“WHO SAYS WE’RE FINISHED?”

INVESTIGATING COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS OF LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

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OVERVIEW

1. Assessing language endangerment
2. Iyasa: context and history
3. Speakers’ perspectives: causes of language endangerment
4. Speakers’ predictions of Iyasa’s future
5. Speakers’ attitudes towards endangerment
6. Moving forward
ASSESSING LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

• Various tools for assessing linguistic vitality:
  • GIDS (Fishman 1991), EGIDS (Lewis & Simons 2010)
  • UNESCO Language Vitality Index (UNESCO 2003)
  • Language Endangerment Index (Lee and Van Way 2016)
ASSESSING LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

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  - Language Endangerment Index (Lee and Van Way 2016)

- **What do these have in common?**
  - Outside assessments based on *outsiders’* evaluations and observations
    - (Usually!)

**Moderately endangered!**
ASSESSING LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

• Other ways of looking at linguistic vitality
  • Local perceptions of language endangerment?
  • Speakers’ attitudes towards language shift?
  • And what does “language shift” mean to speakers?

Well, the kids don’t speak like they used to...

IT’S DOOMED!
DOOOOOMED!!

Our language is doing just fine.
ASSESSING LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

What’s the value of studying local perceptions of language endangerment...

- **To the speaker community?**
  - Having more say in outside portrayals of language and culture
  - Being publicly acknowledged as experts
  - Increased awareness & dialogue around language shift
  - Better-informed revitalization methods
ASSESSING LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT

What’s the value of studying local perceptions of language endangerment...

• To linguistics?
  • Better data
    • Growing emphasis on “sociolinguistically informed language documentation” (Childs et al. 2014)
  • Better understanding of the sociolinguistics of language shift
  • Better-informed revitalization methods (a win-win!)
**IYASA - CONTEXT**

**Cameroon:** ~280 languages  
**Official:** French & English

**Iyasa** [ISO 639-3: yko], a.k.a. Yasa  
- Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea  
- Coastal Bantu (A.30)  
- 2,000-3,000 speakers?  
- “Threatened” *(Catalogue of Endangered Languages)*  
- **Campo:** main Iyasa town in Cameroon  
  - 8 other villages in Cameroon (2 Iyasa, 3 mixed, 3 mostly abandoned)
IYASA - CONTEXT

History:
- **17th-18th century(?):** Iyasa arrive at coast from Congo(?)
- **1914-1916:** Catastrophic loss of life during WWI Kamerun Campaign
- **1916-1960:** French colonial administration; advent of French-medium schooling
- **Early 1990s:** Construction of Kribi-Campo Road increases mobility in and out of Campo
- **2010:** Construction begins on deepwater shipping port at Lolabe, northernmost Iyasa village; huge influx of outsiders
- **Today:** Rapid urbanization, migration, development in progress.

Big changes going on in the Iyasa area.
METHODS

- Sociolinguistic interviews with 33 self-identified Iyasa speakers, ages 18-76
- Conducted during summer fieldwork trip, 2016
  - With help from two (non-Iyasa) Cameroonian research assistants, MA students at University of Yaounde I
- Questionnaire on language attitudes, language biography, and perceptions of linguistic ecology
- 30-90 minutes, in French
What do Iyasa speakers think, in their own words?

Cf. Rice & Linn on Thursday: Listen not just to what people say, but how they say it.
CAUSES:
DEMographics
**CAUSES: DEMOGRAPHICS**

**Iyasa:** small minority surrounded by larger languages.

**How many speakers?**

- “Not numerous”: Elise (58), Yves (71), Thomas (76), Mary (32), Henri (40), most other speakers
- Perhaps 2,000? (Léon, 48)
- “Frankly numerous” (Robert, 19)
- More than 1 million (Bertrand, 24)
CAUSES: DEMOGRAPHICS

Many people expressed concern about rapidly changing demographics in Campo.

• Older speakers were firm that Iyasa used to be a main demographic in Campo, but no longer.

• Some described the influx of settlers with words like “envahi” (invaded) or “s’embouber” (to be buried).

• Yves (71) drew parallels to the case of Duala language in the 1960s: once the main language in city of Douala, but then became endangered.
  • “The Bamileke already invaded them… that’s what I’m afraid of.”
CAUSES: DEMOGRAPHICS

Why do demographic changes pose a threat?

Mary (F, 32) explains the “accommodation struggle” when meeting a non-Iyasa person:

Mary: When I meet someone who’s maybe Mvae, I speak Yasa to him or I greet him in Yasa?

