Documenting linguistic varieties of the South-Bauchi group

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Documenting linguistic varieties of the South-Bauchi group.

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Introduction

In this paper, we want to address the question "What grammar for what language(s)?". The answer to this question will involve personal reflexions, drawn from personal experience, with all the value and limitations of a personal experience as a specialist of a group of 15 languages or so Chadic languages, spoken in the south of Bauchi State, Nigeria, all of them dominated by Hausa, and the majority being in serious danger of extinction.

Size matters

The size of languages entails different problems, and different choices.

Languages with a large number of speakers (over 1 million) imply the need for a reference grammar; with a view to standardization, teaching and the development of the language. The problems that arise are essentially theoretical, methodological and political: which type of orthography, using which system should be implemented? What should it represent? Full or partial tone marking? Which script: Roman or Ajami? With or without diacritics? Which lect should be chosen for prescriptive purposes? Both in terms of geography (which dialect?) or sociology (which sociolect?).

The linguist dealing with languages spoken by a smaller number of speakers faces a different situation. They are often minority, sometimes endangered languages. This entails problems of bi- or multilingualism, even language attrition. In a country such as Nigeria, the number of little described languages, related to the scarcity of financial and human resources means that a few, not many languages will get a grammatical description. How should these 'lucky' languages be selected? The decision as to which language should be described is often taken on practical, non-linguistic reasons such as accessibility to the linguist of the villages and/or speakers. That is how we decided to study Geji, rather than Pelu, and Zaar rather than Guus (*aka* Sigidi). Let us have a look at South-Bauch West languages whose situation as minority or severely endangered languages entails specific problematics.

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South-Bauchi West (SBW) languages

The situation of SBW language varies from prosperous to dying and even dead:

A few languages are sound (Zoɗi, Polci, Zakshi), even prosperous (Zaar). The basis of their economy is agriculture in the plains, where their speakers have access to primary and secondary education, in Hausa and English. They have been and continue to be in contact with speakers of other languages, whether Chadic (SBW and non-SBW languages such as Angas) or non-Chadic (Afizere, Pyem, Ɓoi, Shall, etc.).

The rest are isolated, endangered languages spoken on hills (whereas the less-endangered ones are spoken in the plains where their population could develop numerically and otherwise) by communities of around 600 speakers. Two of those language (ex: Zaranda ; Luri) are spoken in communities that have split, creating a situation with an "old" village up in the hills with a few older people, living in terrible conditions, using the "old" language and a "new" village where the majority of the population has moved down the hill, by the road, and switched to Hausa, Jaar, etc.
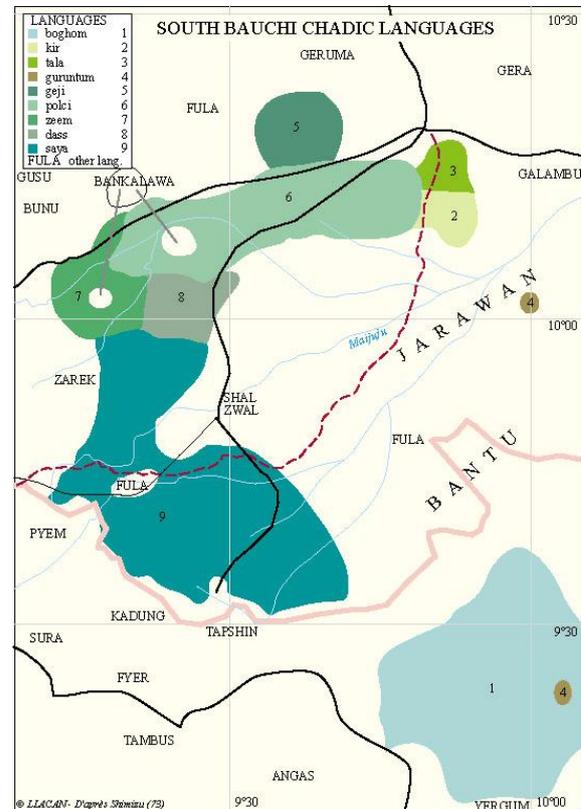
What type of grammar for SBW languages?

