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# **‘Community’ collaboration in Africa: Experiences from Northwest Cameroon**

Jeff Good

## **1. Introduction**

A prominent feature of the literature on language documentation has been the importance of designing documentary projects in ways that allow speaker communities to benefit from the work of an outside researcher. Canonical examples of useful activities in this regard tend to involve things like the creation of materials that can be used for language development or offering training opportunities to assist local language maintenance programmes. The idea that activities like these are appropriate has generally emanated from linguists’ experiences in places such as the Americas and Australia, and it is important to examine the extent to which models coming out of such parts of the world are appropriate in the very different contexts of sub-Saharan Africa. This paper explores the problem of community collaboration in applied language documentation in Africa, drawing on experiences from a documentation project currently underway in Cameroon. Three points will be highlighted: (i) the fact that outside linguists benefit from the support of a number of distinct communities, all of which are under-resourced and which can be assisted in ways specific to their needs, (ii) the importance of coming to a detailed understanding of the social significance of a given language in its local context in order to discover the most appropriate ways to support its maintenance, and (iii) the extent to which the primary assistance offered to a community should be narrowly ‘linguistic’ in nature.

## **2. ‘Canonical’ collaboration and ‘African’ collaboration**

A prominent feature of the literature on language documentation—at least when opposed to other areas of linguistic research—is the idea that it is important to design documentary projects with the ‘community’ in mind. Indeed, linguist-community collaborations are the prototypical means through which applied language documentation is practiced.<sup>1</sup> The topic is included in

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<sup>1</sup> The research on which this paper is based has been supported by generous funding from the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology Department of

the seminal papers of Himmelmann (1998: 188-189) and Woodbury (2003: 38-39), and has seen more detailed treatment, especially recently, in a number of other works on field work and language documentation, including, for example, Czaykowska-Higgins (2009); Dwyer (2006, 2010); Grinevald (2003); Leonard & Haynes (2010); Mithun (2001); Penfield et al. (2008); Rice (2006, 2010, 2011); Wilkins (1992); and Yamada (2007) (see also Ahlers & Wertheim 2009 and Dobrin & Berson 2011 for broader contextualization).<sup>2</sup>

Much of this work—indeed, seemingly the majority of it—has been concerned with research conducted in places like the Americas or Australia, where the researcher-community dynamic can usually be characterised in terms of an 'outside' researcher interacting with a single historically and economically marginalised community or set of communities of roughly comparable socioeconomic status (e.g., groups marginalised by settler societies established during the period of European colonialism). This allows, for instance, Czaykowska-Higgins (2009: 24), writing from the perspective of a linguist working with languages of northwestern North America, to define *Community-Based Language Research* as follows:

Research that is *on* a language, and that is conducted *for*, *with*, and *by* the language-speaking community within which the research takes place and which it affects. This kind of research involves a collaborative relationship, a partnership, between researchers and (members of) the community within which the research takes place.

It is undeniable that there are research contexts where such a model is completely appropriate. At the same time, we clearly must be wary of uncritically assuming that a notion like 'community-based' will transfer to

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Linguistics, the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities (under NEH fellowship #500006 and NEH grant RZ-50817-07), the U.S. National Science Foundation (under NSF Grant BCS-0853981), and the University at Buffalo College of Arts and Sciences and Humanities Institute. I would like to thank the many linguistic consultants who made this work possible, in particular Ngong George Bwei Kum, whose support of the research described here since 2004 has been invaluable. I also thank audience members at the Workshop on Applied Language Documentation in sub-Saharan Africa, who provided valuable feedback on the work discussed in this paper, as well as an anonymous reviewer. Finally, to the extent that any efforts in community collaboration for the project described here have been successful, significant credit is due to another member of the research team, Pierpaolo Di Carlo.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, this is also a noteworthy theme of Hale et al. (1992). Much of the work in language documentation in this area has drawn significantly on ideas expressed in Cameron et al. (1992, 1993).

parts of the world where the kinds of communities the linguist must interact with are quite distinct from what is found in places like the Americas or Australia. This point is already clearly articulated by Dobrin (2005, 2008).

The goal of this paper is to explore how community collaborations in one part of Africa may need to take on a form quite distinct from more familiar models. Three issues will be explored. First, fieldwork in Africa often involves working with a range of, often socially distinct, under-resourced communities rather than just a single community, prompting the need to consider how ‘community’ collaboration can be equitably distributed across all of the communities that an outside linguist is reliant upon (Section 4). Second, in many parts of Africa, language ideologies take a form quite different from what is found in parts of the world that have more actively informed common conceptions of language maintenance, making it necessary to work towards an understanding of the social significance of a given language in its local context before devising plans to support its usage (Section 5). And, third, when working in relatively poor countries, the stark disparity in the access to resources that an outside linguist has, when set against even relatively privileged members of the local population, puts them in a position to offer potentially effective community support beyond their linguistic expertise, meaning that the most sensible collaborations between a linguist and a community may turn out not to be particularly ‘linguistic’ in nature (Section 6).

The discussion will inevitably be somewhat ‘personal’ in nature, reflecting the ways in which my own research in Northwest Cameroon brings me into contact with a number of communities that I collaborate with to varying degrees. At the same time, my impression is that my own experiences are largely representative of those of other researchers working in Africa, especially when set against linguists working in places like North America or Australia, giving this paper the potential for broader relevance. More generally, I hope that this paper may serve as a model for other linguists interested in exploring how best to align general imperatives like ‘collaborate with the community’ to the myriad local contexts that today’s documentary linguists find themselves a part of, echoing ideas expressed recently by others in the documentary literature in more general terms (Austin 2010a, 2010b; Dobrin et al. 2009; Holton 2009; Woodbury 2011).

Before moving on to the core of the paper, in Section 3, I briefly propose two guiding principles for work in applied language documentation that will inform the rest of the discussion.

### **3.0 Informing ideas**

While, in some ways, this paper could be understood as a criticism of much previous work on the role of community collaboration in language documentation, it is worth making clear at the outset that I take as a given that work proposing models for community collaboration in places like the Americas and Australia, at least on the whole, comprises well-informed responses to the particular social configurations that characterise the linguist's relationship to the 'community' in those parts of the world. Problems arise, however, when concrete recommendations from such work are reflexively applied to social contexts that they were not designed for. The challenge is to determine the (usually implicit) assumptions that have informed collaboration elsewhere in order to re-form them around new contexts.

I begin, therefore, by making the following assumptions: collaboration between linguists and communities is undertaken with two primary goals. The first is to support language maintenance and revitalisation. The second is to increase documentary capacity within a given community—that is, to enhance a community's own ability to document the languages and varieties it deems important. While I am not aware of such goals having been explicitly articulated together in this way previously, they are not intended to be novel and precedent for them can be readily found in the existing literature on community collaboration in a documentary context. Both are quite apparent, for instance, in the approach described by Yamada (2007).

