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Chapter 7

Endangered Languages in West Africa

Roger Blench

1. Introduction

1.1. Status of West African languages

Although the 1990s saw a substantial growth in concern for language endangerment, most notably in Asia and the Pacific, the African literature has been marked more by an expansion of comment than new descriptive materials. Wurm (1996) purportedly includes a map of endangered languages in West Africa, but since these are not identified by name, this is of limited value. Brenzinger (1998) represents a step towards identifying the gaps in the African literature and papers in that volume, such as Connell (1998) and Kastenholz (1998) provide case studies of threatened or moribund languages of West Africa. Typically, funding for fieldwork addresses issues of 'theoretical' interest rather than attempting to provide empirical data on endangered languages and suggest policies that might halt their decline.

Blench (1998) presents a summary of the status of the languages of the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The present paper¹ follows a similar format, but expands the canvas to cover the whole of West Africa, both listing endangered languages, analysing the sources of endangerment and likely impact of broadcast and literacy programmes on reversing endangerment trends. Dealing with a much larger database had made it necessary to extend and expand some of the categories used in the previous paper. The main changes are as follows;

- a) The categories of language size have been extended at the upper end so that there is a category of 50,000–1,000,000 and then greater than 1,000,000.
- b) Additional status categories of 'moribund' and 'declining' have been added
- c) Because some languages are found in several countries, the database has been adapted to count the language when a national count is made, but to treat an individual language as a single record when other types of analysis are conducted.

1.2. The changing linguistic geography of West Africa

West Africa is considered to be all countries up to the border of Cameroon, including Mauretania, but excluding North African countries. The broad pattern of language distribution suggests that closer to the desert, the absolute number of languages is lower as is the numbers of their speakers. This cannot be entirely substantiated from the data used in this paper as languages such as *Berber* and *Arabic* are spoken principally outside West Africa. Unlike East Africa, where substantial numbers of pastoralists and hunter-gatherers persisted into recent times, there is a single group of hunter-gatherers in West Africa (the Nemadi) and essentially only two groups of pastoralists, the Fule and the Tamajeq. In addition, there are nomadic fishing peoples on the Niger River. Language distribution is thus overwhelmingly dominated by large and small farming groups. A consequence of this is that the constant shifting of subsistence strategy and thereby ethnic identity characteristic of small East African groups is largely absent in West Africa (see Tosco 1998 for a theoretical argument on this point). The most common causes of language endangerment are rather patterns of cultural and economic dominance.

The last decades of the 20th century have witnessed almost continuous warfare in some parts of the region, for example in the Casamance of Senegal, in Sierra Leone and spilling over sporadically into Liberia and Guinea-Bissau. The apparently stable Cote d'Ivoire has split North-South along ethnic lines leading to massive relocation of population and thus languages. Even minor skirmishes, such as that between Senegal and Mauretania, have resulted in the permanent departure of some ethnolinguistic groups and their replacement by others. Certain countries, such as Guinea, which has been relatively stable since the fall of the Sekou Touré government, have unwillingly become the semi-permanent home of refugees fleeing combat in neighbouring countries. The consequence is that numbers and locations are subject to change and survey data is best regarded as a timebound snapshot in unstable regions.

1.3. Data sources

The most important source of data is Ethnologue 2005² supplemented by the author's own fieldwork data in Nigeria, Mali and Ghana and by discussions with in-country scholars. The Ethnologue is regularly updated and draws extensively on unpublished field reports. However, it tends to accumulate spurious languages through individuals submitting unchecked or

tendentious entries which once ensconced, become like persistent weeds, hard to eradicate. For example, the 1992 edition of *Ethnologue* attributed numerous languages to Nigeria which were in reality only spoken by small migrant communities in towns. I have thus tried to cross-check the data and eliminate uncertain entries as well as adding materials from other sources. *Table 1* shows the main non-*Ethnologue* sources drawn on for the data tables in this paper.

Table 1. Selected sources for additional data on West African languages

| Country | References | Personal communications |
|---------------|---|---|
| Benin | Ceccaldi (1979) | Debbie Hatfield |
| Côte d'Ivoire | Ceccaldi (1978) | Bruce Connell, Jacques Rongier |
| Ghana | | Tony Naden, Mary-Esther Kropp-Dakubu |
| Guinée | | Tucker Childs |
| Mali | | Robert Carlson, Lee Hochstetler, Denis Douyon |
| Nigeria | Temple (1922), Shimizu (1983), Crozier & Blench (1992) Kleinewillinghöfer (1996) | Bruce Connell, Kay Williamson (†), Barau Kato, Andy Warren, Bernard Caron |
| Togo | Takassi (1983) | |

Since the data analysed in Blench (1998) was collected, I have undertaken substantial new fieldwork in Central Nigeria, focussing on *Plateau* languages and on *Dogon* languages in Mali. In almost every case where a community was visited, published data on the population numbers, location and relative health of the language was found to be inaccurate. This rather suggests that standard references must be treated with a good deal of caution.

