

Linguistic Diversity and Language Endangerment in the Sudan

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1. Introduction

About twenty years ago, Bjorn Jernudd described the language situation in the Sudan as being “not well defined and constantly changing and will not be stable for some time”¹. This description may not appear that surprising for a country that is 967000 square miles large, sharing borders with 9 countries, having well over 100 languages, having suffered from a continuing 50-year civil war (1955-2005) and struck by two severe waves of drought (1983 and 1985). The salient feature of the Sudanese social setting is ethnic and linguistic diversity coupled with the constant population displacement and influx of refugees (as a result of civil wars and drought within the country and the neighbouring countries). However, with its heavy demographic weight (known by almost 80% of the total population of the Sudan as L1 or L2 or L3), multiple roles and great spreading force, Arabic has been causing constant changes in the linguistic map of the Sudan. Speakers of the small local languages having been rapidly shifting to Arabic, in a similar way, whereby small languages all over the world are retreating before the big languages, a process nowadays known as 'language endangerment'. We will try in what follows to describe the diversity of language situation and 'language endangerment' in the Sudan. We will then conclude by suggestions on Sudanese language recoding and documentation.

2. The demographic and linguistic map of the Sudan

Sudan is the largest country in Africa, with an area of ca. 1 million square miles inhabited by ca. 30 million people. Like many of the tropical African countries, it is characterized by linguistic density and diversity. But it is also distinguished from the other countries by a number of additional characteristics, most prominent among these being the instability of its language situation, multiplicity of border languages and existence within its territories of a number of West African immigrant languages. In what follows we try to give more details about these characteristics.

According to the latest census, i.e. of the 1993, the total number of population of the Sudan is 25 million. Owing to the civil war in the Southern Regional, this region was not covered by the census; the above figure have

¹ - B. Jernudd (undated): The Language Survey of the Sudan: An Interim Report, (Language Survey Series - No. 7).

been reached by addition of 5 million (estimated by the Census Department being the approximate number of inhabitants in the South) to the 20 million inhabitants recorded in the census. However, the most accurate and useful census for our purpose (for the due attention given to the question of language in it) is that of the 1956, which yielded 10 million inhabitants as a total number of Sudanese population at that time. This means that during the following 37 years the Sudan population had increased by 2.5 times. Since the 1993 census did not cover the entire country, all the figures given in this section are calculated through multiplication of the 1956 figures by 2.5.

More than a hundred languages are spoken within the Sudanese national territories: 113 languages according to the 1956 census, 106 languages according to Tucker & Bryan 1956 and 177 languages and dialects according to Abu-Bakr & Hurreiz 1984², and 134 according to Ethnologue³. However, it is noteworthy that Ethnologue gave 6 entries of Banda, 5 entries of Dinka, 3 entries of Arabic and 2 entries of Daju. Therefore, the number of the languages in Ethnologue is actually 122. In all these sources Arabic has been found to be the first and only major language (with more than 50% of speakers) in the Sudan, spoken by 51.4% as a first language. Its general knowledge (as L1 or L2 or L3) may cover up to 80% of the total population. Since the independence until 2005 it was the only official language of the state⁴, the medium of instruction in almost all levels of education, and its different varieties serve as *lingua franca* among most Sudanese communities, even in the South among people whose languages are mutually unintelligible, particularly in the urban areas.

Apart from Arabic, none of the other Sudanese languages satisfy the condition of the 'majority language' status. However, we still find it pertinent to provide here-below a list of 13 languages described by Hurreiz & Bell as "languages with the largest number of speakers"⁵ (the figures are worked out by conversion from the 1956 to the 1993 census).

<u>Language</u>	<u>Number of speakers</u>
Dinka	2.740.900
Beja	1.181.335

² - Y. Kh. Abu-Bakr & S.H. Hurreiz (1984): "The linguistic map of the Sudan and the position of Arabic Language", paper presented to the 1st Linguistic Conference in Sudan, Khartoum International Institute (unpubl.)

³ - http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=SD.

⁴ - According to the Nivasha Comprehensive Agreement, English has now been recognized as another official language.

⁵ - S.H. Hurreiz & H. Bell (1975): *Directions in Sudanese Linguistics and Folklore*. Khartoum. Khartoum: University Press, p. 25.