In assuming that these two goals underlie collaborative relationships among linguists and communities, I do not mean to forestall debate about, for example, whether there may be other important goals to consider—or even whether linguists should even prioritise community collaborations in general (see, e.g., Ladefoged 1992; Matras 2005; Newman 1998). Rather, I use them here to serve as the basis for the re-contextualization of 'collaboration' with respect to my own research. Their specific role in relation to the overall arguments being made here will become clearer in the following sections. As will be seen, perhaps the most surprising result of adopting these two goals is that they have, at present, been one of the reasons why the current collaborative efforts of the research team I am a part of have, in great part, been focused on communities other than the ones whose languages are being researched.

## **4. One community or many?**

### **4.1. Research context**

The work on which this discussion is based involves documenting the languages of a small region of Northwest Cameroon known as Lower Fungom. A map of the area in which Lower Fungom is located is given in Figure 1. Lower Fungom itself is found at the centre of the map and roughly constitutes the region bounded by the Yemne River to the west and the Kimbi River to the north and east, with its southern border running approximately east to west between the villages of Ajumbu and Fungom.

Seven languages, or small language clusters, are spoken in Lower Fungom's thirteen recognised villages, whose populations and language classifications are presented in Table 1. The languages can all be reasonably classified within the Bantoid subgroup of Benue-Congo (see Watters 1989) but, beyond this, their genealogical affiliations are, for the most part, not yet well established. In terms of language density, Lower Fungom represents an extreme in the already quite diverse Cameroonian Grassfields—the wider region in which Lower Fungom is located. An overview of the languages of Lower Fungom can be found in Good et al. (2011) and description of aspects of the region's cultures relevant to understanding its linguistic situation is given in Di Carlo (2011). Good (to appear) additionally discusses Lower Fungom from an areal-typological perspective. The languages of Lower Fungom appear to be relatively vital. Children born and raised in its villages generally still speak the language associated with their home village. Nevertheless, the small size of many of the languages means that they are demographically threatened and can, therefore, be considered endangered.

Figure 1: Lower Fungom and surrounding area

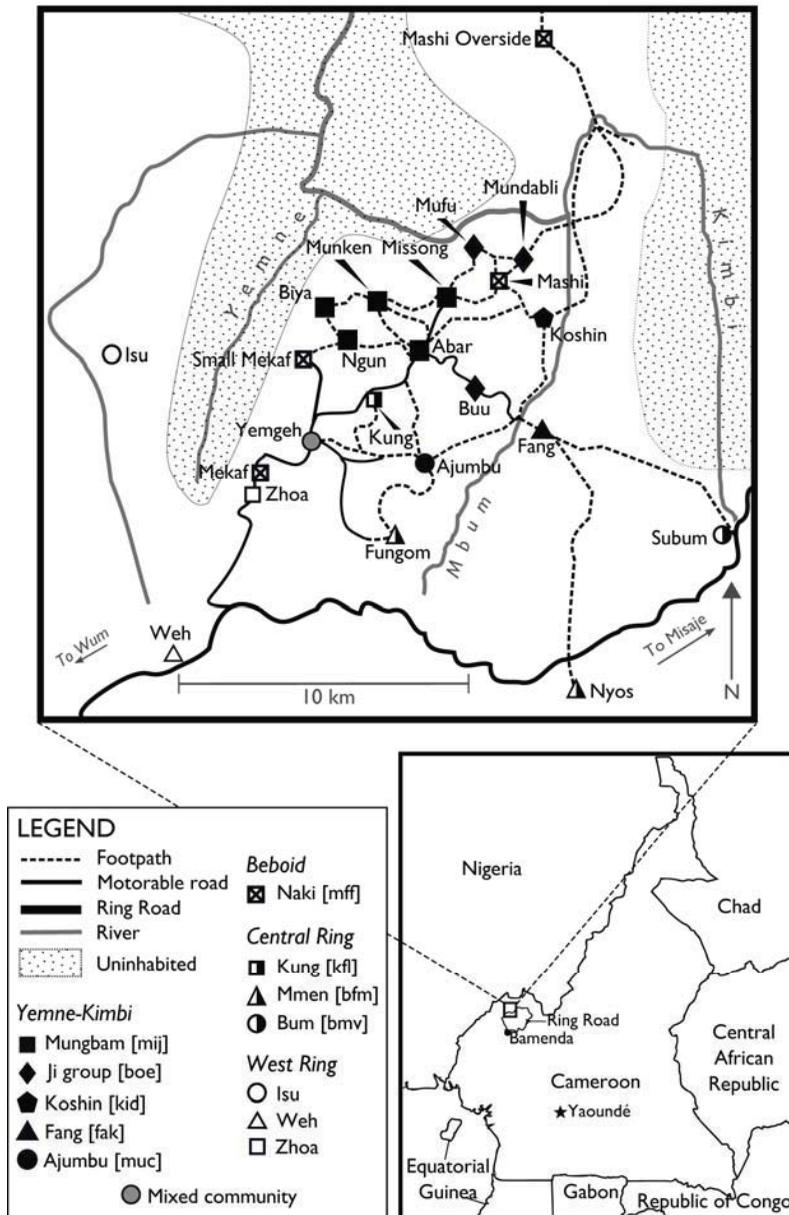


Table 1: Lower Fungom villages

SUBGROUP	LANGUAGE	VILLAGE	POPULATION
Yemne-Kimbi	Mungbam [mij]	Abar	650-850
		Munken	around 600
		Ngun	150-200
		Biya	50-100
		Missong	around 400
	Ji [boe]	Mundabli	350-450
		Mufu	80-150
		Buu	100-200
	Fang [fak]	Fang	4,000-6,000
	Koshin [kid]	Koshin	3,000-3,500
Ajumbu [muc]	Ajumbu	200-300	
Beboid	Naki [mff]	Mashi	300-400
Central Ring	Kung [kfl]	Kung	600-800

For present purposes, the most important aspects of the research project being conducted on the languages of this region are as follows.<sup>3</sup> First, the documentation efforts are focused on the region as a whole, rather than any specific language, with the goal of trying to understand what has allowed it to become so linguistically diverse. Second, because Lower Fungom is relatively remote and lacking in infrastructure and regular electricity, much of the documentary work, especially detailed grammatical analysis, takes place in the closest major town. This is Wum, which is a relatively short distance to the south and west of the village of Weh, given on the map in Figure 1. The language traditionally associated with Wum is Aghem, and Aghem individuals have helped the project significantly, though their language falls outside of the scope of the research itself. Finally, the success of the research

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<sup>3</sup> This work is being done by a team of researchers including myself, two other Westerners, and a number of Cameroonians, none of whom are from the region that is being studied. One member of the team, Pierpaolo Di Carlo, has primary responsibility for those aspects of the research examining the relationship between language and culture in Lower Fungom. The impact of his insights can be found throughout this paper, and, especially, in Section 5.

is, in a number of ways, reliant on the assistance of linguists based at the University of Yaoundé, in the country's capital, whose location is given in the context map in Figure 1. In a comparable, though less strictly academic domain, the research has also made significant use of the Buea Archives, which hold documents of historical interest from Cameroon's British colonial period (see Section 6.2). This institution is located in the city of Buea, which is located near the Cameroonian coast to the west of Yaoundé.