2. Language endangerment

2.1. The status of West African languages

To try and establish the distribution of endangered languages, a status was assigned to each language in the database. The *Ethnologue* rarely pro-

vides enough information to make such assignments unambiguously, and I have made a number of assumptions. These are;

- a) Any language with over 50,000 speakers is 'not threatened'
- b) Any language with under 400 speakers is 'definitely threatened'
- c) Any language with fewer than 3,000 speakers without status data has been assigned to 'no information' on the grounds that it might well be threatened and should be made a priority for research.

Extracting sociolinguistic information from published sources is a problematic exercise; in some cases, where fieldwork is undertaken, it is possible to gain a sense of the reliability of the documentation. Thus the information in this paper for Ghana, Mali and Nigeria is probably more trustworthy than for the other countries, simply because I have conducted fieldwork in these countries and also talked to other researchers.

'Declining' and 'moribund' are categories introduced since my previous paper on Nigerian languages to try and capture languages that are apparently in decline despite having a viable number of speakers. The assumption is that there are many more languages in these classes and that further sociolinguistic surveys will clarify the status of individual speech-forms. *Table 2* shows the numbers of languages assigned to each category on the basis of this revised categorization.

Table 2. Status of West African Languages

| Status | Number |
|-----------------------|--------------|
| No information | 304 |
| Not threatened | 683 |
| Definitely threatened | 55 |
| Moribund | 10 |
| Probably extinct | 16 |
| Declining | 7 |
| <i>Total</i> | <i>1,075</i> |

Perhaps the most depressing figure in *Table 2* is the large number of languages for which no reliable information is available. These are mostly small languages and therefore more likely to be threatened. The availability of information is extremely uneven, so the data was further analysed by country, as shown in *Table 3*. This illustrates yet again Nigeria's ex-

ceptional situation; its languages are less-known than any other country even in percentage terms.

Table 3. Distribution of languages with no status data by country

| Country | Total languages | No data | % No data |
|-----------------------|-----------------|------------|-------------|
| Niger | 11 | 0 | 0.0 |
| Togo | 39 | 4 | 10.3 |
| Sierra Leone | 21 | 1 | 4.8 |
| Mali | 44 | 5 | 11.4 |
| Senegal | 35 | 4 | 11.4 |
| Guinea-Bissau | 21 | 3 | 14.3 |
| Ghana | 66 | 9 | 13.6 |
| Liberia | 32 | 5 | 15.6 |
| Mauretania | 8 | 1 | 12.5 |
| Burkina Faso | 66 | 12 | 18.2 |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 78 | 15 | 19.2 |
| Gambia | 19 | 5 | 26.3 |
| Guinea | 28 | 8 | 28.6 |
| Benin | 50 | 16 | 32.0 |
| Nigeria | 553 | 216 | 39.1 |
| <i>Total and Mean</i> | <i>1,071</i> | <i>304</i> | <i>28.4</i> |

The explanation for this is simple; all other West African countries have had a fairly active programme of language survey conducted either by the French research establishment or by the SIL. In Nigeria, since the virtual cessation of SIL activities in 1976, very limited further survey work has been conducted.³

2.2. How accurate is existing data?

A curious consequence of the expansion of the endangered languages establishment is the adoption of unnecessarily pessimistic assessments. The apparent preconditions for language death set up negative expectations that may well be falsified by (rare) field surveys. For example, surveys of Plateau languages of Central Nigeria 1993–2006 showed that in almost every case, even languages with relatively small numbers of speakers appeared to be flourishing, despite gloomy prognostications of their disap-

pearance (Blench, in press). By way of contrast, *Case study 1* gives an example of two related languages from the *Mambiloid* family of SE Nigeria which although they might appear prime candidates for endangerment are in fact thriving.

Case study 1: Mvanip and Ndunda

Roger Blench & Bruce Connell: Survey notes 1999

Meek (1931) gives a short wordlist of a language he calls Magu, spoken at Zongo Ajiya town in the northwest of the Mambila Plateau in southeastern Nigeria. While undoubtedly a Mambiloid language, it seems to be distinct from Mambila proper. In Crozier & Blench (1992) the population is given as 'less than 10,000' and called 'Mvano'. Following a field visit in 1999 we ascertained how incorrect this information was. The Mvanip people are only 100 (chief's estimate) consisting of a few households in one quarter of Zongo Ajiya. Almost all individuals seemed to be fluent in the other languages of Zongo Ajiya, Fulfulde, Mambila and Ndoro. Despite this, the language seems to be alive – the Jauro (chief) assured us that the children still speak it, and we observed this to be true. A long wordlist was taped and there is no doubt this is the same language given in Meek as Magu.

When we asked for the language closest to Mvanip, to our surprise we were given the name of the Ndunda people. Ndunda is a village some 5 km. from Yerimaru, past Kakara on the tea estate road south of Zongo Ajiya. And indeed, there proved to be a people and language of this name whose existence has so far entirely eluded the reference books. Their language resembles Mvanip but the two are sufficiently distinct as to be considered separate languages. There are probably 3–400 speakers of Ndunda and the language is also alive and well, although the Ndunda settlement is much more ethnically homogeneous than Zongo Ajiya.

