REFLECTIONS ON A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO WRITING GRAMMARS OF ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

PIUS W. AKUMBU

UNIVERSITY OF BUEA, CAMEROON

UNIVERSITY OF HAMBURG

A written grammar can support a community by encouraging the use of a community language. Sometimes, however, grammars are ways that outsiders "mine" a local community for the outsiders' benefit, leaving the community of speakers with nothing (Kadanya 2006: 253).

INTRODUCTION

If linguistic research on endangered languages does not arouse interest in maintenance and/or revitalization, or if research outputs do not actually reach the target language community, then the research has only been completed partially. This is exactly what happens when publications end up in book-shelves and at best, stimulate further investigations and promote knowledge in the scientific world (Akumbu 2018: 266).

INTRODUCTION

The issue I wish to consider is how we can work on grammar in a way that it might be useful to the community of native speakers on which we write. I do not dwell on the standards of the grammars but focus on the method and activities that could lead to a grammar that is accepted and owned by the community of speakers with whom and for whom the grammar is conceived and written. Some questions I hope to answer are the following:

• How can such a grammar promote the maintenance or revitalization of the language?

• How can it do more than just preservation?

• Is there a way to plan and write the grammar to achieve this goal?

• Is there something that can be included in the process to meet this objective?

INTRODUCTION

My talk is based on an exploration of existing grammars written by native and non-native speakers, as well as on feedback from native speakers. My main argument is that a grammar that is based on community mobilization, sensitization, and training requires a greater involvement and follow-up by the grammar writer especially after publication.

ROADMAP

- **Review existing grammars**
- **Assess the realization of the goals of existing grammars**
- **Reflect on how to realize community-based grammars**
- **Conclusion**

1. REVIEW OF EXISTING GRAMMARS

I begin in this part by looking through grammars of some endangered Cameroonian languages to understand what their goals were at the time of writing. First, I consider grammars written by native speaker linguists (Bafut, Babanki, Bangwa, Oku), and then those written by non-native speakers (Obang, Mokpe, Mundabli, Kutep, Akoose, Buwal, Nchane, Mungong, Mfumte).

BAFUT, NGEMBA LANGUAGE OF NORTHWEST CAMEROON (TAMANJI 2009: 5)

The descriptive apparatus used in the grammar of Bafut stays clear of any formal model of linguistic analysis and only provides a very simple straightforward description of the facts as they appear. The intention is to make the description as simple as possible in order to make the book accessible to all categories of language practitioners who are interested in the Bafut language and in related Grassfields Bantu languages.

BABANKI, GRASSFIELDS BANTU LANGUAGE OF NORTHWEST CAMEROON (AKUMBU AND CHIBAKA 2012: 9)

Without using any specific formal model, we provide a description of the grammar of Babanki in a way that it will be useful to the learners and teachers of the language, as well as to others interested in this and other Grassfields Bantu languages.

BANGWA, GRASSFIELDS BANTU LANGUAGE OF WEST CAMEROON (NGUENDJIO 2014: IV)

As I was writing this book, I was worried by the fact that it would not serve the community because it is full of linguistic jargon which makes it inaccessible to a layman.

OKU, GRASSFIELDS BANTU LANGUAGE OF NORTHWEST CAMEROON (NFORBI AND NGUM 2009: 19)

Our grammar will contribute to implementing government policy in the domain of mother-tongue education as it facilitates the teaching of Oku grammar. Though dedicated to the linguist and the Oku people, we hope that everybody will find pleasure in discovering the richness of African languages through the Oku language.

COMMENTS

- No clear indication of the usefulness of the grammar to the community of speakers, even though it's written by native speakers.

- Grammar writers are out to satisfy the requirements of their respective universities that expect them to publish high quality work (abroad) and also in some cases to satisfy their funding agencies.

- no commitment on the part of the authors to follow up the consumption of their grammar nor the general development and use of the language.