These points are relevant here because they establish, at the outset, a key way in which this research in Cameroon is distinct from most of the other cases of collaboration discussed in the documentary literature: There is not a single 'community' of interaction. Rather, the research depends on multiple communities, of quite distinct types, all of which are severely under-resourced when set against the intellectual and economic opportunities that an outside researcher like myself has access to. Moreover, since the project relies on the support of all of these communities, it does not seem reasonable to restrict collaboration to just one of them. This does not mean, however, there may not be reasons to work more closely with some over others, as will be seen.

In addition, even if we focus on the 'standard' notion of community collaboration, involving collaboration with the 'speaker community', even that raises problems in the context of this work. On the one hand, the region is dominated by strongly localist language ideologies (see Hill 1996), meaning that practically every village in the region, regardless of scientific classifications, perceives itself as speaking its own language.<sup>4</sup> This means that, if one were to attempt applied language documentation in ways that were responsive to the local conceptualisations of the region's languages, one would, in effect, require separate projects for each village, a practical impossibility. On the other hand, the project itself explicitly takes the whole region as its research domain meaning that the community of research does not overlap with a notion like speaker community but rather is something closer to a 'micro-sprachbund'.<sup>5</sup> This would seem to necessitate considering how collaboration cannot merely support individual languages but, rather, an

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<sup>4</sup> The one exception to this pattern is the village of Mashi which views its language as a variety of a Naki, a view completely consonant with what scientific classification would suggest.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, linguists like Czaykowska-Higgins (2009) who rhetorically frame collaboration in terms of the relationship between a linguist and a single speaker community do, in fact, often work with multiple communities over the course of their careers. However, I am not aware of cases in the literature on collaboration where the relevant research project has explicitly taken a set of interacting communities as its focus.

entire language ecology (see also Mühlhäusler 1992), further complicating the ways that existing models of collaboration apply in this case.

In the following sections, I discuss either how the research project has tried to distribute its collaborative efforts, or how it plans to distribute them, across the different communities it relies on. The discussion begins by considering the community where devising appropriate collaborations has been most straightforward, the Cameroon linguistics community, in Section 4.2. In Section 4.3, it then moves to the case of the Aghem community, who have served as hosts for much of the work and who also, by virtue of having an established language development programme, are relatively well-prepared to collaborate with outside linguists. Finally, the most difficult case is considered, collaboration with the speaker communities of Lower Fungom, in Section 4.4, which, as will be seen, presents a number of challenges when considering models of community collaboration.

Comparable to the discussion in Section 3, it will be important to lay out the basic principle the project has (informally) attempted to employ in determining how to devote the necessarily limited resources, in terms of time and money, that are available for applied language documentation as opposed to more traditional kinds of linguistic research.<sup>6</sup> The key consideration has been to try to balance what the project can offer, against what the different communities need and what they contribute to the overall success of the project.

Crucially, these considerations may be in tension. For instance, the Aghem community contributes less to the overall project than the communities of Lower Fungom. However, the Aghem, with an existing language programme, are in a much better position to make use of the skills that an outside linguist can offer than are any of the Lower Fungom speaker communities. Further discussion of this tension is found in Section 4.5.

## **4.2. Collaborations with local research communities**

While the Cameroonian research community is relatively well-resourced when set against the communities of Lower Fungom, they nevertheless are lacking access to many things taken for granted in a Western research context, e.g., well-maintained libraries, high-speed internet connections, financial

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<sup>6</sup> Primary funding for the work described here, at present, comes from a grant from the U.S. National Science Foundation Documenting Endangered Languages programme, which focuses on funding scientific research activities, though it allows for project resources to also be devoted to applied work to a limited extent.

support for student research, etc.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, despite significant opportunities for African scholars to receive training in language documentation (e.g., via summer schools which offer travel funding), the need for additional training opportunities, especially for students rather than faculty, is clear. A particularly pressing problem in this regard is that many severely underdocumented languages in Africa are not obviously endangered which limits funding opportunities for documentary work on them.

At the same time, the Cameroonian linguistics community is by far the best placed to benefit from the training opportunities that an outside linguistic research team can potentially offer. University contexts, for instance, are similar enough in the West and Cameroon as to greatly attenuate problems of varying cross-cultural expectations. Furthermore when African researchers who have trained in the West can serve as intermediaries, which is the case with the linguistics community in Cameroon, the task of devising appropriate collaborative arrangements becomes even more straightforward, since such scholars are well-placed to effectively explain to an outside researcher what kinds of collaborative activities they and their students can most immediately benefit from.

In the context of the project of focus here, there are three concrete instances of collaboration with the local research community that are worth remarking on. One of them, working on a project to stabilise a local archive, will be discussed in Section 6.2, where the topic of collaboration that is not obviously 'linguistic' in nature will be discussed. The other two are relatively straightforward. First, the project team has offered a workshop on topics in language documentation aimed at graduate students at the University of Yaoundé, and its members have also lectured on other linguistic topics as requested by the faculty in the Department of African Languages and Linguistics. Second, the project offers research funds to Cameroonian students to conduct documentation and description on some of the languages that are the focus of research. These funds include provisions for equipment (e.g., computers and recording devices) which will remain in Cameroon after the project is completed and made available to other students doing documentary work.

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<sup>7</sup> There is another Cameroonian-based research community who has also assisted the project, the linguists working with SIL International. I do not consider them in detail here since, although based in Cameroon, interactions with them are more or less comparable to those one would have with scholars based at universities in the U.S. and Europe. See Dobrin & Good (2009) for discussion of the relationship between SIL and documentary linguistics.

Because models for training workshops can be found elsewhere (see Jukes 2011), and funding students to do research is hardly innovative in and of itself, I will not discuss all the details of these efforts here. Instead, I will briefly remark on some lessons the project team has learned that may be useful for others considering undertaking similar activities.

