

Language Situation in the Blue Nile

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The Blue Nile States is located in the South eastern part of the Sudan inhabited by approximately 675.484 people living in an area of about 38.500 square kilometres. The region witnessed massive migration movements across history. In addition to the local African inhabitants many Arabs and African groups made their way to the area constituting the present population which is concentrated in four provinces: Al-Damaazien, Al-Russairis, Bau, and Al-Kurmuk. The region hosts about 40 different ethnic groups belonging to four major categories. The local indigenous group (Berta, Burun, Ingassana, Hamaj, Dowala, Watawiet, Jumjum, Kuma, etc.), The Arabs (Al-Ashraf, Kinaana, Rufaa', Kamaatir, etc), Western Sudan (Zaghawa, Massalit, Nuba, Fulani, Hausa, etc,) Southern Sudan (Dinka, Shilluk, Maban, etc,). A quick look at the ethnic structure of the people living in Blue Nile suggests that a considerable number of languages are spoken in the region. These languages belong to three different language families, Afro-asiatic, Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan. The first language family is represented by Hausa and Arabic, the main lingua franca in the area as well as the whole Sudan. Arabic plays a crucial role in the socio-political and socioeconomic life of the Blue Nile people. It assumes an exceptionally dominant role in education, the media, and everyday interaction. The existence of Arabic in the Blue Nile and Southern Sudan can be traced back to the Turko-Egyptian period, which began in 1821. During the Turko-Egyptian

Rule, Arabic spread as the language of administration in northern and central Sudan. Because of the government's desire for a southward expansion, in order to have access to human resources (slaves) and ivory, male adults from the Blue Nile and the Nuba Mountains were captured and recruited for the army. It was probably in the multilingual garrison camps in the southern Sudan that pidginized versions of Sudanese Arabic emerged which came to be known as Nubi and Juba Arabic. The second language family, Nilo-Saharan is represented by Berta (Spoken by 22000 speakers), Ingassana (8000-20000 speakers), Alca, Molok, Burun (1800 speakers), Mabaan (25000-50000 speakers), Jumjum (25-50000 speakers), Uduk (2000 speakers), Koma (extinct), Gumuz (40000 speakers also spoken in West of Ethiopia), and other migrating languages (i.e., Bargu, Maba). The third language family, Niger-Congo, is represented by Fulfulde which is spoken widely in Sinaar State and the Blue Nile.

It is obvious from the above discussion that most of the languages spoken in the Blue Nile belong to the Nilo-Saharan language family and that although the Afro-Asiatic and Niger-Kordofanian families are the least represented (Arabic and Fulfulde, respectively) in terms of number, their status and use are very pronounced. This is evident from the fact that Arabic plays the role of lingua franca while Fulfulde is spoken by a considerable number of people in the area. In fact, Arabic is progressing significantly at the expense of ethnic languages especially among younger generations. The growing role of Arabic in Sudan has been documented by a number of studies conducted in different parts of the country (Mahmoud 1983, Miller and Abu Manga 1992, Jahalla 2002, Mugaddam1, forth coming, and Mugaddam2, forthcoming).

Arabic managed to find its way to the different regions of the Sudan (i.e., the South, the Blue Nile, and the Nuba Mountains) in spite of the tough measures taken by the British authorities. The British colonial government developed a policy which aimed at the checking of the Arabic language as well as Islam in the southern Sudan. In line with a more general policy in their colonies, the colonial government stimulated not only the use of English as an

official language, but also the instalment of local or regional languages in the educational system. At the Rejaf Conference (1928), for instance, six ethnic languages from the southern Sudan were selected for development and for use in education: Bari, Dinka, Ndogo, Nuer, Shilluk and Zande.

Right after independence, Arabic received more development and empowerment in the whole country. This policy resulted in a virtual exclusion and neglect of the remaining languages. The move was further enhanced by Arabizing secondary and university education in the following decades (Hurreiz 1972). In the late 1960s, Arabic became the official language of instruction in government schools throughout the country, although at the National Conference for Education in Khartoum it was ordained that southern vernaculars written in Arabic script could be used as media of instruction in the first two years of education in the rural areas of the southern provinces; starting from the third year, however, Arabic should be the medium. From 1972 onwards, final examinations in Grade 6 took place in Arabic throughout the country. Language policy after independence, then, emphasized the crucial instrumental (and integrative) role of Arabic and reduced the role of other Sudanese languages (or English). This had a partly negative effect on attitudes towards local and regional languages. As in other parts of the world, urbanisation had an additional catalyzing factor on language attitudes. The studies by Miller and Abu-Manga (1992) and Mugaddam (Forthcoming) clearly show that second-generation migrants in Khartoum, for instance, shift significantly towards Arabic. Although there are differences in language solidarity between the various ethnic groups, there is a clear tendency among second-generation speakers to use Arabic as the first language. In this respect, Khartoum is comparable to many other major urban centres in Sudan; in such multilingual areas, there is a strong tendency to adopt the dominant language, Arabic, (the major lingua franca) for everyday communication.

Whereas today Arabic is used widely in the streets, markets, government and educational institutions in the Blue Nile as well as across the entire country, ethnic languages

are used mainly within their immediate speech communities, although there are differences in language attitudes between the different generations and between ethnic groups (Mugaddam 2005). For example, speakers of ethnic languages from the Blue Nile, Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, or elsewhere use Arabic more than their ethnic languages in most domains of communication including the home domain.

The predominant role of Arabic has been severely resisted by language activists groups in Sudan. Language issue was among the reasons for the outbreak of civil war in the country between 1955 and 1972 as well as between 1983 and 2004. In the Addis Ababa peace agreement (1972), Arabic was recognized as the official language and English as the principal language for the southern region without prejudice to the use of languages which may serve a practical necessity for the executive and administrative function of the region. In the same year, "the Language Survey of the Sudan" was initiated by the Institute of African and Asian Studies, University of Khartoum, to investigate the status and use of Sudanese languages and how this might influence future language policies. Unfortunately, the Addis Ababa Accord did realize its objectives because of the renewed outbreak of civil war in the south in 1983. Interestingly, whereas subsequent Sudanese governments did not support the official use of languages other than Arabic, non-governmental organisations in the Sudan developed orthographies about sixty different languages.

In 2005 a peace protocol was signed by the government of the Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. This so-called Naivasha Peace Protocol also contains important statements concerning the linguistic situation in the Sudan: 1. All the indigenous languages are national languages which shall be respected, developed and promoted; 2. Arabic language is the widely spoken national language in the Sudan; 3. Arabic, as a major language at the national level, and English shall be the official working languages of the national government business and languages of instruction for higher education; 4. in addition to Arabic and English, the legislature of any sub-national level of government may adopt any

national language (s) as additional official working language (s) at its level; 5. The use of either language at any level of government or education shall not be discriminated against.

Given the fact that many local languages in the Sudan are notourisly facing an imminent death, the protocol can function as a valuable asset to the linguistic diversity in the country. This is because, at least, it will help in changing people`s negative attitudes towards their own languages (i.e., primitive, having no grammar, unable to express modern ideas in science and technology, etc.). If people are convinced that their languages are useful, they will be in a better position to take the initiative in developing and sustaining them. Prior to this step we have to find the possible means by which the languages endangered the most can be documented before they finally disappear.

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