COMMENTS

- Data is the author's idiolect that is verified by one or two other speakers, which is not sufficient to be considered as a proper representation of the entire community.

- Tamanji (2009: 6) appreciates a single community member who "was very instrumental in crosschecking my Bafut data especially as concerns the transcription of tones."

- Akumbu & Chibaka (2012: XIII) declare that "most of the data used in this book was largely from the first author…".

COMMENT

- Nforbi & Ngum (2009: 9) list three consultants who helped in providing the data for them to analyze, and emphasize that "these informants are just a representation of the many Oku speakers who assisted."

- Nguendjio is mute about the sources of the data used in the Bangwa grammar.

OBANG, NGEMBA LANGUAGE OF NORTHWEST CAMEROON (ASOHSI 2015:10)

The aim of this grammar is to provide reliable data by letting the language tell its story with simple linguistic descriptions from a structural and typological perspective that can be useful for descriptive or documentary, comparative, theoretical linguists as well as to a wider audience.

MOKPE, COASTAL BANTU LANGUAGE OF SOUTHWEST CAMEROON (ATINDOGBE 2013)

- hopes that the absence of a sophisticated linguistic jargon will make the grammar also accessible to non-linguistic readers.

- desires that Mokpe students studying linguistics can now see how their language functions and accommodates phonological processes that look so unfamiliar and abstract to them although they practice them in their everyday use of their mother tongue

- wishes that the Bakweri people who are 'struggling' to have their language and culture known by the children and the general public will find the grammar a useful tool.

COMMENTS

- Only a few individuals are involved in the data collection process.

- Asohsi is mute about the sources of the Obang data.

- Atindogbe (2013: 4) acknowledges "my 'many-in-one' consultant who understood at the early stage of this work my intention and gave me all the linguistic support. His role did not only consist of kindly providing data for the book but also to explain and research on the areas or questions he could not answer immediately during our elicitation sessions."

COMMENTS

- Lovegren (2013: 7-13) acknowledges all the consultants who helped in various ways but doesn't say how the grammar of Mungbam might be useful to the people.

- Voll (2017) is based on recordings made during three field trips to Cameroon in Mundabli village as well as in neighboring towns with several consultants. She explains that "recordings of spontaneous speech were transcribed and glossed with the help of consultants. Unfortunately, she doesn't say how this grammar will serve the needs of the Mundabli people.

COMMENT

- Talking about the limitations of Nzadi grammar, Crane, Hyman and Tukumu (2011: 6) point out that it will be of use to scholars of different sorts, and ultimately to the Nzadi community as well (although this might better have necessitated a version of the grammar in French). They further point out that they worked only with one speaker, collected data through elicitation rather than direct observation, and finally that the study has been done out of the community using translation rather than through the first language.

COMMENT

- Again, it is evident that these non-native speaker writers of the grammars, like native speakers, are primarily concerned with their academic pursuits rather than focusing on language development for the interest of the community.

- Many academic linguists express a wish for the community to benefit from their grammar but do not design and implement any measures for further exploitation of their work.

AKOOSE, COASTAL BANTU LANGUAGE OF SOUTHWEST CAMEROON (HEDINGER 2008: 1)

The grammar is intended for a wide audience, both linguists and non-linguists, speakers and non-speakers alike. I have therefore tried to use non-technical language as much as possible while at the same time giving a linguistically sound description of the facts of the language.

BUWAL, CHADIC LANGUAGE OF FAR NORTH CAMEROON (VILJEON 2013: 1)

This first detailed description of the language would prove of great interest to academic linguists. Furthermore, my hope is that this work will assist the Buwal people in their efforts in developing and preserving their language and culture and that the recognition of their unique identity will give them confidence in finding their place in an increasingly globalized world.

COMMENT

The linguistic work, including the writing of grammars, that the SIL missionaries undertake is intended to serve the community of speakers in some ways. This is reflected in the way the data is collected and in the extent to which community members are engaged in the process.

