State of affairs and prospect of language documentation in Cameroon

Gratien G. Atindogbé

University of Buea, Cameroon / University of Cologne, Germany

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Introduction

- Language documentation (LD) is a relatively new concept in linguistic research in Cameroon
- As such, LD is a research practice that needs to be "conquered" by all the stakeholders involved in linguistic research or LD project for a palpable and durable benefit for all parties!

Introduction (cont'd)

- African countries in general and Cameroon in particular being a favorable ground for LD projects, a lot of funds from national and international bodies are/may/will be invested to support this activity.
- For these funds and energy from participants to serve the full purpose, one needs to go a step further...

Introduction (cont'd)

- Even if some language researchers have already perceived the necessity of LD activities in Cameroon for instance where many languages are threatened of death, not everybody in the chain (I mean the stakeholders) is moved...
- This talk is going to address the question of "not everybody in the LD chain is moved..." or, some of the problems related to the practice of LD in Cameroon

Introduction (cont'd)

- These problems will be analyzed from three levels:
  - the language documenter
  - the institution he/she belongs to
  - and the hurdles in the field
- Thus, with the eyes of an insider, I will deal with very practical, sometimes trivial, points that, unfortunately, can ruin any LD activities even if the expertise, the money and the time are present.

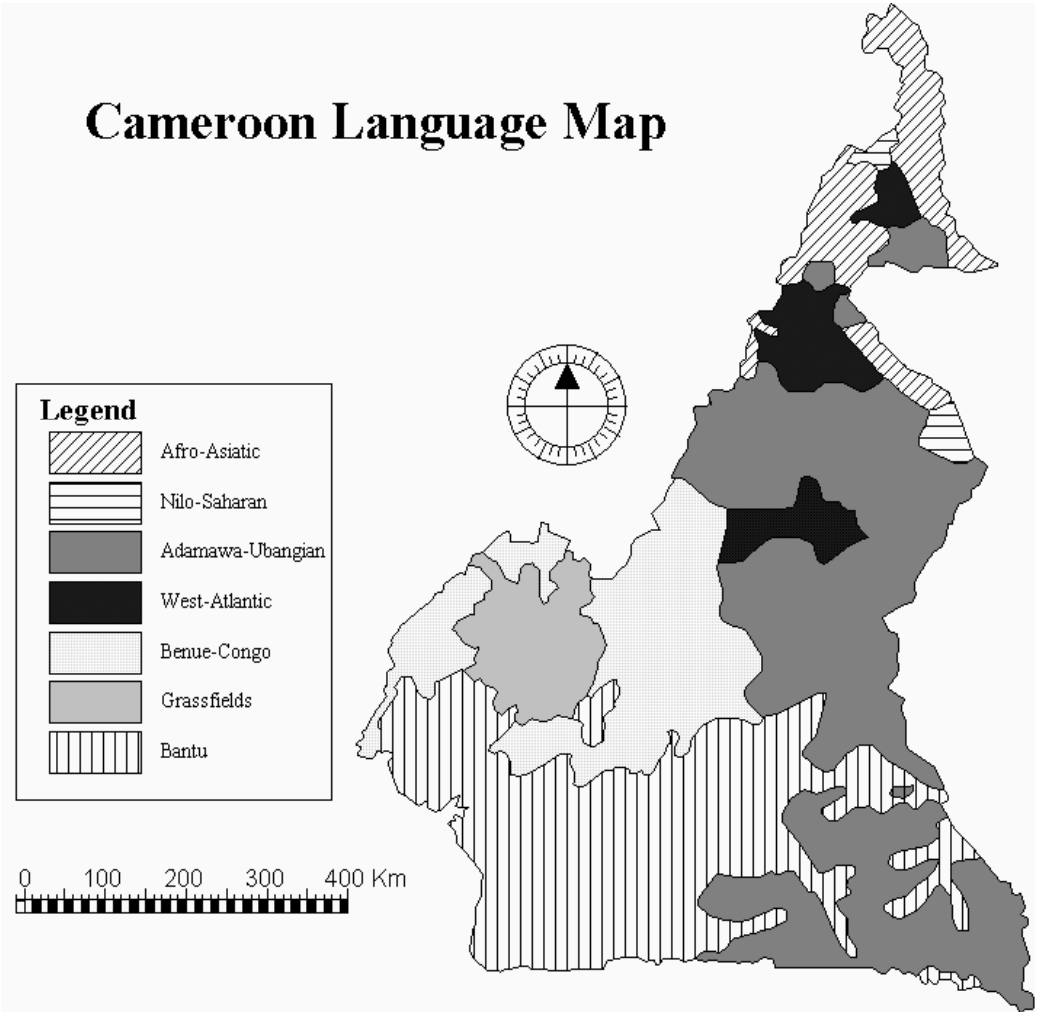
Worth noting

- Cameroon is a multilingual country counting 286 languages with 279 living languages, 3 second languages without mother-tongue speakers, and 4 extinct languages (Gordon 2005).
- There are two official languages, French and English, and no home languages is officially promoted...