Mvanip and Ndunda would appear to be prime candidates for language loss. Their numbers are very small, and the populations live in close proximity to prestigious and numerically dominant languages associated with Islam. However, they seem to have developed a situation of stable multilingualism and religious synthesis that allows them to conserve their traditions without seeming anomalous to outsiders. In contrast to the Yangkam (see *Case study 2*), the Mambila Plateau is off major trade routes and remains highly inaccessible even in modern Nigeria.

The conclusions to be drawn from this are that much of the published, repeated and re-analysed data on the numbers, location and status of minority languages is highly inaccurate. Secondly, our understanding and thus our ability to predict relative levels of language endangerment is very limited. The plethora of models to describe the theory of language endangerment that accompany every worried text have very limited applications to the survey and analysis of actual endangered languages.

3. Affiliation and distribution of West African languages

3.1. How many languages are spoken in each country?

Assessing the number of languages spoken in each country for analytical purposes is not quite the same as simply taking the Ethnologue figures at face value. Ethnologue tends to 'split' languages; in other words, language chains with high degrees of inter-intelligibility tend to appear as separate head entries. This is particularly the case with widespread languages such as *Arabic* and *Fulfulde*, which have two, three or more entries for each country in which they are spoken. Similarly, the Ethnologue includes sign or deaf languages and also colonial languages now used for national administrative purposes.⁴ Ethnologue (2005) now lists 'immigrant' languages separately in its national statistical tables. *Table 4* shows total language numbers for West African countries, but;

- a) Excludes languages spoken in most countries (*English, French, Arabic, Fulfulde*) but treats *Portuguese* as part of the inventory of the country where it is spoken
- b) Includes creoles as *Indo-European* languages the countries where they are spoken.⁵
- c) Registers cross-border languages for each country where they are spoken (the overall total thus includes significant double-counting)

Table 4. Total of languages spoken in each country (for this analysis)

| Country | Number | Country | Number | Country | Number |
|---------------|--------|---------|--------|---------------|--------|
| Throughout | 4 | Mali | 44 | Ghana | 66 |
| Mauretania | 8 | Guinea | 28 | Burkina Faso | 66 |
| Niger | 11 | Liberia | 32 | Côte d'Ivoire | 78 |
| Gambia | 19 | Senegal | 35 | Nigeria | 553 |
| Guinea-Bissau | 21 | Togo | 39 | | |
| Sierra Leone | 21 | Benin | 50 | Total | 1,075 |

Eliminating multiple counts for widespread languages gives a total number of languages for West Africa of ca. 1,000. The predominance of Nigeria as a percentage of all languages will continue to skew this analysis. Were the survey to include Cameroun with 279 languages and Chad with 132, the distribution would look more balanced. In analysing this type of data, much depends on where the boundaries are drawn.

On the basis of this, it seems useful to calculate approximately how many speakers a typical West African language has. Human population statistics are always highly controversial; some countries have only highly politicised speculative estimates while others have reasonably careful counts. The population figures in *Table 5* are from Ethnologue (2005) and are significantly more conservative than UN estimates. Countries are sorted in descending order, with those with the most speakers per language heading the table.

Table 5. Mean no. speakers per language in West African countries

| Country | Population | Mean no. speakers per language |
|----------------|-------------|-----------------------------------|
| Niger | 9,230,862 | 439,565 |
| Mauretania | 2,725,734 | 302,859 |
| Ghana | 20,119,660 | 242,406 |
| Senegal | 9,479,825 | 231,215 |
| Sierra Leone | 4,739,450 | 189,578 |
| Guinea | 6,747,526 | 174,935 |
| Nigeria | 90,026,548 | 174,470 |
| Total and Mean | 185,322,189 | 172,125 |
| Mali | 9,031,529 | 167,251 |
| Burkina Faso | 11,019,638 | 159,705 |
| Benin | 6,449,442 | 117,263 |
| Côte d'Ivoire | 9,220,274 | 100,220 |
| Togo | 3,978,381 | 94,723 |
| Liberia | 2,63,817 | 79,478 |
| Guinea-Bissau | 1,439,995 | 57,600 |
| Gambia | 1,113,325 | 50,606 |

For comparison, the figures for Cameroun and Chad are;

| | | |
|----------|-----------|--------|
| Cameroun | 9,638,055 | 34,442 |
| Chad | 5,909,406 | 44,432 |

There is little doubt that we can identify broad ecological determinants for these differing language densities; desert countries such as Niger and Mauretania the highest number of speakers per language while countries

dominated by humid coastal forest, the lowest. Nonetheless, nation-states are not generally divided into neat ecological units; countries such as Nigeria encompass tropical rain-forest and sand-dunes, and even Togo and Benin have a wide range of environmental conditions within their borders.

3.2. How many speakers do West African languages have?

West African languages were divided into a number of size classes, based on the most recent estimates available. Given the uncertainty as to the verisimilitude of these estimates it seemed appropriate to make the boundaries of each size-class quite generous. Table 6 show the numbers and percentages assigned to each size class;

Table 6. Size classes of West African languages

| Size class | Number |
|------------------|--------|
| < 400 | 74 |
| 400–3,000 | 81 |
| 3,000–50,000 | 426 |
| 50,000–1,000,000 | 168 |
| 1,000,000 + | 267 |
| Unknown | 59 |
| Total | 1,075 |

Without detailed sociolinguistic information it is hard to make an overall estimate of the numbers of endangered languages, but clearly any language with less than 3,000 speakers (i. e. 155) is potentially threatened.