COMMENT

Viljeon (2013) reveals that the language data on which her grammar is based was collected over a period of roughly **five years between 2004 – 2011**. She lived in the community for most of those years and worked with several people there. She adds:

"The majority of these were recorded and then transcribed. However, six of the texts were written by native speakers to put in a book for those learning to read the language. Although many of the texts came from regular language informants, a significant number were provided by other members of the community, the majority being from Gadala Centre" p. 23.

COMMENT

To write the grammar of Akoose, Robert Hedinger (personal communication) spent more than **25 years** collecting data from the community. Many of those years were spent learning the language and culture of the Bakossi people and training several members of the community on different aspects of linguistics, including basic literacy skills, text collection methods, etc.

COMMENT

To write the grammar of Nchane, Northwest Cameroon, Boutwell (2010) collected a number of texts of various genres, as well as from elicited sentences and words collected over a period of **four years, from 2006 to 2009**, while living in the village of Nfume and with the help of several language consultants.

COMMENT

In 2014, Boutwell wrote the grammar of Mungong, a language of Northwest Cameroon, with data derived primarily from a number of Mungong narrative texts, as well as from elicited sentences and words collected over a period of **seven years, from 2007 to 2014**. He further adds that texts and other language data were collected with the help of several language consultants.

COMMENT

In a similar manner, McLean (2014) used data from a number of Central Mfumte texts from a range of genres and elicited utterances to write the grammar of Mfumte, another language of Northwest Cameroon. According to him, "these texts and utterances have been gathered over a period of **five years, from 2008 to 2013** and the texts and other language data were collected with the help of several Central Mfumte speakers.

II. ASSESSING THE REALIZATION OF THE GOALS OF EXISTING GRAMMARS

- Four main issues considered

- awareness of the existence of the grammar

- availability of the grammar

- ability to read the grammar

- necessity of the grammar.

- Five languages were targeted: Oku, Babanki, Bafut, Mokpe, and Akoose

- 750 respondents out of a total population of 346,000 (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig 2019)

AWARENESS OF THE EXISTENCE OF THE GRAMMAR

	Oku	Babanki	Mokpe	Bafut	Akoose	Total	%
No grammar	122	120	74	80	48	444	59.3
Unaware	22	24	68	28	36	178	23.7
Aware	6	6	8	42	66	128	17
Total	150	150	150	150	150	750	100

