

Report of language endangerment workshop Babati – July 2018



Participants

Gorwaa members

Pascali Bu'ú

Stephano Edward

Mch. Hezekiah
Kodi

Raheli Lawi

Festo Massani

Asimjeeg members

Mayco Bacheng

Yohani Mangi

Yonah Ndege

Isanzu members

Nicholas
Nalingigwa Gideon

Petro Malindeu

Hadzabe members

Maria

Gudo

Sigwazi

European and North American members

Andrew Harvey

Robert Lindfield

Richard Griscom

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Introduction

On July 16th and 17th, 2018, representatives from four different central Tanzanian ethnic groups met in Babati to discuss the changes currently experienced by their communities and the effects on their languages and cultures, as well as potential ways to combat any negative changes. The groups represented were the Gorwaa, the Asimjeeg Datooga, the Hadzabe, and the Isanzu. The Gorwaa and Isanzu had been invited by Andrew Harvey, a researcher who had been previously working towards documenting these languages. The Asimjeeg Datooga and Hadzabe were invited by Richard Griscom, a linguist working in Northern Tanzania with these two groups, primarily spending time documenting Asimjeeg Datooga. Both the Gorwaa and Asimjeeg Datooga groups have experience conducting research themselves, and the Isanzu and Hadzabe are preparing for similar projects themselves whereby they will start to conduct research themselves.

The primary aims of the conference were to share experiences of cultural change, to build a network between different communities engaging in linguistic research, to exchange knowledge and lessons from different projects, and to discuss different options for potential revitalization or preservation.

The first day was spent discussing the listed topics below, structured so that small groups divided into different language communities could discuss in detail their experiences within their localities. Each group was given a chance to report their findings to the larger group, and then common issues noted by the linguists were openly discussed with all participants together in a larger group. During these open discussions, everyone had the chance to speak their mind, and a stack system was used to keep track of who would like to speak. The second day was spent near Lake Babati, sharing knowledge about conducting field research. These discussions were much more centred around practical knowledge such as equipment, techniques for recording, and storing data.

Questions

What are the cultural changes in your community that you see today? How do you experience them? Do you feel that these changes are negative or positive?

Each group independently identified that their language was struggling in terms of transmission to younger generations. They all expressed concern that Swahili was replacing their languages in almost all domains: education, culture (music and

storytelling), business and public life. The Isanzu said that anyone speaking Kinyihanzu may be judged as uneducated and simple, and that this mindset had even reached villages with majority Isanzu communities.

Similarly, every group mentioned that traditional ways of life in some form or another are being lost. For example, the Hadzabe mentioned that children don't know traditional songs, the Asimjeeg Datooga said that traditional housing and even food has been lost, which has created health problems in the community. The Gorwaa also talked about shame associated with speaking the Gorwaa language due to negative perceptions, even within the community. They also said that traditional methods of education have been lost, as well as important celebrations related to agricultural seasons throughout the year, which were all integral parts of language transmission. They also connected modern problems such as unwanted pregnancies to the loss of this system.

One Isanzu representative said that smaller groups like the Isanzu are being "swallowed" by larger ones. He gave the example that songs, games and phrases that used to distinguish them from other groups are being forgotten. As a result, groups that are closely related are starting to become more homogeneous. They also echoed the sentiment that traditional systems of education, based on older community members teaching younger ones, have been lost.

What are the sources of these changes?

A central theme mentioned by all groups was that traditional ways of educating young people have been lost and replaced with government-endorsed education. It was repeatedly mentioned that not only are young people taught that Swahili is the language of progress and business, but that students are actively punished for using their home languages, which damages both their perception of the language and their ability to speak it. As mentioned above, age-based education has been largely lost. The Gorwaa said that this has been accompanied by a loss of respect for elders and a decrease in their authority. They said that elders and their methods of teaching (as well as their language) are often seen as dated and irrelevant. One Asimjeeg Datooga participant suggested that this lack of respect for elders and their customs comes partly from their inability to make money in the modern economy.

The Isanzu explained how it is difficult for modern parents to find the time to fulfill all the needs of their children and still find time for cultural education. When asked why everyone is too busy to focus on cultural activities, one Isanzu respondent

answered that these days there is a huge pressure to focus on economic advancement, especially helping one's children have a good Western-style education. This necessitates the establishment of businesses which in turn tend to use Swahili as the primary language of communication. A Gorwaa participant explained how culturally focused activities take a backseat, as there is often very little or no financial benefit for those supporting such activities. The associated vocabulary and opportunities to use the language are then lost. One member of the Hadzabe added that even people who are motivated to preserve cultural and linguistic heritage are often too tired from their daily work and routine to organise other activities.