Nuer	1.160.398
Fur	663.913
Zande	648.783
Bari	418.920
Masalit	406.310
Fallata	392.100
Koalib	386.713
Toposa	306.375
Hausa	295.775
Lutuhu (Latuka)	290.575
Shilluk	236.565

A summarizing statistical calculation on all the Sudanese languages, in terms of numbers of speakers and percentages, projects the following picture:

<u>Language</u>	<u>Number of speakers</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Arabic	13.191.340	51.3%
The 13 main languages	9.013.460	35.1%
The remaining ca. 92 lgs.	3.498.840	13.6%

2.1 Linguistic density and diversity

To illustrate the degree of the density and diversity characterizing the linguistic map of the Sudan, it suffices to note that the Sudan falls within the zone termed by David Dably the 'Sub-Saharan Fragmentation Belt'⁶. This belt, some 3,500 miles in length but only 700 miles in average width, runs immediately to the south of and parallel to the Saharan desert. From a total of approximately 90 language complex-units and simple-units (typological classification), all but a dozen are located within this belt. It includes languages belonging to all of the four Greenberg's language families (phyla). For Dably, its eastern end – in which the Southern Sudan lies – "needs to be the pivotal area for any future historical study of linguistic relationship in Africa"⁷.

The languages of the Sudan belong to three out of the four language families (Phyla) of Africa according to Greenberg's (1963) classification;

⁶ - D. Dalby (1970): "Reflection on the classification of African Languages", *African Language Studies* XI.

⁷ Ibid. pp. 169-170.

namely, the Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Kordofanian and Nilo-Saharan⁸ (exception is Khoisan). Adding the immigrant languages, we find that 16 out of the 18 branches comprised in these three language families are represented in the Sudan. On the basis of their classification in Ethnologue, the distribution of all these languages in the three families is as follows:

Family	Number of Languages
Afro-Asiatic	3
Niger-Kordofanian	35
Nilo-Saharan	80

Although the Afro-Asiatic family includes only three languages (Arabic, Hausa and Tigre), these languages are spoken by ca. 55 % of the total population of the Sudan as MT. Apart from Fulfulde, all the Niger-Kordofanian families are found in the Nuba Mountains and Southern Sudan. As can be seen from the above table, the largest number of the languages of the Sudan belongs to the Nilo-Saharan family. In fact, the Sudan represents the ideal home of this family, where all its branches are represented as follows:

- 1- Soghai, spoken by a number of Sudanese of West African background in the Nuba Mountains, on the Blue Nile near Sennar and in Gedaref State.⁹
- 2- Saharan, represented by Zaghawa, Kanuri, etc.
- 3- Fur, mainly in Darfur
- 4- Maban, represented by Maba (Borgo), Masalit, etc.
- 5- Chari-Nile, represented by the Nilotic languages (Dinka, Shilluk, Nuer, etc.), the Nubian languages, Nyimang, etc.
- 6- Koman, mainly in Southern Blue Nile, represented by Koma, Ganza, Gumuz, etc.

2.2 Instability of the Language Situation

As stated above, the language situation in the Sudan has been constantly changing. One of the salient features to underline in this regard is the uneven geographical distribution of the Sudanese languages. About 70% of these

⁸ - J. Greenberg (1966): *The Languages of Africa*. The Hague: Mouton.

⁹ - see A. Abu-Manga (1995): "The Songhai speech communities in the Sudan with special reference to the Songhai speakers of the Blue Nile", *Fifth Nilo-Saharan Linguistics Colloquium*, (Nilo-Saharan Vol. 10), ed. by Robert Nicolai & Frantz Rottland. Cologne, Ruedige Koeppel Verlag.

languages concentrate in the Southern half of the country (as traditional home-regions), with a striking density in the Southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains. This is while in some regions in the northern half of the country (e.g. Northern or Eastern Sudan) one may hardly count more than 5 languages.

The actual factor behind the instability of the language situation in the Sudan is the constant population movement, especially during the last 30 years, as a result of the civil wars, on the one hand, and drought and famine, on the other hand. As the direction of the movement has always been from the peripheries to the centre, Khartoum agglomeration today has become a new home for all the Sudanese language¹⁰. One of the ultimate outcomes of this phenomenon is the acceleration of language shift to Arabic.

2.3 Border languages

Sudan shares borders with up to 9 neighbouring countries, which makes it the country with the most numerous neighbours in Africa. Since political boundaries in Africa do not consider ethnic or linguistic boundaries, Sudan shares at least two languages with each of its neighbouring countries, as follows:

Neighbouring Country	Shared languages
Egypt	(Nile) Nubian, Beja, Arabic
Libya	Zaghawa, Arabic
Chad	Zaghawa, Arabic, Maba, Daju, Kanuri, Massalit and others
CAR	
DRC (Zaire)	Banda, and others
Uganda	Zande
Kenya	Acholi, Madi and others
Ethiopia	Toposa
Eritrea	Murle, Nuer, Shilluk, Koma (Gumuz), Tigre Tigre, Arabic

¹⁰ - E.g. in 1988 a total number of 51 languages were found to be spoken in an area of ca. 8 square kilometers in the vicinity of Khartoum. See C. Miller & A. Abu-Manga (1992): Language Change and National Integration: Rural Migrants in Khartoum. Khartoum: KUP.