The first one will hardly be surprising to those who have worked in sub-Saharan Africa: one must plan to be flexible when offering any training programmes since they will rarely run according to a pre-conceived plan. In our case, for instance, we had anticipated working in a prototypical workshop-style setting involving, perhaps, ten students. This quickly transformed into a more traditional lecture-style presentation format when around fifty students wanted to attend. In retrospect, there were many reasons why such a level of student interest should not have been surprising, ranging from the relative infrequency of training opportunities being offered by linguists from outside the university to the sheer size of enrolments in a country which has seen its population expand much more quickly than its university infrastructure. But, regardless of the reasons for why this ‘unexpected’ turn of events took place, the central lesson was a need to be flexible on relatively short notice. Since lecture-style teaching has clear limitations in imparting practical knowledge to students actively engaged in documentary projects, we hope to offer a mix of training opportunities when planning for the future. Students who are already in a position to do documentary work in the near term, for instance, may be selected for more intensive training while open lectures will be offered to those students simply interested in getting an introduction to the topic.

A second lesson has been that, if one wants to involve local students in the work, at least in the Cameroonian case, it is ideal to offer them the opportunity to leave their home country and receive some of their training at an outside university. We did not make provisions for this in the current project and overestimated the power of technology to allow us to advise such students from a distance. The crucial issue has not been the technology, *per se*. We could easily give students a budget for internet access, for instance. Rather, the issues are social: the students have many competing obligations on their time, some of which are directly connected to the under-resourced position of their universities. This keeps them from devoting as much time to project work as we had anticipated. A student, for instance, who is simultaneously trying to gain the qualifications needed to become a high school teacher while earning an advanced degree in linguistics, has limited time to dedicate to language documentation and description. And, this is not to mention the myriad events that may require them to travel back to their home villages. There is simply no substitute for actually bringing someone physically to a location where their only ‘job’ is to do research.

The final lesson I would like to mention in this context is to consider how training programmes can leverage the special strengths of local faculty and students. In the case of our project, this meant, for instance, devoting a substantial portion of our training workshop to topics in linguistic anthropology. Local scholars, of course, will have insights about their cultures which are much harder for outsiders to gain access to. At the same time, they do not have access to the latest computers and software. We, therefore, have decided to de-emphasize instruction on standard documentary topics such as metadata, time-aligned texts, etc. (though we have, by no means, ignored them), in order to see how we can amplify the documentary talents that they have but which we lack. One concrete instance of this has been encouraging local scholars to consider documentation of special registers of their languages (see Storch 2011 for discussion in an African context). These are clearly of documentary interest, and consideration of how they relate grammatically and socially to more common registers is a domain where an individual from the relevant speech community has clear advantages.<sup>8</sup>

Though there may be some relatively 'small' innovations in this collaborative work, I should make clear that the idea that outside linguists should work with the local academic community in Africa in order to provide training opportunities is hardly novel in and of itself. I am not aware of many publications where it is discussed (at least partly because, before the rise of the documentary paradigm, issues like collaboration were not typically the subject of academic publications). However, comparable efforts are described by Dwyer (2010: 202-203) in her overview of a documentation project focusing on the Ivorian language Ega.<sup>9</sup>

### **4.3. Collaborations with the host community**

As discussed in Section 3.1, due to the relative lack of development in Lower Fungom, the region of research focus, much of the team's documentary work is conducted instead in the nearby town of Wum, which is traditionally associated with the Aghem language (see Hyman 1979). The residents of

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<sup>8</sup> Moreover, since such registers will often become endangered before an entire 'language' becomes endangered, there are potential opportunities for funding work on them that would not otherwise be awarded for work on languages with larger speech communities. An important role for the outside linguist in such a case is to help African scholars discover how to find such areas of overlap between outside funding priorities and their cultural concerns.

<sup>9</sup> See <http://coral.lili.uni-bielefeld.de/LangDoc/EGA/> for further information on this project, which was led by Firmin Ahoua, Bruce Connell and Dafydd Gibbon.

Lower Fungom and the Aghem are both part of a geographic and cultural area known as the Cameroonian Grassfields and, in particular, are interconnected via wider patterns of trade (Warnier 1985). Moreover, being both the most accessible major town to most of the villages and the divisional capital, many individuals from Lower Fungom spend extended periods in Wum, for instance for schooling. At the same time, it would be incorrect to suggest that there is any particularly strong affinity between Lower Fungom and Wum. In local terms, they are not construed as belonging to some common larger group for instance. Therefore, collaboration with the Aghem cannot be considered to cleanly stand in place of collaboration with the speaker communities of Lower Fungom itself, even though Aghem, too, is an indigenous language of Cameroon.

Nevertheless, though still on a relatively limited scale, the project has attempted to develop collaborative projects with the Aghem for both practical and broadly ‘ethical’ reasons. On the ethical side, members of the Aghem community have provided important assistance to the project, especially in terms of offering lodging and workspace for project activities undertaken in Wum. Some degree of reciprocation is clearly warranted for this reason alone. On the practical side, two points are relevant. First, unlike any of the Lower Fungom communities, the Aghem have an existing language programme, partly run by individuals with linguistic training. Like the Cameroonian research community, they are, therefore, already prepared to make use of the expertise of an outside linguist. Second, despite the lack of strong cultural ties between the residents of Lower Fungom and the Aghem, Wum nevertheless serves as Lower Fungom’s primary gateway to the rest of Cameroon and the wider world in general. As such, if any of the villages of Lower Fungom chooses to initiate a language programme (entailing usually, among other things, developing a writing system for their language), then the Aghem language programme would be a natural first place for them to turn to for advice.<sup>10</sup>

In practice, collaboration with the Aghem is, at this stage, largely incipient in nature. The project has donated linguistic books to the language programme’s library and is working (albeit slowly) on a scheme to support one of the language programme’s linguists to visit communities throughout the Menchum subdivision, which Wum is the capital of, to assess the possibilities for new language development projects. This has included

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<sup>10</sup> While it is easy to imagine cases where local politics could make it difficult for groups in a place like Lower Fungom to turn to their more developed neighbour for assistance, we have no reason to believe that this would be in an issue in this particular case.

providing him with equipment and training to conduct documentation even when the rest of the research team is not present in the area. If this programme becomes further developed, the intention is to make equipment useful for language development work (e.g., computers, printers, etc.), available to the Aghem language programme, which they will be able to use for their own projects, and will also be made available to other groups in the area. This should prove especially useful for the Lower Fungom communities, if they decide to embark upon their own language development projects because the lack of electricity in Lower Fungom means that they have to travel to nearby towns like Wum to make effective use of many kinds of electronic equipment anyway.