Both the Hadzabe and Asimjeeg Datooga said that economic circumstances forced them to speak languages of other larger groups in their areas, due to the small size of their communities. They said that educated young people leaving school would often gravitate to urban centres with greater opportunities. Also both these groups said that their smaller communities often face discrimination and stereotyping from the other groups, which led young people to want to distance themselves from their origins. In addition, each group mentioned that the mixing of communities in towns and inter-ethnic marriages has led to the weakening of the status of their languages, as Swahili is usually adopted as the language of inter-community communication. Another cause brought up by the Asimjeeg Datooga and agreed to by the other groups was that popular culture in Tanzania today is largely dominated by the Swahili language and narratives, which are very recurrent in music and film popular amongst young people.

What are potential solutions to these problems?

All groups stressed the importance of encouraging the use of their languages in the home. One method for doing this could be teaching of games and dances for young people. This could be done through dedicated community gatherings where elders could have a chance to pass on knowledge or through encouraging parents and grandparents in the home to take a more active role in passing on traditional songs and games. Each group suggested that local elders be asked to come and teach these to young people. The Gorwaa proposed that they try to establish media such as radio stations that can broadcast the Gorwaa language and offer local alternatives to the Swahili media. They also suggested that Gorwaa be used in community meetings and religious gatherings, a sentiment that was echoed by most other participants. On the subject of community language media, the Asimjeeg Datooga suggested an app full of recordings of songs and stories that people over the scattered

communities could use to boost their knowledge of the language.

A very recurrent idea was that each community have a space where people could come to hear their language being used and partake in traditional activities. The Isanzu already are putting in place a plan for such a project and have a designated space, and the Gorwaa said they are discussing options for a cultural centre. In such a space, events could be held such as musical productions, storytelling, and teaching of the language, all of which serve to get people excited about their heritage and provide them with opportunities to engage with and preserve their culture. The Gorwaa added to this by saying that they hope to establish fields where traditional farming methods are used, which in turn will lead people to learn associated vocabulary and practices, as well as observing traditional ceremonies and celebrations. The Hadza explained how they hold regular events in the community revolving around various competitions and traditional games, where the use of the Hadza language is encouraged. They said that these had been quite a successful way to bring the community together and get people speaking Hadza.

The Asimjeeg Datooga and Gorwaa stressed that they felt part of the solution was having written materials in their languages that could be used for educating young people and storing knowledge and information in their languages. They felt that if people were able to use their language in a written format it would lead them to see it as more relevant and give young people motivation to study and value the language. In addition to this, one Hadza participant suggested that this report be translated and distributed to people across the various communities, in the hope of them getting an overview of the challenges facing them regarding linguistic and cultural preservation, and in turn to motivate people to work on finding solutions.

One Hadza group member said that she felt for them, the crux of the problem was land. She argued that many of these problems have been caused by the loss of their ancestral lands, in turn restricting their ability to live following traditional techniques of hunting and subsistence. Therefore, she argued if land rights could be improved for the Hadza, many of these problems would be in turn solved. For example, they would no longer need to attract tourists as a source of income or look for work in neighbouring communities.

How can we work together, between these ethnic groups as well as with linguists, to achieve these solutions/goals?

This question aimed to provide an opportunity for some reflection on the next step for both the organisers and the participants. There was a strong feeling of wanting to continue to work together to address some of the issues faced by the various communities. One suggestion was that the other groups come to visit the Hadza during the above mentioned competitions to observe how they are used to create a space for Hadza culture and language use. We all exchanged contact details so we can stay in touch and hopefully a cross-community group network can develop to share news and possibly pool resources.

Reflections and conclusions

Overall, this meeting was successful in starting a conversation in a cross-community setting, which we hope will lead to further dialogue and cooperation in the future. We were able to get a small picture of the effects of cultural and linguistic change in Northern Tanzania, and what is driving these changes. The meeting was friendly and enjoyable, and provided insight into different communities and the challenges they are facing, which was hugely educational for me personally.

We have hardly scratched the surface of the discussion of what practical steps would need to be taken in an effort to reduce the negative impacts of these changes, but we have begun to hear the visions and aspirations of various communities on what such a plan may look like. In reflection, it would have been useful to have someone present with experience of language revitalisation projects that could provide concrete examples. If such a meeting were to happen again, this might be worth considering.

One further point was that the meeting was definitely dominated by men, with only two women present. Going forward it is important that we create balanced spaces that give women a voice, too, in order to ensure that the views heard at meetings are reflective of variations in opinion and experience within different cultures and communities.

Thank you for reading and many thanks to everyone who attended the meeting. It wouldn't have been possible without your time, enthusiasm and insight.