3.3. Genetic affiliation of West African languages

Despite the linguistic diversity of West Africa, at the phylum level it is quite uniform. *Niger-Congo* languages dominate most countries and constitute 85% of all languages spoken there. Only Nigeria has a substantial element of another phylum, *Afroasiatic*. Table 7 presents a broad outline of the phyla and language families present in the West African region, with examples of specific languages;

Table 7. Genetic classification of the languages of West Africa

| Phylum | Family | Examples |
|---------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Niger-Congo</i> | Mande | Mandinka, Busa |
| | West Atlantic | Fulfulde, Wolof, Bijogo, Kissi |
| | Dogon | Donno So, Tomo So |
| | Ijoid | Kalabari, Kolokuma |
| | Kru | Dan, Wobe, Seme |
| | Gur | Moore, Dagbane, Gulmancema, Bariba |
| | Adamawa | Chamba Leeko, Mumuye, [Kim, Mundang] |
| | Ubangian | Gbaya, [Zande, Ngbandi] |
| | Kwa | Akan, Ewe, Akebu, Gun |
| | Benue-Congo W. | Yoruba, Nupe, Igbo, Idoma, Bini |
| | Benue-Congo E. | Kamberi, Tyap, Birom, Jukun, Efik |
| | Bantoid N. | Mambila, Samba Daka |
| | Bantoid S. | Tivoid, Beboid |
| Bantu | Jarawan, Ekoid | |
| <i>Afroasiatic</i> | W. Chadic | Hausa, Angas, Mwashavul, |
| | Central Chadic | Bacama, Huba |
| | Semitic | Shuwa Arabic |
| | Berber | Tamachek |
| <i>Nilo-Saharan</i> | Saharan | Kanuri, Teda |
| | Songhai | Zarma |
| <i>Unclassified</i> | | Jalaa, Bagi Me |

Languages in [] are not spoken in the sampled region

'Dogon' is not recognised in standard reference works. The *Dogon* languages are a separate branch of *Niger-Congo* and are highly internally diverse (Williamson and Blench 2000; Hochstetler *et al.* 2004). Table 8 shows the numbers of languages in each major language family.

Table 8. Genetic affiliation of West African languages

| Language family | Number | Language family | Number |
|-----------------|--------|-----------------|--------|
| Berber | 5 | Indo-European | 9 |
| Semitic | 5 | Unclassified | 10 |
| Saharan | 7 | Songhay | 13 |
| Ijoid | 8 | Dogon | 19 |

Table 8. cont.

| Language family | Number | Language family | Number |
|------------------|--------|------------------|--------|
| Kru | 45 | Mande | 100 |
| Adamawa-Ubangian | 46 | Chadic | 125 |
| West Benue-Congo | 63 | Gur | 136 |
| Atlantic | 84 | East Benue-Congo | 305 |
| Kwa | 95 | Total | 1,075 |

Afroasiatic consists almost entirely of *Chadic* languages, including otherwise only *Arabic* and *Berber*. The category 'unclassified' usually implies simply a lack of data for a language known to exist. Data exists for two languages, *Jalaa* and *Bagi Me*, which appear to be truly unclassifiable.

3.4. Sources of language endangerment

In general, West African languages are in a healthy state. Compared to Eastern and Southern Africa, only a few languages are disappearing. The clear contrast with East Africa almost certainly reflects the dominance of smallholder farming systems. A lack of mobility and a relative inflexibility in reinventing subsistence strategies tends to conserve language and maintain classic patterns of diversification such as areal spread and dialect chains. Language endangerment in West Africa generally occurs through language shift, which usually reflects the rise of a dominant culture, formerly military, but often nowadays commercial or religious. This is particularly the case with Islam; conversion to Islam was historically associated with the rise of highly militarised cultures and indeed the slave trade. Thus, *Hausa*, *Arabic*, *Mandinka*, *Bambara*, *Fulfulde* and *Kanuri* have all been associated with aggressive expansionism and the forcible conversion of enslaved peoples. In the colonial era, the convenience of these languages was such that they were frequently adopted as secondary languages of communication. Promoted by the administration they became ever more the vehicle of assimilatory forces pressing on minority languages.

Case study 2 illustrates the case of *Yangkam*, a language of Central Nigeria that is severely endangered through the association of its people with Islamic expansion during the nineteenth century.

Case study 2: Why is Yangkam is disappearing?

