

When Language Documentation becomes Language Archaeology: Methods for data retrieval in a highly moribund language

Laura Robson, University of Kent, U.K. (PhD Anthropology)
lr81@kent.ac.uk

Moribundity as a different methodological problem

The aim of Language Documentation is to produce as accurately as possible a representation of a language in danger of extinction. In cases of moribundity, what remains of the language can be very little, and documentation methods may necessarily extend from those generally associated with Language Documentation. Moribund refers to languages which are no longer in use, and which have no particular motivation for maintenance or revival. Where the label is sometime deemed negative or controversial in language endangerment circles, I believe it is a necessary label, where used correctly, particularly as, as I argue, moribund languages may present the language documenter with a situation requiring different methodologies from those demanded by other Endangered Language projects.

Njanga: a Moribund Dialect

Njanga is a dialect of the Kwanja language spoken in the Adamawa a Northern Province of Cameroon, bordering Nigeria. Kwanja has three dialects, including Njanga, although many people, Kwanja included, know only of the two most populous: Ndung and Sundani. This is because Njanga is the language of just one isolated and relatively low-populated Kwanja village: Mbondjanga. Furthermore, over the years Njanga speakers have shifted to using Sundani as a first language and Mbondjanga is now considered a Sundani-speaking village. Njanga is no longer used employed in any regular function, but there are four people who remember, and can speak it, quite well (one of these was a first language speaker) and there are maybe 6-10 of varying competency who remember some Njanga. Njanga's original form (whatever that might have been) has been affected by language-wide systematic borrowings and those which a speaker puts into his speech when speaking Njanga at any time. Unlike other language endangerment situations where speakers have shifted to use of a highly contrastive language, that Njanga speakers have shifted principally to a highly related and structurally similar language further problematises the delimitation of Njanga as a unique lect.

Connell, Bruce. 1998. "Moribund languages of the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland." In *Endangered Languages in Africa*, ed. M Brenzinger. Koln: Rudiger Koppe Verlag.

Connell, B. 2002. "Phonetic/Phonological Variation and Language Contraction." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 157:167–185.

Dorian, N. 1981. *Language Death: the Life Cycle of a Scottish Gaelic Dialect*. . Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Problems posed by research into moribund languages

- * LOST DATA: forgotten (speaker level) / lost (language level)
- * HIGH LEVELS OF ASIMILATION:
 - Reliance on a limited pool of (bias) knowledge (less opportunity to triangulate ... but see below) + Speaker inconsistencies
 - Idiolectal vs Language features
 - Language vs Other-language features

Solutions suggested for these problems!

1. Encouraging Speaker Memory
2. Finding fossilised or unique language forms in texts
3. Making the most of Speakers
4. Different forms of triangulation
5. Competence Tests (Dorian 1981)
6. Searching for fossilised forms:
 - a. Intonation in story-telling; rhythm in song; use of direct speech, voice, textual organisation etc in stories
 - b. Syntax: word order in songs; grammar of ritual and formulaic speech
 - c. Grammar: set phrases (wa:ma, dzebi ...) (in) greetings etc
 - d. Lexicon: riddles / play-on-words: highly culturally-specific; unusual words you may not otherwise discover or be otherwise remembered by a speaker. Fossilised forms in songs, incantations etc
 - e. Phonology: rhymes in songs, fossilised forms pointing to previously-regular correspondences.
7. Recognising idiolect from lect (the [s] / [□] problem):
 - a. minimal pairs,
 - b. triangulation with other speakers,
 - c. observance: is this speaker consistent or is it free variation?,
 - d. intra-speaker comparison when speaking another language,
 - e. linguistic tendencies,
 - f. likelihood/naturalness,
 - g. behaviour of related lects,
7. Recognising borrowings from cognates:
 - a. sound correspondence comparison
 - b. matched guise