AWARENESS OF THE EXISTENCE OF THE GRAMMAR

Chart Title
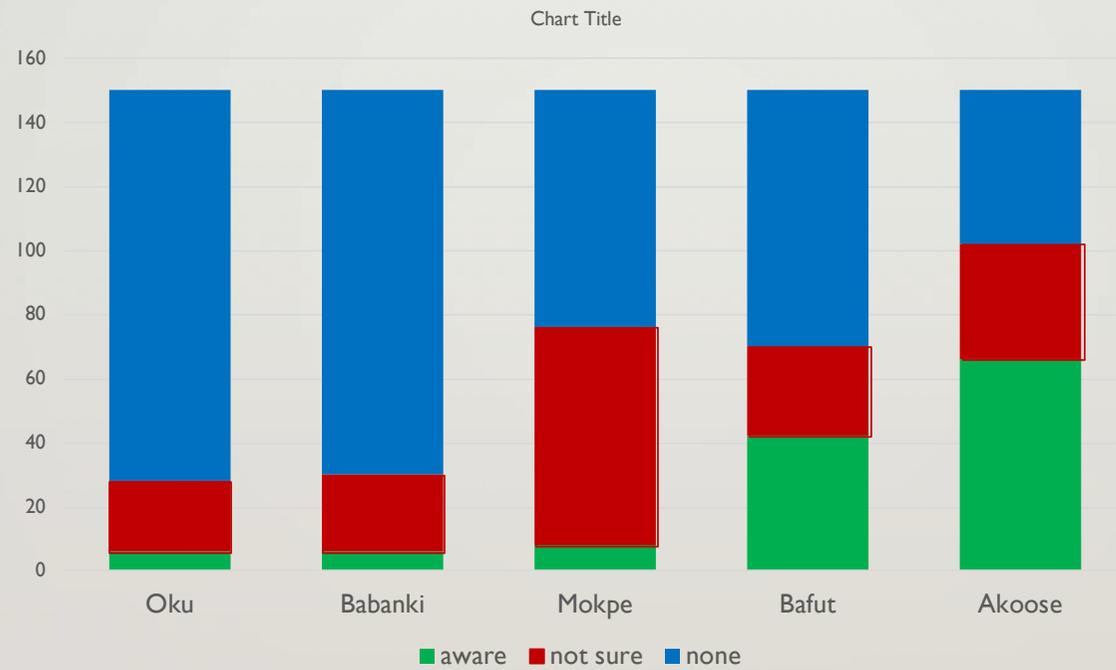
AVAILABILITY OF THE GRAMMAR

	Oku	Babanki	Mokpe	Bafut	Akoose	Total	%
Have	2	1	2	2	6	13	10.2
Do not have	4	5	6	40	60	115	89.8
Total	6	6	8	42	66	128	100

AVAILABILITY OF THE GRAMMAR

Chart Title
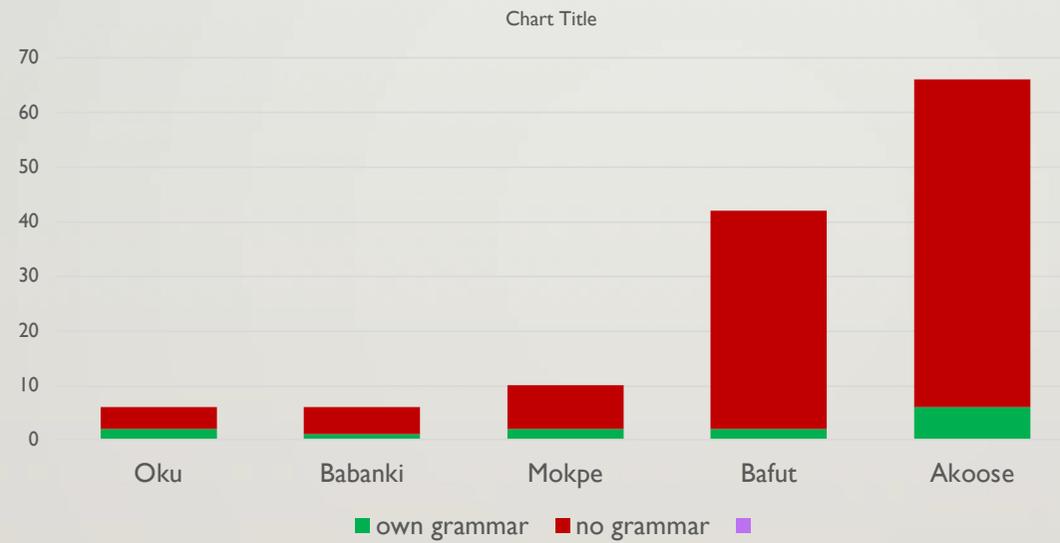
ABILITY TO READ THE GRAMMAR

All 13 respondents in the five communities who had copies of the grammar said they could read but specified during the interviews that they needed a lot of training and practice

- Unfamiliar symbols [ŋ, ɸ, β, ɬ, ʔ, ə, ʉ]

- Tone marks

- Oral tradition

NECESSITY OF THE GRAMMAR

Many interviewees recognized and agreed that their indigenous languages are important and useful in keeping them connected to their culture and, above all, in passing their cultural elements to future generations but did not quickly agree that through their own languages their children could have opportunities to learn better and faster and eventually have or create jobs, as well as excel in business. For these reasons the motivation to support the writing of grammars of indigenous languages is actually low in many parts of Cameroon.