Given their socio-linguistic situation, what type of grammar is suitable, or can be reasonably envisaged for SBW languages? This in turn is determined by the usage these grammars are intended for. These fall under various categories:

- *Documentation*: referring to the title of the conference, this can be done with a view to archiving the languages and cultures before they disappear, building an archive with a primary concern for museology. This type of work should be as exhaustive as possible. This type of general, all-encompassing grammar can, in the end, fulfill the aims of the other three types by providing the relevant data. However, they can only be achieved by teams of researchers with specialist competence in different fields such as linguistics, anthropology, sociology, geography, . This type of conjoined effort, and the finance required, is rarely available in Nigeria, and certainly not for SBW languages.

- *Typology of languages and cultures*: this type of description relies heavily on the former one, and is therefore event more time- and human resources- consuming.

- *Language change*, studied from the point of view of socio-linguistics and typology generally requires purely linguistic and socio-linguistic material, and little cultural data. However,

socio-linguistic studies involve data covering large populations and/or a minute study of language use with several variables (age, sex, situations, linguistic genres, etc.) wich consumes time and human resources.

- *History of population*: with the help of reconstruction, the data collected should tell us more about the population and its movements in the Chad area over the past four hundred years. The data needed for this type of work is generally limited to lexicon (both basic and cultural) and morphology. Given that we are dealing with a group of genetically related languages, let us not forget another type of grammar, i.e. the *comparative grammar*, which is both heuristic and hermeneutic.

Now, what are the tools available to reach that kind of description?

Theory & methodology

The structuralist foundation of our activity as linguists has come under heavy criticism from various sides. We will try to briefly retrace those tendencies, and evaluate what this leaves us with. Let us begin with how the scientific object of linguistics is generally defined, starting with Saussure, who has remained the driving force behind our descriptive activity as linguists, despite those criticism. Saussure's aim in laying the foundation of linguistics as a science is to find stable units in the continuous flow of speech, and in the geographical and individual variations. For Saussure, the object of linguistics is language, defined as an instrument of communication[2] between speakers in a given society. This definition finds the stability Saussure was looking for in the abstraction of a population of speakers sharing the same language. Now, the concept of people is ductile, in Africa as well as anywhere (cf. Central Europe), and is politically loaded. The stable association of a language with a population, a culture and a territory is not the rule in the areas where we (as Africanists) work. SBW languages are a good example.

SBW languages, like Plateau languages, are generally considered to be spoken by small population units living in quasi-autarcy on top of hills which enjoy a good pluviometry which in turn allowed these populations to be self-sufficient. This seclusion The fear of slave-hunters reinforced. This situation was used as an explanation for the remarquable language diversity in this area, where languages changed from one village to another within a distance of about 10 to 20 kilometers, each village counting an average of 600 speakers. However, far from being isolated, these populations developed very close ties:

> *Though there were inter-group conflicts, there were also social intercourse and intermarriage between the different groups. This is perhaps one explanation for the similarity of the various langages. Thus, with continued close contacts*

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[2] Chomsky changed it to the concept of "competence", i.e. the grammatical competence of the speaker. The way his theory pushed the whole process of data collection into the background under what he called the "black box" prevented his theory from becoming popular with those who were concerned with documenting languages. This is generally the case with more theoretically oriented linguistics. In France, Antoine Culioli's "Theory of Predicative and Enunciative Operations", although it has given birth to a few descriptive grammars (Béarth 1971, Caron 1990) has had as little success with descriptivists.

