



# A COMMUNITY APPROACH TO LANGUAGE DOCUMENTATION IN AFRICA

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- Linguistics work, including Language Documentation (LD) in Africa does not serve the current needs of community members.
- Data from African languages advances science while owners and producers of the data themselves are neglected.

- Context of linguistics work in Africa
- Practical aspects of linguistics work in Africa
- Beneficiaries of current linguistics projects in Africa
- Proposals for what should change in linguistics work in Africa



Why continued endangerment of African languages since colonial times?

- **Natural Process**
  - economic pressures,
  - increased mobility,
  - mass media (TV, radio, internet),
  - pressure from dominant languages

Why continued endangerment of African languages since colonial times?

- **Consequence of colonialism**

- The colonizer set out to erase and make invisible what belonged to the colonized (see Holmes 2018 for the Native American context).
- The colonial project for Africa portrayed whatever was African (language, culture, religion, etc.) as negative, primitive, inadequate...
- Some Africans shame and punish others for speaking their languages (Bwesigye bwa Mwesigire 2014)
- Colonialism set the stage and orchestrated language and culture endangerment and death in Africa

Why continued endangerment of African languages since colonial times?

- **The role of linguists and funders/donors**

- Current linguistics research (description and documentation) validates, stands by, watches, accompanies, and even accelerates the language endangerment process as linguists are rushing to document African languages in order to have something to look back to when the languages would have died completely (Harrington 1941).
- Language endangerment is used to justify language documentation – it ensures that researchers (especially those trained in European and American universities) obtain language documentation funding.
- Donors decide what funders should support

## **Linguistics work and continuation of colonialism**

- In some sense the colonial experience has been carried over to linguistics work in the African continent. While African languages have contributed largely to advancing linguistic knowledge (see for example Hyman 2003a; Hyman 2003b; Lionnet & Hyman 2018), Africa itself has probably benefitted only in very minor ways from the study of its languages.

- Linguistics fieldwork training has largely neglected the needs of communities such that colonial approaches to linguistics continue to prevail (Tsikewa 2021).

For most linguistics work in the African context, the researcher brings the expertise, equipment, tools, finances while the community actually just provides the language – the mining field (Kadanya 2006; Akumbu 2020).

Shortcomings of the community-based Holmes (2018: 153) refers to McDonald (2003: 84) who argues that “first, community-based research is located in communities. So what? Almost by definition ethnographic research is located in communities...The issue is that community-based research needs to be about something more than location”.

Continuing from McDonald’s theorizing, Evans (2004: 60) notes that “...the term ‘community based’ says nothing about the role of the community in the research process.”





## Identification of community needs

Linguist: “Would you like a dictionary for your language”?

Community member(s): “Yes”.

## Identification of community needs

Linguist: “What do you need”?

Community needs identified by Cameroonians

- Water
- Roads
- Electricity
- Health Facilities
- Schools
- Food
- Security
- Peace



## Identification of community needs

*Pig for Pikin* initiative of the KPAAM-CAM project in Lower Fungom,  
Northwest Cameroon

<http://www.pigforpikin.org/>

*The Sunday Dress* funding initiative

<http://it.pigforpikin.org/il-vestito-della-domenica/>

Water supply initiative implemented by the Beezen Language  
Documentation Project.

<https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/afrika/medien/beldop.pdf>



## The linguist and funders

Successful completion of project means

- Data collection for scientific inquiry
- Participation/presentation at conferences
- publications
- Academic fulfilment
- Capacity building in scholarship
- Financial benefits
- Travel and leisure
- etc

## The community

dictionary, orthography guide  
storybook(s)



## **On archiving and the benefits of archived materials**

Meissner (2018: 273–274) discusses the problem of archiving and access to community members and it emerges clearly that archives do not primarily serve current community members' needs.