It is important to bear in mind that, if it moves forward as planned, the structure of the collaboration with the Aghem is intended to not only help the Aghem but also to help support a local language infrastructure that could eventually be of value to the residents of Lower Fungom (as well as others). To the extent that the Aghem's contribution to the project merits helping them in some way, this potential 'multiplier' effect (Dwyer 2010: 203) for the communities of Lower Fungom is clearly an added bonus. But there is something more at stake here. In principle, some of the ways that we hope to assist the Aghem could be applied instead directly to Lower Fungom. However, it is not clear that their ultimate impact on Lower Fungom would be significant if that route were taken for reasons that will be explored in the next section.

#### **4.4. Collaborations with speaker communities**

The most striking thing about the collaborative activities undertaken in the present project is almost certainly the extent to which collaboration with the communities whose languages are being researched has been subordinated to other kinds of collaborations. There are two main reasons for this. One of these, the issue of not attempting to support languages without first understanding their local social significance, will be explored in Section 5. Here, I will focus on the disconnection between what the specialised training of the members of the project team allows us to offer Cameroonians and what the residents of Lower Fungom actually need.

In a Melanesian context, Terrill (2002) discusses the emblematic power that printed language materials, like dictionaries, can have in validating the language of a given community by virtue of putting it on a symbolically more equal footing with other languages associated with printed materials. Lüpke (2011: 319) describes something similar in a sub-Saharan African context. In principle, efforts at community collaboration conducted by the present project could similarly be used to create emblematic language materials, whose

production would be actively informed by the linguistic expertise of the members of the research team. They would however be highly unlikely to ever be used for their ‘normal’ purpose, at least in the short term, due to a lack of any local tradition of literacy in languages other than English (or, more rarely in this part of Cameroon, French). Of course, such materials could potentially have a positive effect on language attitudes in Lower Fungom communities, thus supporting language maintenance (see Section 3).

However, if the goal were simply to provide communities with emblems that would allow them to affirm their identity in positive ways, we have found no reason to believe that a dictionary would be somehow more affirming in the Lower Fungom context than, say, giving consultants framed certificates in recognition of their efforts, which could be done at much lower cost. In Terrill’s (2002) case, there was good reason to believe that linguistic emblems would be especially powerful. But, to the extent that we have no evidence for this with respect to the communities we are working with, it would be strange to offer targeted linguistic support to the residents of Lower Fungom’s villages rather than Aghem people (see Section 4.3), when the Aghem have already explicitly organised themselves in ways which would allow them to directly benefit from the specialised knowledge outside linguists have. Therefore, while we, of course, would be more than willing to offer linguistic support to any of the Lower Fungom speaker communities if the right opportunity presented itself, this has not been a priority—and, as we will see in Section 5, there have been additional, perhaps even more important reasons, not to prioritise prototypical kinds of language development at this stage.

There is also a more fundamental issue to consider here. Not only do Western contexts like North America or Australia encourage a conception of relationships with communities in terms of a simple outsider/insider dichotomy, rather than viewing documentation as relying on a network of relationships, they also emphasize an equation between indigenous languages and endangered languages, which simply does not apply in sub-Saharan Africa. It seems both inequitable and unreasonable to only offer support to languages that happen to be ‘endangered’ because the current valorisation of endangered languages over non-endangered ones in the West prioritises funding of basic research on the former over the latter (see Hill 2002).

Importantly, such support can play a role in ensuring that smaller, but not endangered languages, do not themselves become endangered. In fact, in the Lower Fungom context, the greatest threat to linguistic diversity does not appear to be larger local languages but, rather, the spreading *lingua franca* of

Cameroonian Pidgin.<sup>11</sup> This even suggests that, by playing a role in preventing monolingualism in Cameroonian Pidgin from becoming a social norm, offering support to local non-endangered languages, like Aghem, can contribute to the maintenance of the local linguistic ecology in ways that would facilitate the continued use of nearby endangered languages as well.

This last point indicates that one should not take for granted that the only way to ensure the survival of an endangered language is to attempt to collaborate directly with the community itself on language maintenance activities. More generally, assuming that the goals of collaborative work on language documentation are along the lines of those introduced in Section 3, namely, to support language maintenance and increase documentary capacity, there may be situations where a linguist is actually directed away from focusing their efforts on the speech communities their research is based on.

#### 4.5. Achieving the right balance

When the scope of the possible 'community' collaborations is enlarged beyond speaker communities whose language is being researched, the question of how to balance the needs of all the collaborating partners becomes even more acute than with the more usual model focusing on a linguist and a single community (many of the complexities of which are elaborated by Leonard & Haynes 2010).

In Section 4.1, I introduced the basic principles which the project is attempting to employ at present: to balance what the project can offer, against what the different communities need and what they contribute to the overall success of the project. There are clear tensions among the various parts of this proposal, most importantly when considering what the project can offer against a community's contributions to its success. This is because, without question, the most significant communities for the project's success are the communities of Lower Fungom. After all, the research is funded on account of the scientific lessons that their languages and language dynamics potentially offer, but the specialised linguistic knowledge that the project

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<sup>11</sup> Anecdotal observations suggest that the increasing use of Cameroonian Pidgin may be leading to the decline of knowledge of local languages as second or third languages insofar as bilingualism in one's native language and Cameroonian Pidgin may be replacing older patterns of multilingualism (see also Hamm et al. 2002: 20). Moreover, the *idea* of a *lingua franca* in the region is of relatively recent provenance, arising due to European contact. Menang (2004: 903-904) gives a date around the mid-nineteenth century for the first major influx of a pidgin English variety along the Cameroonian coast which was the precursor to contemporary Cameroonian Pidgin.

members bring with them can be much more effectively used by other communities in the region. How can one deal with the potential inequity of such a situation?

At present, we have considered two ways to address this issue. The first is ‘to take the long view’ (Dobrin 2008: 318). That is, we will actively consider how to try to distribute collaborative efforts equitably over the long-term rather than being overly concerned with short-term imbalances. Not only do we take research on the languages of the Lower Fungom to have no fixed endpoint, we also take the development of collaborations to be an open-ended process requiring constant re-evaluation. Inevitably, we will undertake activities that we will later view as ‘mistakes’ or ‘misplaced effort’ but, just as an initially incorrect grammatical analysis can ultimately be the gateway to analytical success, as our local relationships become more fully developed, we will be in a position to understand how to achieve a better balance than has been possible at present.

At the same time, it must be immediately acknowledged that, even if, today, our research plans in Cameroon and Lower Fungom are open-ended, all sorts of eventualities could prevent a continuation of these activities. Accordingly, we have also expanded the notion of ‘what we can offer’ to domains beyond our linguistic expertise in order to try to find ways to collaborate with the communities of Lower Fungom in the nearer term. This will be discussed in Section 6.1.