He replies that he’s not Iyasa, that I should respond, greet him in Mvae.

[...] So better, for not bringing the discussion upon myself, that it’s in French.
CAUSES: DEMOGRAPHICS

Yves (M, 71) expressed negative feelings towards the influx of outsiders and their effect on Iyasa.

Yves; After all, (CLAP) we’re not numerous, eh?

We’re not numerous, the foreigners will come with their dictatorship and with their magic and all that—

It’s going to disappear.
CAUSES: DEMOGRAPHICS

Serge, M, 70+, was extremely pessimistic about Iyasa’s survival in the midst of outside settlers.

Serge; The– the Yasa are finished.

Of course the city, the city grows with foreigners.
Where are the Iyasa?
You’ll count in the city there. How many?
The city of Campo now, is full of Bamileke.
CAUSES: DEMOGRAPHICS

Overall:

• Speakers have grave concerns about being overwhelmed by other groups, linguistically and otherwise.

• Not an unfounded fear: many cases of language endangerment globally involve loss of traditional territory.
CAUSES: FRENCH
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**French:** The colonial and official language of the Campo region.

- Need more be said?
CAUSES: FRENCH

Adele (F, 41) identified inter-group marriages as driving French use in the home.

Hawaou; And what do you think of these mixed marriages? Where you’re always going to be looking for common ground? As a Yasa woman?

Adele; (TSK) For me I don’t like it. I like when we are— we have the same language. Because that’s good. Because sometimes there are couples— I see this, You’re obliged to speak French.
**CAUSES: FRENCH**

**Paul (M, 71)** identified French as a cause of language attrition among children who are schooled in the city.

**Paul:** They go to the city there, like a lot of children, instead of speaking the mother tongue, they’re accustomed with their friends, they start to speak French, even arriving at their parents’ house, the sentence is bad—is badly constructed.

#Since #he #is unaccustomed in the city ((to speaking Iyasa)).
CAUSES: FRENCH

Justine (F, 54) described changes in the role of French:

Justine; It’s now that the fact of French has come.
In our home here ((when I was young)) the— we spoke the patois.
It’s at school that you’ll speak Fre— you learn French.
But now everything has changed.
French in the home French in the home,
The children don’t understand Yasa anymore.
A lot don’t understand they don’t even speak.
CAUSES:
TRANSMISSION
CAUSES: TRANSMISSION

Do young people speak Iyasa? How well? How often? According to whom?

- **Robert (19)**, before the interview began, claimed that “all kids speak Yasa all the time!”
  - Twenty feet away, a group of kids was playing soccer in French.
CAUSES: TRANSMISSION

Christine (F, 29) said most young children don’t speak Iyasa well (including her own), though there are exceptions.

Christine; There are those ((kids)) who speak well but—here too, but most—when you do the percentage, it’s low.
Robert (M, 19) says he is a rare good speaker among youth.

Robert; Well nowadays it’s also difficult to find a dude speaking Yasa fluently.

Well they have a bit of little problems.

If they put out two words in Yasa they’re going to put out the third in French.

…((But my level of language)) it’s frankly good because I grew up with my mother, and only spoke Yasa in the house.
CAUSES: TRANSMISSION

Martin (M, 21) said he didn’t speak iyasa well now, but believed he would in the future.

Martin; It ((my language)) will be good afterwards.

[...]

Hawaou; What’s going to happen that afterwards your language will be better than today?

Martin; I can still learn still to talk with the great ones/elders.
Thomas (M, 76) believes that youth are deliberately creating a new form of “incorrect” iyasa.

Thomas; When they ((kids)) speak Yasa, Yasa isn’t– it’s changed– they want to change Yasa. Their patois—their Yasa (TSK), isn’t correct to the ears. [...] They want to create eh, “I WANT to say that.” They want to create THEIR Yasa. (Laughter)
CAUSES: TRANSMISSION

Overall:

• Consensus that a large proportion of children speak mostly or exclusively French.
  • Many young parents reported speaking mostly French in the home.

• Consensus that young people don’t speak Iyasa as well as elders: not as “deep,” more mixing, and more errors. (see Belew 2017)

• Youth (18-30) generally said they spoke Iyasa, but some elders claimed youth don’t speak at all.
PREDICTING IYASA’S FUTURE
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Varied responses to questionnaire item about the future:

• “If things continue as they are now, will Iyasa be spoken in [speaker’s village/town] in ten years? Fifty years? One hundred years?”
  • Older speakers: generally pessimistic.
  • Younger speakers: generally optimistic.