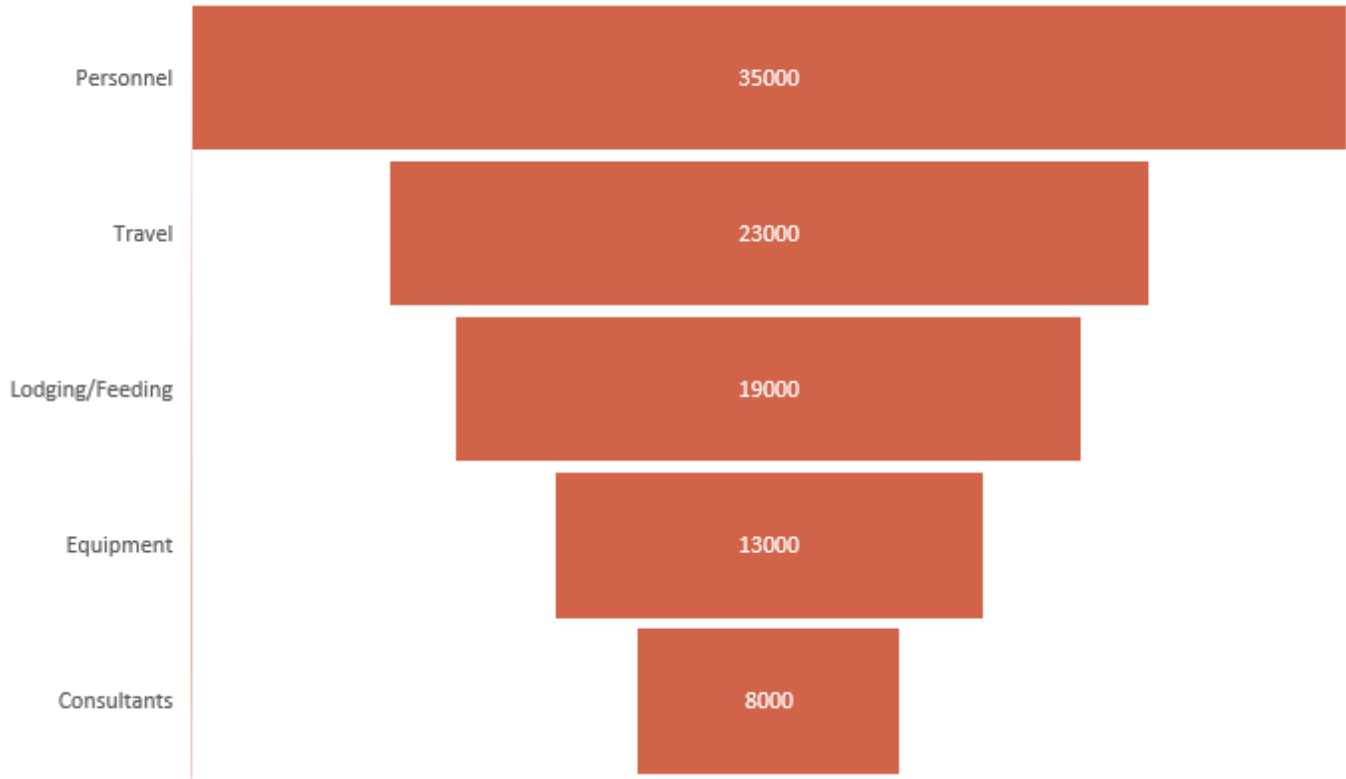
## Financial benefits

- It is obvious that communities benefit the least. It is often the case that the greater part of the budget will cover the researcher's expenses and other project costs while consultant payment will be in the neighborhood of 10% of the budget.
- Bown (2008: 162–163) notes that “it might not be appropriate in all cultures to pay people in money; that may be considered insulting...it's also useless if there's nowhere to spend the money... your consultants may wish to be paid in alcohol, or in cigarettes. Paying with cigarettes can be more valuable to the recipient than paying in cash, because cigarettes can be traded or used to ‘buy’ favours.”



## LD Budget allocations

Allocation of 100,000 USD Language documentation budget



## Financial benefits

### **Minimal contribution to community's economy by the researcher**

In some communities, linguistics projects leave very little economic and financial impact and, clearly, do not contribute much to community development. Therefore, even if the project is community-based in some sense, it only enables the exploitation or mining of the community's linguistic resources and does not leave the community with any considerable benefits.