Roger Blench: fieldnotes 1997

The Yangkam people live in a region west of Bashar town, on the Amper-Bashar road, in Plateau State, Central Nigeria. They are known as 'Bashar' or 'Bashera-

wa' (the Hausaised name for the people) in the existing literature (Greenberg 1963; Crozier & Blench 1992). The correct name of the Bashar language and people is YàNkàm, plural aYaNkam. Crozier and Blench (1992) give a figure of 20,000 speakers of the language located in and around Bashar town, some 50 km east of Amper on the Muri road. Fieldwork in 1997 showed this estimate turned out to be entirely erroneous. Yangkam society was transformed by nineteenth century slave raiding, perhaps by the Jukun as well as the Hausa. The Yangkam converted to Islam and a relatively powerful political and trading centre was established at Bashar. At the same time they began to switch to speaking Hausa, while still retaining strongly their Bashar identity. In the region of Bashar town in 1997, there were just two old men who remain reasonably fluent in the language, in the village of Yuli some 15 km northwest of Bashar. However, at the time of the raids, the population split into two and another group sought refuge in Tukur, west of Bashar. Yangkam is spoken in some four villages, Tukur, Bayar, Pyaksam and Kiram. Even here Yangkam is only spoken by people over fifty and all the young people speak Hausa. There seems to be no likelihood that Yangkam will be maintained as speakers are quite content with the switch to Hausa. The local estimate of the number of fluent speakers is 400, and falling every year. In many hamlets around Bashar town in Wase local Government the populations are ethnically Yangkam but they no longer speak the language.

Yangkam is something of a paradox; members of the ethnic group are very proud of their history and identity, but do not associate them with retention of the language. Hausa is not spoken as a first language by any populations nearby and Bashar is today well off major routes for long-distance trade. A typescript of the history of Bashar circulates in the district, larded with non-Hausa names and words but Yangkam do not draw the conclusion that there is any link between this identity and the language they formerly spoke. Although Yangkam has nearly disappeared as a language, the populations who formerly spoke it are likely to retain Basherawa and Basheranci as their name for the people and language as long as they retain a separate identity.

The expansion of *Hausa* represents a confluence of Islam, political and military power and a high level of proficiency in establishing trade networks. But not all large vehicular languages in West Africa were the products of Islamization; *Moore*, *Yoruba*, *Efik/Ibibio*, *Akan* and *Wolof* seem to have expanded, often in a military context, but prior to or unrelated to Islam. Interestingly, these languages have been less successful in the post-colonial phase of cultural expansion, suggesting that a less pluralistic engine of expansion made the transition to a trade language was more difficult than for the *Hausa* or *Bambara*. These languages had the resources to reinvent themselves when the military option was exhausted. Islam, as also Christianity, has always had long-distance trade as a second arrow in its

quiver. Languages with a prior embedded trade and institutional vocabulary recommended themselves to colonial administrators. Cultures with less orientation towards commerce meant that their associated vehicular languages made more limited inroads in an era of relative peace.

4. Broadcasting, literacy programmes and their impact

One guilty party usually identified by morbilinguophiles is urbanization; as individuals and households move to the cities, they lose their languages and switch to dominant speech-systems.⁶ There is no doubt that this is partly true, especially during the great afflux to cities in the third part of the twentieth century. However, city culture also has interesting countervailing tendencies. It provides access to communications technology, most recently FM radio, which can sometimes act to support language maintenance. In Mali and Northern Ghana, commercial broadcasting in minority languages has become a major growth area and has acted dramatically to increase the prestige of indigenous languages.⁷ If a language can be adapted to 'modern' life it paradoxically gains more prestige in rural areas. Broadcasts then become a major channel for neologisms and syntax changes to reach rural areas. A likely consequence, as in Western Europe, is that broadcast media tend to eliminate local dialect variation,⁸ but the experiment is too new in West Africa for any results to be measured.

Between overt government policy and ground reality huge chasms yawn invitingly. No government these days can be seen to be against minority languages, but few governments have the political will to actively support languages with small numbers of speakers. Most governments have some type of literacy bureau, proffering a few dusty pamphlets in major languages. One exception to this is Mali, which, through its agency DNAFLA, has tried to make use of a spectrum of funding sources to print primers, grammars, dictionaries for a wide variety of languages over several decades. Government involvement in literacy cuts both way; DNAFLA tried to establish a 'standard' *Dogon* that would effectively eliminate the other 20 *Dogon* languages from development (Hochstetler et al. 2004).

The reality is that literacy in minority languages is most likely to be driven by the resources of organizations, notably the SIL and its affiliates, who consider it a means to an end, in this case reading the Bible. For example, in Ghana, SIL (locally GILBTT) runs literacy programmes in some thirty-two languages and is actively researching the potential of the relatively few

remaining minority languages. The Ghana Bureau of Languages, by contrast, offers one or two pamphlets in about ten languages, printed many years ago in now-discarded orthographies. An intriguing exception to this is Nigeria, where the size of the economy and the growth of ethnic consciousness among minorities has been responsible for a lively enthusiasm for local publishing, especially in the popular arena, focusing on proverbs, oral literature and reading and writing. Recent publications include Gochal (1994) on *Ngas*, Mamfa (1998) as well as Lar and Dandam (2002) on *Tarok* and Nyako (2000) on *Izere*. This type of publishing will probably continue to expand and take in more ethnolinguistic groups.

Whether externally-driven literacy programmes really do assist language maintenance is a moot point, as they can run into the sand with threatened languages. Almost by definition it is hardly worthwhile to spend limited resources on languages whose speakers seem to be deserting them; and most programmes thus focus on 'medium-scale' languages with a viable number of speakers. Nonetheless, the criteria for viability varies strikingly between continents. A language with less than 1,000 speakers in Africa looks seriously endangered and is unlikely to get literacy materials; such languages in New Guinea are regularly the subject of literacy programmes.