2.4 West African immigrant languages

Establishment of West African communities in the Sudan can be dated in terms of centuries. Since the advent of Islam in West Africa until recently West African Muslims from as far west as Senegal and Mauritania used to cross the Sudan on their way to or back from pilgrimage in Arabia. A number of these pilgrims, for one reason or another, settled permanently in Sudan. However, such old migrations of individuals or small groups of people had a very limited linguistic impact, because these immigrants have already been completely integrated linguistically and culturally in the Sudanese indigenous societies. The real West African linguistic impact on the Sudanese linguistic map was associated with the waves of West African migrations to Sudan with the advent of colonialism during the first decades of the last century. As a result of this historical event the linguistic map of the Sudan added a number of West African languages, the largest of which are:

Language	Shared with:
Fulfulde	Senegal, Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger Republic, Nigeria
Hausa	Cameroon and Chad
Songhai	Nigeria, Niger Republic, Ghana, Togo, etc.
Kanuri	Mali, Niger Republic, Benin Nigeria, Niger Republic, Chad

3. Arabic within the linguistic map of the Sudan

As stated above, the 1956 census showed that 51.4 % of the Sudanese population spoke Arabic as their MT, whereas the remaining 112 languages were spoken as MT by 48.6 % of the total population. All recent language surveys agree that Arabic is spoken by ca. 80 % as a first, second or third language. As such it serves as a *lingua franca* and facilitates communication between groups, which speak over a hundred mutually unintelligible languages spreading all over the country, including the Southern Region. Mother-tongue Arabic speakers make up the most economically affluent, socially prestigious and culturally dominant ethnic group in the country, and thus, Arabic derives its prestige. It is the dominant language in all other official and semi-official domains, including mass media, politics, administration, the army, etc. After the Arabicization of higher education in 1967, Arabic became the official medium of instruction at all educational levels. Other languages with large number of speakers include Dinka, Nuer, Zande and Bari in Southern Sudan; Beja in Eastern Sudan; Fur and Masalit

in Darfur in Western Sudan; Koalib and Nyimang in the Nuba Mountains in Kordofan and Fellata or Fulani in different areas in Western, Central and Eastern Sudan. Though the Nubian languages of Northern Sudan, i.e. Nobiin and Dongolese, do not make part of the large languages, their demographic minority position is counter balanced by their historical importance and their considerable contribution to the development of the Sudanese colloquial Arabic.

4- Language endangerment in the Sudan:

Today 'language endangerment' is the most current and important issue in linguistic studies all over the world. With the fast development in communication media the world is witnessing, linguists are now convinced that about 90% of the world's languages are deemed to die in the next few centuries. Because of the important place of languages as human heritage and important data in explanation of human history, funds have been raised to record and document these languages before they disappear without leaving trace¹¹.

The results of all the language surveys carried out at the Institute of African & Asian languages or elsewhere confirm the fact that the Sudanese local languages are drastically receding and retreating before the rapid spread of Arabic. This is true even of languages with historical weight such as Nobiin, whose the young generations of speakers have been found to be shifting to Arabic¹². A similar shift, although to a lesser degree, was also recorded by Ushari A. Mahmud among the Bari children in Juba.¹³

Recession and resistance of languages depend on a number of variables, among which are mainly the demographic size of speakers and the functions, prestige and historical weight of the language. Unfortunately, ca. 90% of the Sudanese local languages do not enjoy any of these variables. In the following tables we will try to classify the most endangered Sudanese languages according to degree of endangerment measured against number of speakers¹⁴:

¹¹ - A considerable amount of funds has been entrusted to SOAS for this purpose.

¹² -cf. F.M.A. Zumrawi (1983): Dynamics of Language Use Change in a Nubian Community of New Halfa. M.A. dissertation, IAAS, University of Khartoum (unpubl.).

¹³ - cf. U.A. Mahmud (1982): *Arabic in Southern Sudan*. Khartoum: FAL.

¹⁴ - Considered only the languages whose numbers of speakers are given in Ethnologue.