## 5. Supporting language in context

Dwyer (2006: 38) reasonably suggests that the first principle for ethical language documentation should be to do no harm. There is a key difficulty in adequately applying this principle, however, in many fieldwork contexts. The social embeddedness of language means that, in order to ensure that activities that one performs will not be harmful, one must have a clear understanding of the role that a given language has within the relevant community. In the Lower Fungom context, our current research results suggest that the social significance of language is quite distinct from what is assumed in much of the endangered languages literature and that this has important consequences for what kinds of projects might promote language maintenance without ‘doing harm’.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Di Carlo & Good (2013) lay out the evidence for, and details of, the analysis of the social significance of languages in Lower Fungom summarised here.

As discussed in Di Carlo (2011), there is good evidence for a historical reconstruction of Lower Fungom's linguistic situation wherein some of its current diversity can be understood as the result of recent developments involving increased sociopolitical instability in the wider northern Grassfields region. This instability caused groups that had adopted relatively dispersed settlement patterns to shift instead into compact villages for purposes of defense. Simplifying somewhat for purposes of exposition, because local language ideologies stress that independent political entities should be associated with their own 'language', this resulted in the formation of distinctive 'dialects' from formerly more homogenous linguistic groups. This is seen most clearly in Lower Fungom in the case of the Mungbam language (see Figure 1). The Missong variety of Mungbam, for example, shows particularly strong evidence for having been substantially influenced lexically and grammatically by some unknown language (or perhaps languages), elements of which appear to have been transferred into a Mungbam variety as part of the means through which its distinctiveness could be enhanced with respect to other varieties of the language.

What is important about this historical reconstruction in the present context is that it suggests the current level of diversity we see in Lower Fungom is not the result of some 'ancient' pattern of differentiation but, rather, is of much more recent provenance. Moreover, its languages do not appear to be essentialist embodiments of conceptually immutable ethnic identities of the sort associated with the so-called 'Herderian equation' of language, culture, and nation (see, e.g., Hymes 1968, 1972; Foley 2005).<sup>13</sup> Rather they represent, at least partly, a response to a particular moment in history when the region's overall sociopolitical risk was particularly high (see Nettle 1996 for discussion of the notion of risk in the context of understanding linguistic diversity). In other words, the region's languages are locally construed primarily as indices of historically contingent political affiliation rather than abstract cultural 'essences'.

The key issue here for the linguist interested in collaborating with the local communities on language maintenance, then, is understanding just what 'maintenance' should mean in a context where many of the varieties that the linguist encounters are associated with political structures intended to be transient in nature. This pattern is not isolated to Lower Fungom but appears to be characteristic of the entire Grassfields region (and, presumably beyond,

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<sup>13</sup> McIntosh (2005) discusses essentialist attitudes towards language in a sub-Saharan African context.

as suggested by Kopytoff's 1987 study). For instance, an early ethnographic survey of the Grassfields suggests (Chilver & Kaberry 1967: 6-7):

The major problem of historical reconstruction in this area is the incompatibility of language distribution with alleged ethnic origin and institutions...The present politico-social units of the [Cameroon] Grassfields are for the most part composite units, sometimes grouped round intrusive dynasties or built by conquest, or by the slow adhesion of smaller groups in favoured areas, or, more recently, by the temporary agglomeration of small groups seeking protection from attack. The history of the [Cameroon] Grassfields, therefore, must do without simple schematic maps showing broad directions of migration, though some of the effects of invasion in the early 19th century or the expansion of particular states can be demonstrated.

If an outside linguist structured collaborations in Lower Fungom animated by a desire to save the 'priceless treasures' (see Hill 2002: 123-135) embedded within its languages, their natural course of action would presumably be to try to ensure that each of the region's languages—and language varieties—be indefinitely maintained. But, this would be a highly political act, in effect treating the moment of Lower Fungom's contact with the West as privileged and 'ancestral' (see Woodbury 2011). This is completely contrary to the historical pattern of 'ceaseless flux among populations' (Kopytoff 1987: 7) that, when reflected in language, appears to be an integral part of the linguistic genius of the inhabitants of the Grassfields.

To the extent that trying to maintain a pattern of linguistic stasis for individual varieties of Lower Fungom would essentially mean supporting political structures that were not intended to be permanent but, rather, adaptive, it would seem reasonable to construe any activity along those lines as 'doing harm'. Language 'maintenance', in such a scenario, would amount to imposition of a European sociolinguistic ideology to communities with a very different view of the relationship between languages and cultures. This underscores how important it is for the linguist to avoid uncritically applying models of community interaction in language documentation devised for one sociopolitical region to another without first having done their 'ethnographic homework' (see Dobrin 2008: 317).

What has this meant for notions of community collaboration in Lower Fungom? First, it has provided an additional reason beyond those discussed in Section 4.4 to avoid immediately engagement in collaboration with its communities on linguistic projects. Now that we have, however, come to a clearer understanding of the local significance and functions of languages, we

are in a position to consider collaborations that are more responsive to local language ideologies.

For example, while we have not yet implemented it, our most concrete plan in this regard has been to try to support the development of a local radio station where broadcasts can be made in the local languages (see Tsunoda 2005: 208). The necessary technology for radio broadcasts and reception is a good fit for the area, and they would allow for the use of the local languages in a new communicative sphere which, by virtue of being able to cover the whole area, will provide an opportunity for those who speak more than one of the region's languages (e.g., women who have married out of their original villages) to be exposed to them if they so wish. Crucially, radio broadcasts are inherently ephemeral. They, therefore, have the potential to facilitate language maintenance in a way that, unlike, for example, developing written materials, will not lock in one historical moment as 'definitive'. Perhaps radio broadcasts would not, in the end, change the language situation drastically in the area. But, at least, we believe that they are much less likely to do actual harm than initiatives which would, if only accidentally, disrupt the region's characteristic fluidity of language distributions.

If we relate the current project's experiences in this regard to the existing literature on collaboration in language documentation, it is important to point out the extent to which the conclusions we have reached required dedicated research into the social meaning of the local languages, with a team of linguists applying significant academic expertise to the problem. Our current conclusions regarding the potential harm that 'canonical' language maintenance might cause would almost certainly have never come about had we simply tried to adopt Community-Based Language Research of the sort described by Czaykowska-Higgins (2009: 24). The cultural differences are simply too great for the gap between Western-derived endangerment ideologies and Lower Fungom language ideologies to be bridged by means of direct consultation with community members. Substantial *research* effort was required on the part of the outside scholars, armed with access to the analytical tools and information granted by their specialised training, not to mention the financial resources to devote considerable time to sociolinguistic and grammatical analysis rather than, say, subsistence agriculture. Had we simply asked the residents of a village 'Would you like us to help maintain your language?' the answer would almost certainly have been in the affirmative. But, how could they know that our default notion of maintenance is intimately connected to Western language ideologies that are incompatible with local norms regarding the role language has in constructing flexible political associations?