The definition of the unit of endangerment in language survey is often problematic and it is difficult to assess whether resources should be allocated to languages that are relatively close to vigorous speech-forms. The case of *Tchumbuli* in Benin is a case in point (*Case study 3*);

Case study 3: Tchumbuli

A report on the Tchumbuli language of Benin provides some information on a little-known and endangered speech-form (Schoch & Wolf 2001). Tchumbuli is a Northern Guang language spoken in three villages in the Département de Collines between Savé and Ouessé. These villages are Okounfo, Gbede and Edaningbe and their total population is 3,500 individuals.

The origin of the Tchumbuli is complex; they are closely related to the Chumburung of NE Ghana and oral tradition suggests that they migrated to their present site in the mid eighteenth century. However, while in Ghana they absorbed the 'Cobeche', mercenaries from Benin (the precolonial state in Nigeria) who had come to fight in the Ashanti wars and halted on their way home. This ethnic distinction is maintained in the Tchumbuli communities in Benin Republic today, despite the homogeneity of the spoken language. To add to the confusion, in the 1950s an expedition led by their Paramount Chief returned with a number of families back to Ghana and settled in Anyinamae, near the present-day Chumburung community. Their language has effectively been relexified and absorbed back into Chumburung.

Tchumbuli is slowly dying as a result of contact with two major neighbouring languages, Maxi and Cabe. Maxi is part of the Fon group while Cabe is a type of Yoruba, closely related to that spoken across the border in Nigeria. In Okounfo village, the switch to Cabe has occurred, with pervasive bilingualism and Tchumbuli only known to the older generation. In Edaningbe, Maxi is replacing Tchumbuli although a more complex ethnic mixture in the village means that the process of replacement is less straightforward. In Gbede, Tchumbuli remains widely spoken although Cabe is used to communicate with outsiders and appears to be spreading among younger children.

The total number of speakers of Tchumbuli was estimated at 1838, and although this is relatively high compared with many other threatened languages in West Africa, it conceals the fact that the language is largely confined to the older generation. Paradoxically, the Tchumbuli are proud of their historical traditions and their links with Ghana. Tchumbuli illustrates the problem of how much weight to give to languages close to those that are not threatened. Tchumbuli is sufficiently close to Chumburung for linguists to classify it as a dialect. However, the results of complex interactions with Maxi and Cabe and the very different cultural traditions of the Tchumbuli have made the language quite distinct above the level of fundamental vocabulary.

Many of the factors responsible for language endangerment are contingent; they cannot necessarily be predicted from sociological variables nor prevented by well-meaning programmes. War and social disruption have been key forces displacing populations, fragmenting speech communities and prematurely ending the life of speech communities. But refugees are refugees, it would hardly be appropriate to suggest specialised assistance for those speaking threatened languages. The forces of globalization similarly depend on political stability and also the macro-economic order. It is hard to listen to the government radio station if you can't afford the batteries.

5. The research agenda

It would be pleasant to report, that West African languages, especially those endangered by language shift, were the focus of a lively research effort. But this is far from the case; indeed the opposite is true. Why should this be so?

First and foremost, because of the moribund research establishment in African universities. Political insecurity in many countries has made it difficult for universities and other institutions to function at all. Many West African universities are in decay and staff morale is low, in part because of

uncertain pay and conditions, but also because of a lack of support for research. The other body with a record of interest in research, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, now tends to regard academic publication as a low priority. Little has appeared in recent years, although the situation is patchy; Mali for example, still tries to encourage academic publication of results. The impact of the Euro-American research establishment is also limited for rather different reasons. Research increasingly uses expatriate and out-of-context informants, despite the oft-publicised danger of this approach. The declining economies of the region and the more commercial approach of Euro-American universities has meant that many fewer speakers of minority languages are visiting or studying in Europe and America. This illustrates all too starkly the neo-colonial nature of fashionable linguistics, which takes no interest in languages for themselves, merely for their potential contribution to passing seminar-room fashion. Despite much talk, the institutions that purportedly encourage *Endangered Languages* research have eccentric priorities, to judge by their profile in Nigeria, which has by far the largest number of endangered languages in Africa. 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.

6. Conclusion

The situation of minority languages in West Africa can be summarised as follows;

- a) The information base remains extremely weak for many countries
- b) Survey work is not a high priority for governments or academics within West African countries, while research by outside scholars is apparently declining
- c) SIL surveys are useful but certainly do not focus directly on language endangerment issues, although policy is changing in this area.
- d) Government policy usually has little to say about endangered languages although what policies exist are generally in favour of indigenous languages
- e) However, government action in this area tends to be weak or non-existent
- f) Nonetheless, what evidence there is suggests that West African languages are generally holding their own in the face of globalization and the homogenising forces of the twenty-first century

Appendix: Endangered languages in West Africa

The following table does not include languages that are probably extinct.

