

Language Documentation & Linguistic Theory 2

The Uncunwee (Ghulfan) Documentation Project: linking language documentation to language conservation

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This report will focus on how a major African language documentation project is responding to community concerns about language conservation, and in doing so will highlight some new and emerging techniques and approaches to both language documentation and language conservation. The Uncunwee (Ghulfan) Documentation Project (UDP) is a major team effort working to document, analyze, and archive Uncunwee, an endangered and little-documented Kordofan Nubian (northern East Sudanic) language spoken in the Nuba Mountains and in the Uncu Diaspora.

One characteristic of the UDP is that we worked for almost three years prior to our first trip to the Nuba Mountains with an Uncunwee speech community among the large refugee population in Cairo, Egypt. While not exactly a new technique in language documentation, our refugee work does highlight the opportunities refugees provide for immediate response to endangered languages with difficult-to-reach in situ locations.

During our first trip to the Nuba Mountains in January 2009, it became apparent to us that the Uncu Community was already well aware of the erosion of both their language and culture, and that the community had already begun earnest discussion on this matter. In fact, some efforts at language maintenance, such as the development of an orthography and Uncunwee-Arabic word list were already underway. Thus Uncunwee leaders, realizing that we had language documentation knowledge and skills lacking in the Community itself, asked us to broaden our mandate to include assisting in the Uncunwee conservation effort, and we gladly accepted.

It is our position that any successful language conservation effort must be lead and carried out by the speakers themselves, and not by outsiders, such as linguists or anthropologists. To this end, our initial response to the community's request involved training community members in some elementary language documentation skills, such as use of the IPA and the writing of the Uncunwee tones. We initially worked with the two Uncunwee speakers who were working on the orthography and word list, but will attempt to expand our field school student population on our next visit, when we will also offer training in elementary lexicography.

We have also engaged community members in drawing culturally relevant elicitation prompts and in making video recordings of elicitation prompt directions in the national language. We now have picture prompts and video-taped directions for the elicitation of locative marking and plan to expand this effort on our next visit. We have also been able to put the prompt directions, as well as video clip prompts from the Nijmegen 'put' project, onto iPods, which makes facilitates elicitation in the field. Involving speech community members in these efforts will eventually enable trained Uncunwee speakers to carry out linguistic elicitation on their own, or under long distance supervision through the use of programs such as Skype, which we have been using for elicitation checks since our return from the field.

Finally, we are investigating the possibility of developing a public awareness advertising campaign aimed at combating locally held negative beliefs about the efficacy of raising children as bilingual Uncunwee-Arabic speakers and concomitant negative attitudes about the status of Uncunwee versus that of Arabic and English. Such a campaign would target girls in primary and secondary school in an effort to reverse the now widely-spread practice of raising children as unilingual speakers of Arabic.