Table A: Severely endangered (with less than 1000 speakers)

Language	Number of speakers	Family
Aja	200 (1993)	Nilo-Saharan (NS)
Aka	300 (1989)	NS
Borugu	494	Niger-Kordofanian (NK)
El-Hugeirat	200 (2000)	NS
Gula	200-2000 ¹⁵	NS
Indiri	7000	NK
Kelo	200	NS
Lafofa	600 (2000)	NK
Mangayat	400	NK
Mo'da	600	NS
Molo	100	NS
Nding	400	NK
Njalgulgule	900	NS
Wali	487	NS

Table B: Very endangered (1000-5000 speakers)

Language	Number of speakers	Family
Afitti	4,512 (1984)	NS
Bai	2,500 (1971)	NK
Dair	1,000 (1978)	NS
Heiban	4,412 (1984)	NK
Ko	2,683 (1971)	NK
Legorik	2,000 (1971)	NS
Nyamusa-Molo	1,200 (1977)	NS
Morokodo	3,400 (1977)	NS
Narim	3,623 (1983)	NS
Shwai	3,500 (1989)	NK
Suri	1,000 (1983)	NS
Talodi	1,5000	NK
Tennet	4,000 (1994)	NS
Tese	1,400 (1971)	NS
Tima	3,305 (1977)	NK
Tocho	3,800 (1977)	NK
Warnang	1,100 (1956)	NK
Yulu	3,000 (1987)	NS

¹⁵ - It appeared in Ethnologue like this.

Table C: Presently endangered (+ 5,000-10,000 speakers)

Language	Number of speakers	Family
Balanda Bor	8,000 (1983)	NS
Beli	6,000 (1982)	NS
Dongotono	6,219 (2000)	NS
Feroge	8,000	NK
Kacipo-Balesi	10,000(2003)	NS
Kanga	8,000	NS
Keiga	6,072 (1984)	NS
Logol	7,811 (2000)	NK
Otoro	10,000 (2001)	NK
Tingal	8,000 (1982)	NK
Tulishi	8,628 (1977)	NS
Tumtum	7,300	NS

The purpose of this classification is to assist the bodies concerned in deciding the priorities of documentation. It goes without saying that documentation should start with the terribly endangered list of languages and onwards, and even in this order priority should be given to languages with the least number of speakers.

5- Constrains and Challenges:

As may be expected, funding is the key note of the entire process of documentation of the endangered Sudanese language. But at the present stage of affairs, this funding is not to be directed ahead to the immediate embarking on the process of documentation. In fact, more urgent at this stage is training of linguists who are to carry out this task. The department of Sudanese and African Languages, Institute of African and Asian Studies has not been able for many years to train linguists of a reasonable caliber, qualified to undertake such a kind of task. That is for many reasons:

- 1- The linguistics Department, Faculty of Arts, U. of K, from which postgraduate students and potential Teaching Assistants could be recruited, has not graduated students with honours degree for many years.
- 2- Postgraduate studies at Khartoum University is now commercially oriented, many of the potentially qualified students cannot afford the study fees.

- 3- Postgraduate studies are pursued by students for search of better job opportunities, and the area of Sudanese language studies is not a market-attractive area.

As such, the Sudanese academic circles have become very poor in qualified linguists, in general, and those specialized in Sudanese and African Languages, in particular. The few linguists who were trained abroad have been for a long time working also abroad. At the moment, there is only one qualified linguist in the Department of Sudanese & African Languages, Institute of African & Asian Studies, University of Khartoum and two in the Department of Linguistics, Faculty of Arts (same university), in addition to three Teaching Assistants in the above department pursuing their Ph.D. studies. If there are others in other Sudanese universities, they are – to the best of my knowledge – either not adequately trained in modern linguistics oriented to African Languages or not versed enough in English Language.

6- Suggestions:

The most important requirements for a project of recording and documentation of more than a hundred Sudanese local languages are:

- funds
- trained linguists
- time.

Therefore, I forward the following suggestions for consideration:

- 1- Raising of a considerable and unfailing amounts of funds that take into consideration all the three above requirements.
- 2- Introduction of an additional course to the M.A. programme of Sudanese and African Languages (IAAS) on the modern techniques of language recording and documentation.
- 3- Offer of scholarships to brilliant students to enable them to pursue postgraduate studies at the Department of Sudanese and African Languages, IAAS. A special arrangement can be worked out with Khartoum University administration to exempt them from study fees.
- 4- Recruitment of a specialized linguist specialized in African Languages (and interested in language documentation) from abroad (e.g. Dr. Angelika Jakobi from Germany) to assist in teaching and training students at the Department of Sudanese and African Languages.
- 5- Facilitation of training opportunities abroad for the Teaching Assistants of the Department of Sudanese and African Languages.