**Proposal:** Linguistics projects should be conceived and implemented as part of community development projects.

Community-based or community-centered research (McDonald 2003; Evans 2004; Holmes 2018) ensure that linguistic goals are met in ethically acceptable ways, but not concerned the survival needs of communities in the African context (see also Ngue Um 2017).



## Linguists should seek to support community maintenance

“In Cameroon, there appears to be a correlation between language vitality and the community’s wellbeing ...the less economically empowered a community, the less the members are inclined to asserting and performing the group’s identity through language use, and the more exposed and endangered their cultural heritage. African communities whose languages are most endangered also **almost** happen to be the most economically and politically marginalized: e.g. the Bakola, the Bati, the Bezen, etc”. (Ngue Um 2017: 10).



## **Availability of schools retains young community members in rural parts of Africa**

In North-West Cameroon, for example, communities whose languages have continued to be more vibrant are those where secondary schools were established between the 1950s and 1970s, i.e during the independence era. Languages such as **Lamnso'** (ISO 639-3 [lns]), **Kom** (ISO 639-3 [bkm]), **Bafut** (ISO 639-3 [bfd]), **Limbum** (ISO 639-3 [lmp]), and **Aghem** (ISO 639-3 [agq]) are known to be spoken much more than other languages in the region.



**Lack of schools forces young community members to leave communities, thereby abandoning their languages and cultures**

Communities in North-West Cameroon that lacked schools until recently sent their teenagers aged 12 – 15 to other places where they could attend secondary school.

Of course, the children left their languages and cultural practices behind or, at best, practiced them only minimally whenever it is possible.

**Consequence:** the language is not used frequently and, therefore, not transmitted to younger generations, making it endangered and requiring urgent documentation before extinction.

## **Concrete proposal: 20% of budget for community development**

LD grant applications should include at least 20% of the budget for community development projects. A linguist with an interest in community development will find ways to justify the request of 20% of the budget for this non-linguistic work.

Funding agencies should become sensitive to community needs and willfully approve funds for community development rather than simply allocating money for documenting and archiving languages while ignoring the owners and producers of the knowledge. I do not understand why a funding agency can give, say 100,000 USD to a linguist to document a language but cannot give 20,000 USD to assist the speakers of that language

## **Concrete proposal: 20% of budget for which community project?**

The linguist should truly allow community members the liberty to select an urgent community development need that should be funded. From the results of the survey I presented in section 2 above, it is very unlikely that an African community will desire language or cultural preservation which Ngue Um (2017: 5) describes as “more or less, often peripheral”. They are more likely to go for crucial needs such as those he thinks allow for “coping with daily survival (very strong!), Ensuring a better future for the kids (very strong!), socio-economic empowerment and security of the group (strong!)” (Ngué Um 2017: 5)



## Payment of consultants

Suggestions such as “pay consultants in scale with the local economy, and tie the rate to the closest equivalent job (e.g., a teacher)” (Bower 2008: 162) exist.

I believe consultants can be paid reasonably well, if not at international rates but high enough to compensate for their knowledge, knowledge without which linguistic analyses will not be possible. I do not think it is terribly bad to pay a consultant more than a teacher, especially because the consultant’s job is for a limited period of time. Paying consultants at least 10 – 20 USD a day in a rural African setting is very likely to empower them in ways researchers may not imagine.



- I have argued that instead of focusing on the study of African languages while neglecting current survival needs of community members, and thereby legitimizing and accompanying language death, linguists and funding agencies should conceive LD projects as community development projects.
- I have proposed that 20% of research funding such be dedicated to community development projects.





Identifying community projects for funding should be the community's responsibility and, as demonstrated, community members are most likely to choose basic survival needs such as potable water, electricity, roads, schools, and health facilities instead of language development.

If any of these survival needs are provided while doing LD, the linguist can consider that they have given back something useful to the current generation. Such an accomplishment will most likely help retain community members and ensure continued use and transmission of the target language(s). While the linguist will continue to advance their academic career, target community members will also gain substantially from having better living conditions.



I also suggest that consultants should be paid reasonably well, if not at international rates but high enough to compensate for their knowledge, knowledge without which linguistic analyses will not be possible.

Linguistic work should be of greater benefit to communities that it currently is.

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