Of course, this discussion raises an immediate concern: Most documentary projects will not be able to devote significant resources to an analysis of the

social contexts of their languages of focus. Indeed, our current project was able to do this only because this was independently deemed to be a significant issue for theoretical investigation into patterns of language change and language diversification within the Bantoid group. The fact that this research also gave us insights relevant to applied language documentation efforts was, therefore, a beneficial side effect rather than a primary goal, and it seems unreasonable to add to the growing list of areas of expertise demanded of field linguists that they become experts on the ethnography of local language 'valuation' (see, e.g., Evans 2008: 342-343 for relevant discussion).

At the same time, our own experiences point to a reasonable intermediate solution, one which has already been suggested by Dobrin (2008: 317): Make use of the ethnographic literature on the part of the world where the languages being studied are spoken. Ethnographic work is unlikely to directly address the particular issues raised by a documentary project's attempts at community collaboration. However, if a given linguist is committed to working with a particular community over the long term, insights gained from previous ethnographic research are likely to help guide them towards collaborative activities that make greater sense in the local context than might otherwise be attempted. This will take time, not because reading the ethnographic literature is especially time consuming (especially when set against the time it takes to produce high-quality documentation) but, rather, because the significance of a given ethnographic observation may only become apparent with greater experience. In my own case, for example, while I had read Chilver & Kaberry (1967) relatively early in my documentary research in Cameroon, I had originally dismissed the historical analysis quoted above as not being particularly relevant to comparative or descriptive linguistics. After all, the authors simply seemed to be describing the well-known phenomena of language shift. It was only later, upon rereading, that I realised the significance of their characterisation for understanding the nature of linguistic identity in the region and its inherent flexibility. I was only open to this idea, though, after a series of research experiences, over several years, made me aware that the relationship between language and identity in this part of the world was quite different from what I was familiar with from Western contexts. I could list a number of other comparable examples, each underscoring the iterative nature of this process, making it clear that, while engaging the ethnographic literature does involve extra work, the rewards are potentially quite high. Moreover, this, fortunately, does not require the linguist to actually become an ethnographer. Rather, they simply need to learn to make use of work that someone else has already done.

## 6. Must support be specifically linguistic?

### 6.1. Supporting Lower Fungom

Sections 4.4 and 5 clarified why the current project has attempted relatively little *linguistic* collaboration with the communities who are the focus of the research. However, if we deem some kind of collaboration, or reciprocity, to be central to language documentation, it seems reasonable to consider if other collaborative activities might be sensible. Indeed, it is not completely clear why the default expectation appears to be that collaboration should be 'linguistic', when it is widely held that the major causes of language shift are connected to broader patterns of social imbalance rather than, say, lack of access to a vernacular literacy materials (see, e.g., Grenoble 2011: 33-35 for a summarising discussion).

If we recall that one of the assumptions guiding the approach to applied language documentation developed here is that an important goal of collaboration is to support language maintenance (see Section 3), this has caused us to consider what non-linguistic collaborations would seem reasonable both to the local communities and to the research team while also potentially having a positive impact on language use. We have considered two possibilities in this regard: assisting with repairs to a local health centre and supporting the construction of needed roads and bridges.<sup>14</sup> These are both ideas emanating from the communities themselves. From the project's perspective, they have the advantage of being more likely to benefit entire communities—or even the entire region—than, say, giving payments directly to a village chief. And, it is, of course, all of Lower Fungom which provides the context which makes the research possible. Of these two possibilities, largely due to the efforts of Pierpaolo Di Carlo, a significant donation of materials has been made to a local health centre, though this was done too recently for us to gauge the nature of its impact on the communities of the area.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Project members have also made more opportunistic donations to other community projects, for instance, to support local schools or water projects.

<sup>15</sup> I should stress here that, while the materials were very gladly accepted by the community, we will not be able to determine for some time the actual impact (positive or negative) that they will have. Such activities can easily have unexpected consequences and must be undertaken only with great care. While our efforts involved overcoming significant logistical hurdles, our greatest cause for concern were potential political complications resulting from the fact that some local leaders were involved more than others.

Moreover, there is a straightforward, locally acceptable, means to make this work collaborative: the project provides funds for materials while residents provide labour. We have no expectations that these efforts will result in a sustainable development ‘revolution’ in the area. Nor does this really matter. Even a bridge that only lasts a few years will provide real value to those who use it during that time. Moreover, one factor we have identified in the endangerment of some of the Lower Fungom’s languages is out-migration triggered, in part, by the lack of access to economic opportunities and health care in the region. Therefore, improving local roads or health facilities, by helping address imbalances between Lower Fungom and more developed parts of Cameroon, has the potential to support language maintenance. Indeed, at least in this context, we believe that such projects could do more to support the local languages than, say, dictionaries they will never use (see Terrill 2002).

## **6.2. Supporting the Buea Archives**

Supporting maintenance of a health centre in Lower Fungom could indirectly contribute to language maintenance. As an outgrowth of the linguistic research, members of the research team (again, led by Pierpaolo Di Carlo) also engaged in ‘non-linguistic’ efforts which can be understood to derive from the other informing principle regarding the motivations for collaboration given in Section 3, namely increasing documentary capacity. This was a pilot project to support efforts to digitise and preserve the collections of the Buea Archives in Cameroon (see Maderspacher 2009 for a description), which hold significant British colonial documents. In addition, a survey of other sites in Anglophone Cameroon was conducted in order to locate further potentially valuable collections of historical documents in need of resources for preservation.<sup>16</sup>

Our interest in working with the Buea Archives is directly connected to the fact that the materials it contains have been of great value to the research project itself insofar as they include the earliest known historical records on Lower Fungom. It, therefore, constitutes one of our research collaborators (see Section 3.2). Even more so than the University of Yaoundé, it is severely under-resourced, and its collections are in danger for various reasons, most notably the lack of sufficient climate control for the collections.

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<sup>16</sup> This work was funded by the Endangered Archives Programme, based at the British Library, under grant EAP506. Like the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme, this initiative is funded by Arcadia.

While the archive's focus is not languages, its materials have already proven their value for linguistic research. Moreover, our pilot project did not merely involve targeted preservation and digitisation but it also had a training component so that preservation work could continue once the project ended. Digitisation equipment, too, was left with the archives. Therefore, even though the project was not specifically linguistic in nature, it was designed to contribute to Cameroon's documentary capacity (and, indeed, help preserve existing documentation). This represents another case where collaborative projects that would not be expected in a context like North America might be perfectly natural in another part of the world and further underscores how a linguist's collaborative responsibilities may extend beyond the communities whose languages are being researched in some parts of the world.