III. COMMUNITY-BASED GRAMMAR: REFLECTIONS

- Require community sensitization, mobilization, training, engagement, and follow up (Dobrin & Berson 2011, Genetti & Siemens 2013, Grenoble & Whitecloud 2014, Dobrin 2008, Fitzgerald 2017, 2018).

- How is it possible for the grammar writer (community linguist, outsider) to engage in all of these activities and processes giving the limited time and resources that are at their disposal?

1. TIMING AND LOCATION

- It appears that the grammar writer can best do appropriate extensive community mobilization and training only within the context of language documentation projects or such kinds of funded projects that require extensive fieldwork in the community, e.g. ELDP grants, NSF grants, the German Research Foundation (DFG) grants, and The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research grants.

- However, even grammars by native speaker linguists are written away from their communities (and countries), far away from other speakers, in the context of fellowships such as those granted by Fulbright, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and the Commonwealth.

REMEDY

What can possibly work might be for the native speaker linguist, like myself, to engage in sensitization, language development, and training as often as they have the time and resources to work for their community. This could also include taking copies of the grammar and any other publications to the community and attempting to inspire people to develop interest in consuming the materials and promoting the use of their language.

2. SENSITIZATION

- When community members are encouraged to understand the place and usefulness of their language in the current global village, yet the reality they see (e.g., colonial languages like English used in education and official purposes) is in clear contrast, it is extremely difficult to be convincing.

"*you don go learn your whiteman talk get your work, get your money, you don come here for fool me and my pikin dem*" [You have studied English and had a job and riches, and have come here to deceive me and my children].

- How can the local people be convinced when even government policy doesn't help them to see any economic or educational value in their languages?

REMEDY

- This problem can be taken care of if indigenous languages are recognized and given some official functions.

- Community linguists should join efforts to accelerate the implementation of policies that empower their languages.

3. COMMITTED COLLABORATORS

- What economic and financial benefits can community members who offer their time and skills expect to get? It is always difficult to find people who can be trained and who are willing to sacrifice their regular day-to-day activities (e.g., farming, and hunting) and engage fully in linguistic work.

- The people know that anyone who gets to their community to work on their language is doing it for financial or academic benefits.

REMEDY

- While it is hard to provide permanent jobs for community members who engage in language documentation and description (e.g., of a grammar), the grammar writer should try to pay the committed individuals well enough so that they can be better motivated.

- However, this suggestion can only work in the framework of funded projects, not when a community linguist is using their limited personal resources, as it is often the case in most of Africa.

4. LACK OF TRUST

One of the difficulties new teams or individuals face when they arrive in a community in many parts of Africa is the fact that other linguists had been there before. Community members still cry out about the previous researchers who got to the community, collected data and then disappeared. The people feel cheated and exploited and rightly so because the researcher only tried to satisfy their personal needs, not those of the community. In many such cases, the people want to be paid immediately for their effort.

REMEDY

The best thing is to consider leaving something tangible for the entire community if the resources permit. Research projects that have left something concrete in a community such as the KPAAM-CAM project in Lower Fungom *Pig for Pikin* (https://ubwp.buffalo.edu/kpaamcam/research-communities)

or the water supply initiative of the Beezen Language Documentation Project

(https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/afrika/medien/beldop.pdf) have left an open door for researchers into these communities.

5. LACK OF ELECTRICITY

Another thing to reflect on is the lack of electricity in many indigenous communities. This is a major drawback in this era of overwhelming advances in technological development. An extended stay in a community for mobilization and training requires electricity supply. In most cases, training involves the use of information and communication technologies which require electricity to function.

REMEDY

Possibly punctuate stay in the community with visits to a nearby town where one can have access to electricity supply. This must be factored into planning and executed as time and resources permit.