• All agreed, though, that Iyasa is spoken less now than in the past.
PREDICTING IYASA’S FUTURE

Martin (M, 21) is optimistic about the continuation of “good” Iyasa.

Anna; Will Yasa be spoken in Campo in 20 years, in 50 years, in 100 years?
Martin; Yes.
Anna; Yeah? Always?
Martin; Mm-hm.
Hawaou; And it will always be a good Yasa or a bad Yasa?
Martin; A good Yasa.
Justine (F, 54) thinks Iyasa may survive, but in a changed form.

Justine; If people don’t, don’t insist ((on speaking Iyasa to their children)), I see that even after the— some years,

it’s like if Yasa is going to change, it means– it’s

not—

it will be Yasa but it will no longer be spoken WELL like now.
PREDICTING IYASA’S FUTURE

Yves (M, 71) is very pessimistic about Iyasa’s odds.

Yves: The Iyasa language is going to disappear.
    At the moment, it’s disappearing– it’s already disappearing.
    Even more so, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow.

[...] I have doubts that it will still exist. I have doubts.
Overall:

- **Much more optimism from young people**
  - Though some youth were aware of endangerment.
- **Much more pessimism from older people**
  - Catastrophic statements like “the Yasa are finished”
- **Middle-aged people generally in the middle**
  - Aware of endangerment, but predicting continuation of “changed” Iyasa
ATTITUDES TOWARDS LANGUAGE SHIFT
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• (Almost) all speakers reported **positive feelings** towards their language, hoped for it to continue being spoken.
  - Mary (F, 32) was an exception.
• Some speakers described language shift with not only sadness, but condemnation.
  - “It’s the parents’ fault, and it’s wrong,” was a common sentiment.
• The majority of speakers said Iyasa was the **single most important language for their children** to speak.
  - Why? “Because it’s our language,” most commonly.
ATTITUDES TOWARDS LANGUAGE SHIFT

Mary (F, 32) expressed less than positive feelings about Iyasa’s value. Her father (Paul, M, 71) laughs.

Anna; Are you interested in it? The– the Yasa culture?
Mary; No.
Anna; Ah not at all?
Paul; (Laughter)
Mary; It doesn’t interest me. It doesn’t– what does it do for me? What will it give me? Will it give me work? Will it give money? For me, it doesn’t interest me.
ATTITUDES TOWARDS LANGUAGE SHIFT

Mary (F, 32) expressed less than positive feelings about Iyasa’s value.

Anna; If—he ((a child))—he expresses himself very well in French, but he doesn’t express himself well in Yasa. Is that okay?

Mary; For me that’s fine. For me I have no problem.

[...] Like I told you, #as much as he’ll find a Yasa office where he #has to work.

Paul; @A Yasa office where?

Mary; But it’s French that they always ask for.
ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENDANGERMENT

Henri (M, 40) describes language shift in morally loaded terms:

Henri: That parents speak, to their children, a foreign language, that isn’t their own,

I say that— that’s serious. Excuse me for saying it like that. For me that’s serious.

And I’ll even say it’s an aberration, and regrettable to the extreme.
Henri (M, 40) describes language shift in morally loaded terms:

Henri; I think that God isn’t crazy. To have created everyone with a language.

[...] He who refuses to speak his language to first speak another,

He’s already judging God. He finds that God was crazy, to create these languages.
HOW TO MOVE FORWARD?
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What do we do with this information?

• *Listen to speakers*. They know much more about their language context than you do.

• Remember that “communities” are not monolithic!
  • Expect diversity in perspectives.

• Begin your projects with exploratory interviews to get leads on:
  • Salient examples of language change
  • Language shift in different demographics
  • How linguistic repertoires have changed over time
  • Other important sociolinguistic factors
HOW TO MOVE FORWARD?

What do we do with this information?

- For revitalization: insights into most effective tactics.
  - In Iyasa: target outreach to overconfident youth?
  - Optimism is great; underestimating the risks is not.
  - Youth are responsible for carrying the language forward.
  - Invite youth to carefully, realistically observe language use.

- Jumping-off points for community discussions of language shift and maintenance
  - E.g., strong social judgment of parents who speak French → be mindful of shame in reaching out to them
  - Examples familiar to community, like Duala, can be useful cautionary/inspirational tales
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REFERENCES


AKEVA!

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