## **7. Attempting to generalise**

This paper has sought to complement the existing literature on collaboration in language documentation by discussing ways in which the collaborative relationships that play a role in one documentation project in sub-Saharan Africa differ from cases that have been highlighted previously. The most salient, and consequential, divergence involves the range of communities that one relies on in doing work in a country like Cameroon. This requires collaboration to be considered not simply in terms of how the outside 'researcher' interacts with the 'speaker community' but also with respect to collaboration with the local research community as well as, in the case of the current project, a local speaker community whose language is not included in the research itself.

This need to consider collaboration with multiple communities, in turn, raised issues of how to equitably distribute efforts across all of the under-resourced communities that contribute to the success of the research. A potentially counterintuitive decision taken by the present project has been a relative lack of collaborative activities specifically focused on language issues in the communities which are the subject of the research. This is because, of the communities who play a role in making the research successful, they are least able, at present, to make use of a linguist's expertise. Nevertheless, this has not precluded attempts at non-linguistic collaboration, for instance involving local development projects.

A natural question to consider as a result of the discussion above is whether we can derive some general lessons from the collaborative experiences described here. The most obvious lesson may first come across as unhelpful due to its lack of specificity: every documentation project exists in a particular context and collaborative efforts must take that context into

account. The vagueness of advice like this, however, at least reveals where the true problem lies: in modelling the context of a research project.

The ‘colonial’ context of the Americas and Australia, where indigenous groups are subject to ongoing processes of marginalisation due to the presence of historically recent settler societies, can be relatively naturally modelled in terms of a clear-cut linguist-community dichotomy.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, this model can be readily understood as a recapitulation, though on different terms of control, of the dynamics found in the wider societies within which this model has been developed.

This dynamic, of course, does not characterise most of sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>18</sup> The important lines of demarcation there are ‘local’ in nature and do not necessarily strongly implicate the community which the outside researcher is a part of.<sup>19</sup> This allows the collaborations to be more fluid in nature rather than following a kind of pre-determined cultural ‘script’.

Fortunately, even acting within such a fluid system, it seems possible to derive some relatively concrete general principles for collaboration in applied language documentation. The first is that collaboration should **first and foremost be centred on building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships** (with emphasis on the plural). We should not assume at the outset that any one relationship is inherently privileged, as opposed to being privileged in a specific context. Furthermore, just because one side of the collaborative equation involves an ‘outsider’ conducting research, this does not mean the collaboration must closely connect to the research itself. In other words, there is no reason to artificially circumscribe the collaborative agenda on account of the fact that the main identity we may employ when conducting language documentation is that of the linguistic researcher.

The second principle is that **relationships are never fixed and, therefore, models of collaboration will be constantly evolving**. Devising appropriate

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<sup>17</sup> This dichotomy breaks down somewhat when the linguist is also a community member, though it may still be present to some extent (see, e.g., Dwyer 2010: 200-202).

<sup>18</sup> In southern sub-Saharan Africa, where one finds significant white populations as well as cases where Bantu speakers have marginalised communities associated with languages present in the region before the Bantu expansion, some aspects of this dynamic can certainly be found.

<sup>19</sup> Here, of course, it is relevant to point out that I am an American researcher, working with a research team that does not contain any British or French scholars. The dynamics could be significantly different if the team had a more direct connection to Cameroon’s most recent colonial powers.

plans for collaboration at any given point in a project should be understood as a kind of research: questions arise, answers to those questions raise new questions, which in turn change priorities, etc. Such a principle suggests, in particular, that caution is required when conceptualising a notion like 'giving back' primarily in terms of products (see, e.g., Dwyer 2006: 39) rather than in terms of more abstract notions like exchange (Dobrin 2008: 317-318). While exchange may often appropriately take the form of transfer of linguistic products, this should be viewed as resulting from the nature of the collaborative relationship rather than being treated as its main 'point'.

The third principle that I will discuss here is one that I adapt from Dobrin (2008: 318) who urges linguists to take the 'long view' when considering their relationships to their field communities. We can extend this idea by suggesting that **balancing community collaborations requires long-term thinking**. As discussed in Section 3.3, at present it seems more sensible for the project to devote efforts at language development in a community other than those that are the focus of research. This conclusion derived from, among other considerations, a long-term perspective regarding the best way to support language maintenance, in contrast to a short-term perspective of discharging obligations to the 'speaker community' in the compressed timeframe of a single grant-funded research project.

We must acknowledge an immediate concern that may arise in adopting a long-term perspective: not all research is conducted with the long-term in mind. Perhaps survey work is being conducted to set documentary priorities or a graduate student is barely able to gain funding to complete a dissertation, let alone set the foundation for a decades-long commitment to a community. However, conducting short-term research does not prevent one from taking a long-term perspective. This simply requires the researcher making clear to themselves and the communities that they interact with how they fit into global efforts to address language endangerment and related concerns. A short-term survey, for instance, may give little directly back to the surveyed community at the time, but if its results are widely disseminated, it may serve as a valuable resource for future, more extensive work. Hamm et al.'s (2002) survey of Lower Fungom's languages is a case in point in this regard. It proved quite valuable in the early stages of the research project of focus here. This survey went so far as to include practical points like how long it would take to reach a number of Lower Fungom's villages on foot from the centrally located village of Abar (see Figure 1), prompting our own research to add similar practical information in research papers on the area (Good et al. 2011, Di Carlo 2011). Such activities do not seem to merit the label 'collaboration', but they do at least acknowledge, whether implicitly or explicitly, that behind the language data there is an actual community of speakers who can be visited in the future by others, allowing a short-term project to keep the long-term in mind.

The suggestions above are only intended to be a start of a longer-term discussion for arriving at an understanding of collaboration in language documentation that is not inappropriately structured around the social and ideological configurations of a limited part of the world. Of course, other scholars may not choose to adopt the informing principles in Section 3 that guided much of the discussion here. They may also be critical of the specific approaches to collaboration that have been developed during the present project. Nevertheless, I hope to at least have made clear that there are research situations that are sufficiently distinct from those usually encountered in places like North America or Australia as to force us to give serious consideration about how our collaborative models can be made more generally applicable.

To conclude, to the extent that this paper echoes many of the concerns raised in Dobrin's (2008) examination of community-linguist relations in Papua New Guinea, it suggests the need for comparable studies for many other parts of the world. Such studies will be especially crucial if the field is to address a key concern voiced by Lüpke (2009: 35-36) that the endangered language discourse as a whole has resulted in models which largely 'fail' to take into account the linguistic situation of places like sub-Saharan Africa, thereby reinforcing the general Western marginalisation of it and comparable parts of the world. We cannot expect our colleagues working in other parts of the world to automatically grasp the particularities of our own situations. Rather, we must help make them better known ourselves.

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