- 25 languages have 5000-3000 speakers
- 47 languages have 2999-1000 speakers
- 18 languages have 999-100 speakers
- 04 languages have 99-10 speakers
- 08 languages have 09-01 speaker(s)
- 11 languages have no information about the number of speakers
- In a nutshell, about 102 languages have between 5000 and 01 speaker(s)

- About 75% of the languages are not yet described (Atindogbé 2003)
- Linguistically also, Cameroon is ‘Africa in miniature’. Indeed:

Cameroon Language Map Showing Principal Families (Steven Bird (2001) after Dieu and Renaud 1983)



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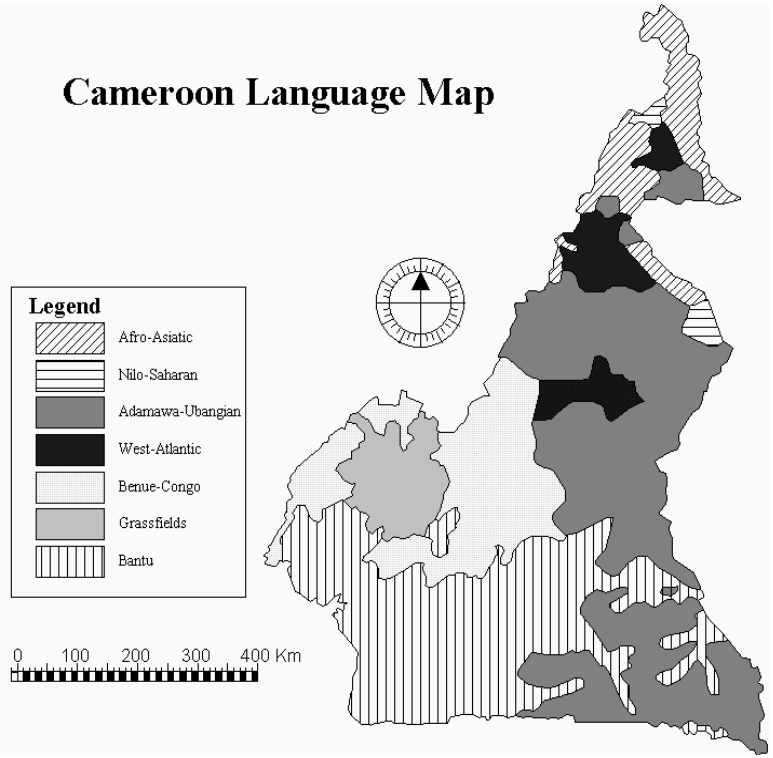

Technical actors of Language projects in Cameroon

It is important to distinguish two types of activities:

- Language description (LDes), most widespread
- Language documentation, less practiced

Language description is done by:

- Individuals and/or groups of researchers in Linguistic Departments of State Universities

- Research institutes, e.g.: the "Centre de Recherche et de Documentation sur les Traditions Orales et pour le Developpement des Langues Africaines (CERDOTOLA)"
- SIL international
- Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL)
- The National Association for Cameroonian Language Committees (NACALCO)
- Individuals and/or groups of researchers in Linguistic Departments of foreign universities

☞ Language documentation is done by:

- Individuals and/or groups of researchers in Linguistic Departments of State Universities
- Individuals and/or groups of researchers in Linguistic Departments of foreign universities

Funds providers for Language projects in Cameroon

- International donors
  - Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst (DAAD)
  - Alexander von Humboldt (AvH)
  - Volkswagen Foundation
  - Foundation for Endangered Languages (FEL)
  - Endangered Languages Fund (ELF)
  - The Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)
  - UNESCO
  - Others

- National donors
  - The Ministry of Higher Education
  - The Ministry of Scientific Research and Innovation
  - State Universities

Note:

considering the amount of money invested, one can say, roughly speaking, that 95% of the funds on linguistic research are from the international donors

LD in Cameroon

- **Methodology**
  - Interviews
  - Questionnaires
  - Spontaneous statements from actors and/or decision makers
    - Personal conversation in informal situations
    - Declarations/statements in meetings
    - Recordings of interviews by journalists over the radio and television

State of affairs of LD

☞Out of the field

- LD is poorly known in Cameroon:

  - colleagues: 100% heard about it but 75% confuse it to LDes, 20% have a vague idea of LD and 5% do not know anything about it

  - Students: 55% of the students on the MA program, and 95% of the students in the 3rd year of the BA program just heard about it and nothing more

- Linguists who heard about LD are reluctant / suspicious towards it:
  - What do these people have in mind? What is this new concept hiding? Is it not another trick put in place to plunder vulnerable people's cultural patrimony? Is it not a diverted way to control people's philosophy?
  - The weight of tradition. Some colleagues are more interested in or more comfortable with LDes and theoretical linguistics. They fill secured in these domains and do not want to take any risk…
  - The fear of not having funds. They do not want to get involved into any search of funds that will not yield any positive results… (pessimism…)