6. CONSUMPTION OF GRAMMAR

How do we (grammar writers) expect people, most of whom have not had formal education in the foreign language in which the grammar is written, to learn to read (and write) their own language (written with some unusual symbols)? This partly explains why even the few people who have seen the grammars of their languages are unable to read them. The excitement is reduced to keeping a copy and hoping that someday, after education in the foreign language, their children will come home and read the grammar.

REMEDY

One way to overcome this problem is to organize literacy classes and assist those who attend to learn to read and write their language. The first step would be for the grammar writer to develop basic literacy materials. Afterwards, they will have to train a few people who can then become teachers of the language. All of these require time and funding and must be done progressively and as available resources permit.

CONCLUSION

- The benefits of working on a language as part of the community and for the benefit of that community are enormous. Community sensitization, mobilization, training, etc. can be challenging tasks to perform.

- A model that could work best requires that the grammar writer should engage more with the community, creating more time and sourcing for funding to prepare literacy materials, follow up and ensure training of community members to read and write the language. The grammar writer should ensure that the people obtain copies of the grammar and that the language is introduced in the school system as a medium of instruction or, at least, as a school subject.

REFERENCES

- Akumbu, Pius W. & Chibaka, Evelyn F. 2012. *A pedagogic grammar of Babanki-a Grassfields language of Northwest Cameroon.* Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.

- Asohsi, Melvice. 2015. *Structural and typological approaches to Obang grammar.* A Grassfields Bantu language of Cameroon. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.

- Atindogbe, G, G. 2013. *A grammatical sketch of Mòkpè (Bakweri).* African Study Monographs, Suppl. 45: 5-163.

- Boutwell, Richards L. 2014. *A sketch grammar of the Mungong language.* Yaounde: SIL International.

- Boutwell, Richards L. 2010. *A sketch grammar of the Nchane language.* Yaounde: SIL International.

- Crane, Thera M., Hyman, Larry M. & Tukumu, Nsielanga S. J. 2011. *A Grammar of Nzadi [B.865]: A Bantu language of the Democratic Republic of the Congo.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Dobrin, Lise and Josh Berson. 2011. Speakers and language documentation. In Peter K. Austin and Julia Sallabank (eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Endangered Languages.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 187–211.

- Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.). 2019. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World.* Twenty-second edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL International. Online version: http://www.ethnologue.com.

REFERENCES

- Genetti, Carol and Rebecca Siemens. 2013. Training as empowering social action: An ethical response to language endangerment. In Elena Mihas, Bernard Perley, Gabriel Rei-Doval and Kathleen Wheatley (eds.), *Responses to language endangerment. In honor of Mickey Noonan. New directions in language documentation and language revitalization*, 59–77. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Grenoble, Lenore A. and Simone S. Whitecloud. 2014. Conflicting goals, ideologies and beliefs in the field. In Peter K. Austin and Julia Sallabank (eds.), *Beliefs and ideologies in language endangerment, documentation, and revitalisation. Proceedings of the British Academy* 199, 339–356. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Hedinger, Robert. 2008. *A grammar of Akoose: A northwest Bantu language*. Dallas: SIL International and the University of Texas at Arlington.

- Lovegren, Jesse. 2013. Mungbam grammar. PhD dissertation, University at Buffalo.

- Nforbi, Emmanuel & Ngum, Peter. 2009. Oku grammar. Dschang: Dschang University Press.

- Nguendjio, Emile G. 2014. *A descriptive grammar of Bangwa*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.

- Tamanji, Pius N. 2009. *A descriptive grammar of Bafut*. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.

- Viljoen, Melanie H. 2013. *A grammatical description of the Buwal language*. PhD dissertation, La Trobe University.

- Voll, Rebecca. 2017. A grammar of Mundabli, A Bantoid (Yemne-Kimbi) language of Cameroon. PhD Dissertation, University of Leiden.

Thank you for your kind attention!