Moreover, the situation of the present SBW languages has not always been stable. Their migration has been retraced by E. Mohammadou (2004) from the Kanem empire North of Lake Chad to their present situation over the past 400 years. The splinter groups detached from the migration movement settled on various hills on the way, and gave birth to various Chadic languages. The map below summarizes this vast movement, with SBW languages represented under the cover name "Zaar" (6):
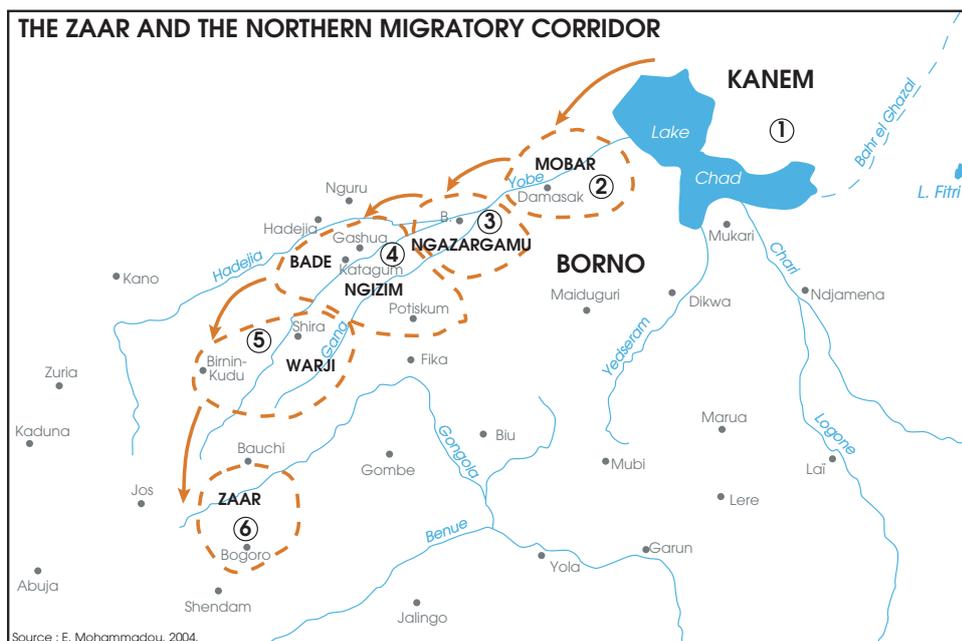
Following the European colonization, the SBW populations have come down from the hills and settled in the plains. A second movement is taking place now with the Zaars moving north of their situation at the beginning of the 20th Century (roughly around Lusa and present-day Bogoro), up to the north of Tafawa Balewa where they are fighting for political power with the Hausa-Fulani.

This mobility accounts for numerous language contacts with Chadic and non-Chadic languages, resulting in a certain amount of heterogeneity in the languages. Traces of these contacts are found in SBW in the coexistence of 2 distinct phonological systems: one for the core lexicon, and a second one for more recent loanwords.

This heterogeneity within languages has called for new concepts. This is

Nettle about Fyem:

The rhizome model, developed by Deleuze and Guattari, as opposed to the tree-like model used for classical reconstructions is better adapted to this type of situation:

> *Plus généralement, il se peut que les schémas d'évolution soient amenés de plus en plus à abandonner le vieux modèle de l'arbre et de la descendance. [...] Les schémas d'évolution ne se feraient plus seulement d'après des modèles de descendance arborescente, allant du moins différencié au plus différencié, mais suivant un rhizome opérant immédiatement dans l'hétérogène et sautant d'une ligne déjà différenciée à une autre [...] Des communications transversales entre lignes différenciées brouillent les arbres généalogiques. [...] Le rhizome est une antigénéalogie. (Deleuze & Guattari 1976 , p. 30)*

From a sociolinguistic point of view , new concepts are emerging, reviving old debates concerning mixed languages, language continuum, sprachbund, etc. SBW language are a good example of language continuum. It has been argued in (Caron 2003) that Guus (aka Sigidi) and Zaar which are considered by their speakers to be distinct languages, is closer to the Kal language than Kal is to the other "dialects" of Zaar such as Bogoro or Gambar Lere (GL). See the tables below concerning percentage of common roots and instances of these roots compared to Proto-Chadic (P.C.).

zoɗi							
30	zakshi						
30	55	ɓoto					
29	53	62	zari				
24,5	38,5	48	52	guus			
27	42	49	48	**68**	Kal		
31	38,5	41	42	47	62	Gambar Lere	
29	36	38	38,5	45	56	**80**	Bogoro

	Bogoro Z.	Kal Z.	Guus	Zoɗi	P.C.[3]
chien	**káɗi**	**kàrə́n**	**kàráŋ**	**kat**	***kɗn**
cheval	**pərʃi**	**ʒùúr**	**ʒùúr**	**pərsi**	**pərsi, ʒuur**
soleil	**dzàŋ**	**fíítə**	**fììt**	**peeɗi**	***p-t**
femme	**gə̀t**	**gə̀də̀**	**gə̀də̀**	**gə̀t**	**mn, etc.**
vache	**gààl**	**rùdúŋ**	**rùndúŋ**	**ɬáá**	***ɬ-, etc.**
concession	**də̀n**	**vììn**	**vììn**	**bən**	***b-n**[4]

In order to account for this type of sociolinguistic situation, Robert Nicolaï proposes to replace the study of language as a tool for communication within a society with the study of individual repertoires working as a *mille-feuilles*.