Table 9. Annotated list of severely threatened languages in West Africa

| Country Languages | Comment |
|-------------------|--|
| <i>Nigeria</i> | |
| Akpondu | Moribund |
| Bade | Still a large number of speakers but giving way rapidly to Hausa. Probably also Duwai. |
| Bakpinka | No recent information |
| Defaka | About 200 speakers. Those in direct contact with Nkoroo are losing their language |
| Dulbu | Giving way to Hausa |
| Dyarim | Ca. 100 fluent speakers. Giving way to Hausa |
| Fyem | Giving way to Hausa |
| Geji cluster | Several hundred speakers of each member of the cluster. Giving way to Hausa |
| Gera | Giving way to Hausa |
| Gura | Giving way to Hausa |
| Gurdu-Mbaaru | Giving way to Hausa |
| Gyem | Giving way to Hausa |
| Ilue | Giving way to Efik/Oron |
| Jilbe | A single village (Tourneux p.c.) |
| Kiong | Giving way to Efik. Moribund |
| Kona | Giving way to Hausa |
| Kudu-Camo | 42 speakers in early 1990s (Bross p. c.) Giving way to Hausa |
| Luri | Only 2 speakers remained in 2003 |
| Mvanip | About 100 speakers in 1999. |
| Ndunda | <400 speakers in 1999 |
| Ngwaba | Two villages in 1991 |
| Odut | Only about 20 speakers in early 1980s |
| Polci cluster | Giving way to Hausa |
| Reshe | Still a vigorous speech community at present but giving way to Hausa |

Table 9. cont.

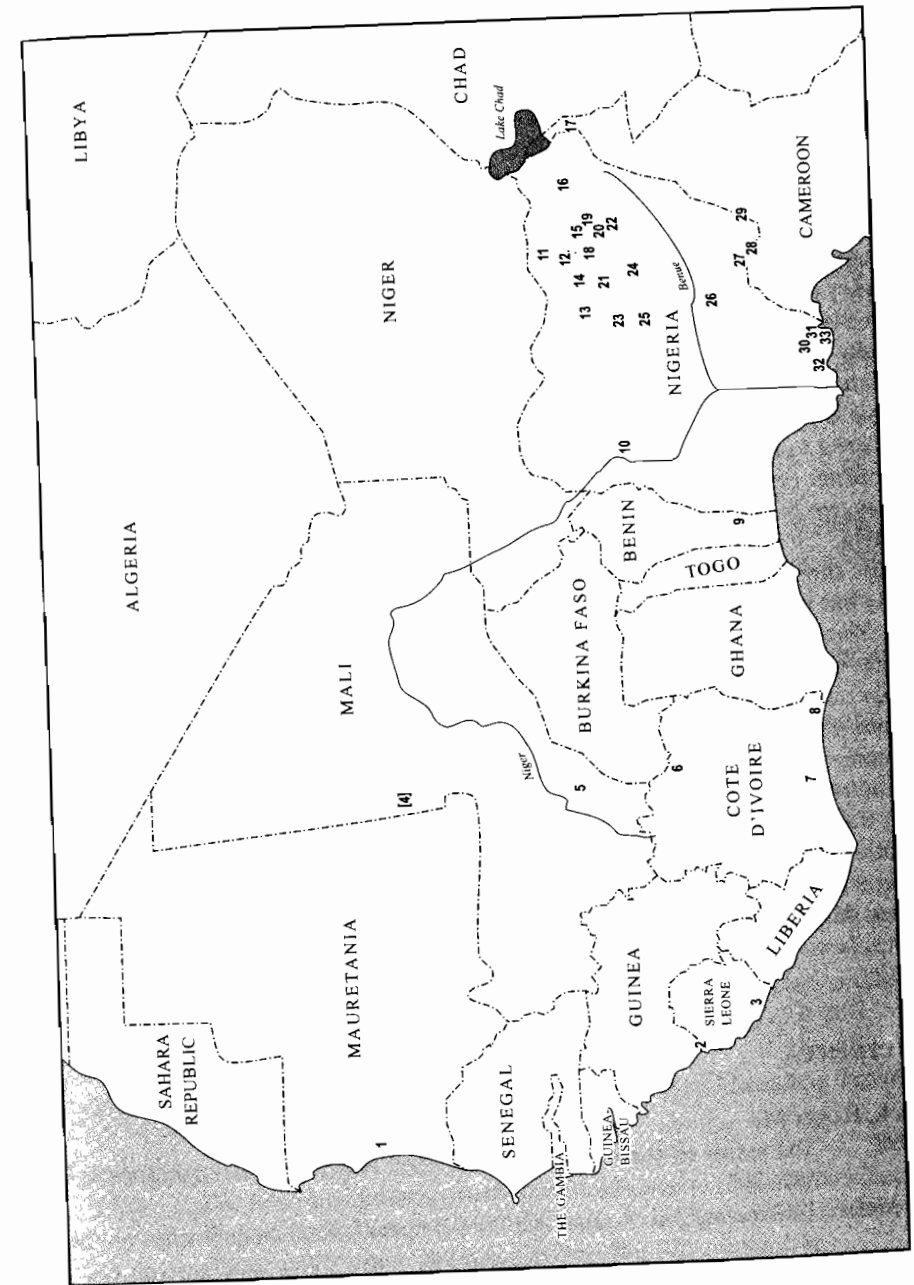
| Country Languages | Comment |
|--------------------------|--|
| <i>Nigeria (cont.)</i> | |
| Sambe | 2 very elderly speakers in 2005. The language is giving way to Ninzo. |
| <i>Country Languages</i> | |
| Somyev | About 20 elderly speakers in 1995 (Connell 1995 and p. c.). |
| Yangkam | About 2-300 older speakers in 1993. |
| Zeem/Tule/ Danshe | These languages are probably extinct (Caron p. c. 2005). |
| <i>Cote d'Ivoire</i> | |
| Ega | est. 1,000 speakers in 1999. The population is switching to Dida. |
| Eotile | 200 speakers in 1999. The population is switching to Anyi. |
| Jeri Kuo | According to Kastenzholz (1998: 259) there are 1,500 speakers from an ethnic population of 20,000. The Muslims are switching to Manding, the non-Muslim to Sienare Senufo. See also Kastenzholz (1992). |
| <i>Mali</i> | |
| Banka | 5,085 ethnic population in 1995, but the population is switching to Bambara. |
| Nemadi | The Nemadi migrate between Mauretania and Mali. There were 200 in 1977. Their language is reported to be Hassaniya Arabic with only some technical terms of unknown source and is probably not 'endangered'. |
| <i>Sierra Leone</i> | |
| Bom | 250 speakers out of an ethnic group of 5,000 in 1991. The population is switching to Mende. |
| Mmani | Only a few speakers out of 6,800 in the ethnic group in 1988. The population is switching to Temne. |
| Krim | 500 speakers or fewer out of an ethnic group of 10,000 in 1990. The population is switching to Sherbro and Temne. |
| <i>Mauretania</i> | |
| Imeraguen | 534 speakers in 2000. No recent information. |