- LD requires more funds, as its interdisciplinary nature makes the budget higher than in traditional LDes
- Discouragement towards the usual poor working conditions…
- About 50% of university lecturers do not have or no longer have a personal computer
- Of those you have a personal computer, 95% do not have private internet access

- Lack of required technical equipments for LD:
  - Our universities do not yet have viable internet connections
  - The IT Centers (computer pools) are overcrowded when they function

- Lack of technical assistance in the domain of ICTs in general
- Lack of office computers for some colleagues
- Lack of the quality audio and video recorders
- Lack of trainers and training on LD
- Lack of literature on LD

LD as a "discipline" of the Humanities

- It suffers from the general feeling/idea about disciplines of the humanities (no or minimal contribution to the national economy or well-being). Although this view is completely erroneous, it influences decisions of some of the policy makers.

- In our universities, some of the Professors who are not in the humanities share this viewpoint and behave accordingly when it is time to allocate research funds to Faculties. In other words, there is total inequality…
- Outside our universities (Ministries, Parliament, etc.), the predominant viewpoint is, unfortunately, that *"Lecturers do not contribute (**directly**) anything to the national economy"*, and consequently do not need good working conditions…

- Heavy administrative hurdles to get a research permit
- The linguistic situation of Cameroon (2 exoglossic languages as official languages)

☞In the field

Despite the fact that LD does not yet attract many researchers, because of its technical and financial requirements, some few "elected" people (2%) who count first of all on their private resources and who dare apply for external funds do involve themselves in LD. Those are confronted with some of the following problems:

- Difference in objectives between the researcher and the community (Mosel 2006), when the latter is really interested

- Indifference of the community towards the researcher's enterprise
- Conditional participation: money
- Suspicion by heads of community who are literate
- Systematic refusal for certain community to have certain social events recorded. LD being a contact between modernism, traditions and beliefs, some traditional practices make people fear for their image and voice to be captured

- Lack of time for the researcher to really penetrate the socio-cultural reality of the community
- The irregularity of certain socio-cultural events
- Difficult access to the site of investigation
- Extremely hard living conditions in the site (to meet up with a minimum for acceptable living conditions can increase the budget)

Way forward...

- Advocacy and Lobbying (Atindogbé 2007). Above knowledge production and preservation, we need to be aggressive, inventive and realistic. Our situation does not give us any other alternative
- Considering the importance of our discipline, we should think about a kind of "Applied Africanistics (African studies)" where we attempt to use the results of our findings to solve daily problems…
- Convince donors of the necessity of combining LD projects with other 'quick-effects' social projects

- With the interdisciplinary nature of LD, stimulate national scientific cooperation amongst State Universities
- Reinforce international scientific as well as political cooperation
- Consider LD as a means to achieve the Millennium Development Goals
- Consider all the learning and knowledge producing discipline as a gage to national development
- Training local speakers as a gage of multiplying effects

Prospect of LD in Cameroon

The prospect of LD resides in the capacity or ability of the documenters to address the pressing practical issues raised above. LD is just like a piece of music played by an orchestra. The ultimate challenge of the researcher is to make sure that each musician (stakeholder) plays its part in order to produce the harmonious piece expected.

"Challenges that must be urgently addressed by nations from developing areas of the world are the improvement of science and education at all levels, the development of the physical infrastructure for research, services and communication,[…], and the increase in efficiency, responsibility and response velocity." (Ponte Sucre 2008:33).

Conclusion

A systematic look at what LD has been, is, and can be in Cameroon reveals the following:

- While in this part of the world the preoccupation is to evaluate the efficiency of LD after 10 years of its practice in order to improve on its outcomes, in some other parts of the same globe the challenge is still at having it accepted as a useful and efficient solution to language and culture endangerment …
- Thus, placed in a realistic setting, the conditions for the hatching of LD are not yet met. The discipline does not yet have the expected support from decision makers, and communities.

- Doing LD in the present context would be like "putting the cart before the horse"
- The few who get involved in LD projects may not do it properly as external funds might not always be available for the doing, the follow-up, the evaluation on the one hand, and the maintenance of equipments on the other. External funds are limited and the competition is hard
- Research is done in a social, political and economic setting/context that needs to be conducive for its success
- LD would not be a priority in a context of crisis, poverty and political survival if it is not well presented and sold
- The main efforts should be directed toward funds raising which is just the outlet of a vast campaign of advocacy and lobbying…

- Yet, comes the question of priority for developing countries. Indeed, I can't resist to paraphrase Bawa et al (2008):

"What does "Language documentation" mean in a world where the environment is being degraded in many areas, poverty is increasing, and the gaps between rich and poor individuals and nations are widening?"

That's fruits for thought.

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Thank you for your kind attention!