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[3] For proto-Chadic : Jungraithmayr & Ibriszimow 1994.

[4] = "house".

> *J'entends par « feuilletage » le caractère propre à tout répertoire linguistique de pouvoir fonctionner comme ressource dans la re-élaboration de variétés linguistiques et d'usages langagiers constitués à travers la refonctionnalisation de traits, de formes et de fragments discursifs matériellement disponibles. Parler de « feuilletage » permet ainsi d'appréhender la notion de superposition et la multiplicité des usages et des variétés disponibles dans le répertoire, sans leur attribuer a priori une homogénéité structurelle, au sens où une telle qualité est présupposée pour une description structurale ou une identification collective. (Nicolaï 2000: 10)*

Temporary conclusion : What now?

Should we indulge into this type of post-modern linguistics based on the deconstruction of classical structuralist foundations of Saussure's concepts? If the situation is complex indeed, and calls for new concepts in the interpretation of facts, what should we do when facing the situation of SBW languages as described above? We have decided to take pragmatic steps, using tried and tested concepts and techniques based on Saussure and the Prague School (sign, information structure, etc.). The new technologies (digital recording of audio and video material) applied to new questionnaires aimed at capturing the language used by groups and individuals in various locations and pragmatic situations will elicit all the material needed for any theoretical analysis. Well-documented corpora are the first and necessary step to any description of languages, whether endangered or not.

In the case of SBW languages, our aim is to produce a comparative grammar, with a core grammar and vocabulary working as the yardstick to which individual SBW languages should be compared.

SBW Comparative grammar: a synopsis

Core grammar

Although this core grammar could be regarded as a proto-language, it does not pretend to have any historical reality. Let us see a sample taken from Caron 2006:

TAM systems

All SBW's TAM systems conform to the same structure: conjugation is expressed in a pre-verbal morpheme, which includes a person mark. The verb itself is not touched by TAM, with two exceptions: floating tones (or tone progagation) and the occasional use of Verbal Nouns for Continuous and Future. When the subject is nominal, the personal mark is dropped and a variant of the TAM marker appears alone.

What can be noted though is the common existence of a 'zero' TAM (H. Jungraithmayr's '*Grundaspekt*'), where only the bare Pro is used to conjugate the verb. We have chosen to name this TAM Aorist when it is opposed to the couple Completive + Incompletive, and Completive when it is opposed to an Incompletive only. We have named Continuous the TAM with a locative structure involving Pro's having the form of subjects of non-verbal predicates, and a Verbal Noun. See below an example in Zođi :

	CPL	ICPL	FUT
1s	a	ám	máá
2s	ú	kʸáà	kíí
3s	Ø	tʸáà	Ø
1p	mà	màà	màn
2p	kò	kʷàà	kòn
3p	tì	tàà	tìn

Completive. The inflexion follows the pattern « Pro + Ø ». The Perfect is a combination of the Completive + **CaK** at the end of the Verb Phrase. The habitual is marked by **ɗa** inserted between the Completive subject pronouns and the verb.

Incompletive. Except for 1s, the inflexion follows the pattern « Pro + **àà** ». It is followed by a VN. With a noun subject, the Incompletive mark is **à**.

Future. The inflexion follows the pattern « Pro + VV » in the singular and « Pro + **n** » in the plural. With a noun subject, the Future mark is **níí**.

Sub-systems of various nature and extension
These sub-systems are aimed at illustrating variation. Each sub-system could be a language, or a structure common to a group of idioms.

Transversal modules
These modules are aimed at analyzing common features that do not correspond to the core grammar. They could be accounted for by studying external influences on the core SBW system.

What languages ?
The languages that are sufficiently documented to be introduced in the comparative grammar are:

Branch	Idioms documented
Geji	Geji, (Pelu), Zaranda
Polci	Dir/Langas/Luri/Polci
Zeem	Chaari
Dass	Baraza, Dott
Saya	Zakshi, Sigidi, Kal, Zaar

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