Table 10. Unclassified languages in West Africa

| Country Languages | Comment |
|----------------------|--|
| <i>Côte d'Ivoire</i> | |
| Mbre | Niger-Congo language of unknown affiliation. |
| <i>Mauretania</i> | |
| Imeraguen | 534 (2000). Near Nouakchott, the region stretching from Cape Timiris to Nouadhibou. Unclassified. The language is reported to be a variety of Hassaniyya structured on an Azer (Soninke) base. |
| <i>Mali</i> | |
| Bagi Me ⁹ | Ca. 2,000 speakers in 2005. Language isolate. |
| <i>Nigeria</i> | |
| Kofa | Unknown but possibly Chadic language spoken north of Yola. |
| Jalaa | Moribund. Language isolate. |

Sources: either quoted directly from Ethnologue 2005 or personal observation in West Africa.

| | | | |
|----|-----------|----|-----------------|
| 1 | Imeraguen | 18 | Polci |
| 2 | Mmani | 19 | Dulbu |
| 3 | Bom Krim | 20 | Luri |
| 4 | Nemadi | 21 | Guruntum-Mbaaru |
| 5 | Banka | 22 | Dugusa |
| 6 | Jeri Kuo | 23 | Fyem |
| 7 | Ega | 24 | Yangkam |
| 8 | Eotile | 25 | Sambe |
| 9 | Tchumbuli | 26 | Kona |
| 10 | Reshe | 27 | Mvanp |
| 11 | Bade | 28 | Ndunda |
| 12 | Kudu-Camo | 29 | Somyev |
| 13 | Gura | 30 | Bakpinka |
| 14 | Gyem | 31 | Odut Kiong |
| 15 | Gera | 32 | Defaka |
| 16 | Ngwaba | 33 | Ilue |
| 17 | Jilbe | | |



Map 9. West Africa

Notes

1. The original version of this paper was submitted prior to the Bad Godesborg meeting but has been amended in April 2005 to include five additional years' data from subsequent field trips. My thanks to all those in listed in Table 1 for unpublished field data.
2. The 15th Edition of Ethnologue online edition includes much of the new data from the period 2001–2005. However, this paper includes materials collected subsequent to the deadline for closure of submissions.
3. Regrettably an attempt to restart survey work in Nigeria in 2001 was stalled by policy problems in the relevant institutions.
4. This is not to say that *French*, *English* or *Portuguese* should be excluded, especially as they are clearly the first language of a large number of resident expatriates and are increasingly becoming the 'home' language of city families.
5. This is highly controversial linguistically, since many standard creoles are considered to be better analysed as African languages heavily relexified from the external (usually I–E) language. However, for the purposes of this analysis they can be excluded from the count of African languages assigned to specific phyla.
6. I use this term advisedly; in Nigeria at least, the would-be urban migrant usually has to contend with at least two 'duelling' languages, for example, *Hausa* or *Yoruba* and *English*. Effective communication skills usually involve rapid code-switching between these.
7. Nigeria has long had government broadcasts in numerous languages, especially from state capitals. However, these seem to have had much less impact than commercial stations, presumably because the desire of government to control content has made them much less interesting for listeners.
8. At the same time, broadcast media may well act to spread new speech-styles. Within England, '*Estuary English*' has undoubtedly been diffused as a consequence of its dominance in the media.
9. New data can be downloaded at:
<http://www.rogerblench.info/Linguistics%20papers%20opening%20page.htm>

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