

The sociolinguistic complexity of coastal Tanzania: the case of Ndengeleko

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Work on endangered languages tends to focus on almost extinct languages or on languages with a few thousand speakers. Although there are – in this perspective – quite a large number of speakers of Ndengeleko, I would like to claim that this Bantu language is severely endangered. When intergenerational transmission is almost absent and the language has – for a complexity of reasons - very low status, it is possible for such a language to disappear within a relatively short time-frame. To document and describe Ndengeleko is of immediate importance, as the dominant language (i.e. Swahili) is taking over and will otherwise influence the description too much. With just a few, or even a few thousand, speakers left it would probably be too late to describe a language in this kind of environment.

One of the reasons for documenting endangered languages is to preserve culture-specific vocabulary, maybe even containing words and concepts that other languages do not have. But knowledge of this kind of specific language-use seems to die out first, making it even more important to describe languages before they become too small.

I will present a sociolinguistic survey conducted among schools in the Rufiji district (August 2006), part of a more complete description of the language, and assess the status of Ndengeleko according to the nine factors as developed by the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages. I will show why I think this relatively large language will decline and disappear within a few generations. Furthermore, a general picture of the language situation in the area will be sketched. This is the area of the Bantu P10 group which is – apart from one language, Matumbi – almost completely undescribed.