

Language Documentation and Description

ISSN 1740-6234

This article appears in: *Language Documentation and Description*, vol 11. Editors: Stuart McGill & Peter K. Austin

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Cite this article: Michael F. Thomas (2012). Building community participation into documentation design: lessons learned in Sakun (Sukur). In Stuart McGill & Peter K. Austin (eds) *Language Documentation and Description*, vol 11. London: SOAS. pp. 59-71

Link to this article: <http://www.elpublishing.org/PID/128>

This electronic version first published: July 2014



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Building community participation into documentation design: lessons learned in Sakun (Sukur)

Michael F. Thomas

1. Introduction¹

A successful language documentation project needs to balance the sometimes conflicting goals of all the project stakeholders in order to enhance everyone's desired outcomes. Linguists have a wide range of motivations for archiving and analyzing languages, many of which have little to do with community goals of maintenance and development. It is argued here that while documentation and development goals may not always be one and the same, the goals of this documentation project are necessary precursors to the attainment of the Sakun community's development goals. The participation of community members in the documentation provides the link for the community to take the results of the documentation and apply them to community initiated development efforts.

This paper reports on the ongoing language documentation project at the UNESCO Sukur World Heritage Site, in Adamawa state, Nigeria, and the attempt to balance these potentially divergent motivations by integrating the community into the documentation project at a number of levels. The success of this project is the result of collaborative efforts between the local community and the researcher, support from representatives of a range of cultural and political organizations at the local, state and national level in Nigeria, and funding from the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project, the National Science Foundation, and the University of Colorado, Boulder.

1.1. Sakun language and people.

The language of the Sakun is part of the Biu-Mandara branch of the Chadic family. Sakun is the only member of the A.6 Sukur sub-group (Newman 1977). The language has between 15,000 (Gordon 2005), and 20,000²

¹ The language is known to outsiders as *Sukur*. However, the community refers to itself and its language as *Sakun*. Both the language and community will be referred to here as *Sakun*. *Sukur* will only be used in reference to the title of the UNESCO site.

² The figure of 20,000 is based on an estimate from a census conducted by the District Head of Madagali Local Government Area in 2009.

speakers who occupy the massifs around Madagali east to the Cameroon border and south towards Gulak. The main village with the *Tlidɔ'*'s residence is located at N10° 44.447', EO 13° 34.226'.

Multilingualism is prominent in the area with speakers of Sakun typically speaking four or five languages. The main contact languages are English, Hausa and Fulfulde. Other local languages spoken by Sakun are mostly varieties of Kamwe (Kapsiki/Higi) and Margi (both Central Chadic languages).³ Polygamy is still commonly practiced in the area, with wives often coming from neighbouring communities. This leads to variation in the multilingualism present, even at the level of individual compounds.

Sakun was inscribed as part of the UNESCO World Heritage Cultural Landscape in 1999. Sakun was recommended for inscription on the World Heritage List primarily for the integration and maintenance of their terraced farming system and the pre-industrial local iron industry. These practices among the Sakun have resisted change for centuries⁴ and the cultural landscape is 'eloquent testimony to a strong and continuing cultural tradition' (UNESCO 1999: 91). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the UNESCO enlistment has strengthened local Sakun identity. Stories of Sakun living in Mubi, 'passing' as Margi, who began projecting their Sakun heritage after the enlistment, are common. The criteria for enlistment may appear to bode well for the maintenance of the language. However, the enlistment has put increased pressure on the language in the community due to subsequent infrastructure development and visitation which has substantially increased outside contact. Local population pressure leading to more Sakun leaving the area for work in nearby cities such as Mubi and Maiduguri, and development of the educational infrastructure with many teachers coming from outside the community has also led to increased incursion of Hausa, independent of the UNESCO enlistment. With the inscription of the Sukur Cultural Landscape and the increased contacts that have followed infrastructure development, Sakun is joining Blench's list of Nigerian minority languages 'giving way to Hausa' (Blench 2007: 140-162). The language is not moribund, i.e. children are still speaking it as a first language, and children are often cited as being the best tellers of the traditional stories or *gɛmakɔkaw*. However, Hausa is occupying more and more domains of language use. Hausa is the language of the church, and the majority of Sakun are at least nominally Christian. Hausa, along with English, is the language of education. From the corpus collected, it

³ See discussion of multilingualism in Sakun in section 4.

⁴ The local iron industry collapsed when cheap iron from Europe arrived after the industrial revolution. For further discussion see MacEachern 2003.

is readily evident that speakers frequently and heavily mix Hausa into their Sakun at times. Although most Sakun speak four or more languages, often local minority languages such as Margi and varieties of Kamweh (Kapsiki), it is only Hausa that appears to be permeating their Sakun speech directly.

Before the beginning of the documentation project, little work had been done on the Sakun language. Word lists had been collected by Meek (1931) and David (2003), but no analysis of the grammar had been conducted. Lacking an orthography, only one text has been published in Sakun, namely a small religious pamphlet produced by Bishop L.T. Waziri.⁵ This text was produced using a writing system for a Kamweh variety and many Sakun literate in English and Hausa state that the text is difficult to read. This is unsurprising as several important phonemic distinctions in Sakun are opaque in the writing system used for the pamphlet.

1.2. The Sakun (Sukur) Language Documentation Project

The scope of the actual documentation project was limited. The goals of the researcher included:

- development of a working orthography;
- collection, time-alignment, transcription, and translation, of 24 hours of video recordings; and
- preparation of a grammatical sketch in the form of a doctoral dissertation.

Efforts were made to balance the corpus, not only for speech genre, but also to represent important cultural practices relevant to a wide range of scholars potentially interested in the site. In the course of the data collection and analysis a word list is being generated that will be the foundation for a future dictionary. While these goals are distinct from the goals for language development proposed by the community, they lay the necessary foundation for it. The community's goals are discussed in the next section.

⁵ Available at <http://www.sukur.info/Lang/Waziritext2.pdf>, accessed 2012-11-02.

2. Community participation

The approach taken in this project has been to train community members in all areas of the documentation process, from data collection to orthographic transcription, time-alignment, and the use of the dictionary database software. Computers used in the project have been donated to the participants so the skills learned in the project can be used to continue the development through community-initiated projects such as developing the corpus of printed Sakun, expanding the dictionary, and creating pedagogical materials. There are several target areas for corpus expansion which members of the community have indicated are of particular interest: traditional stories, oral histories of people and clans, and translations of outside texts into Sakun, in particular the Bible. The dictionary is also high on the community's agenda as this is seen as necessary for standardization of the writing system.

2.1. Training the documentation team

The members of the documentation team include the lead consultant, Simon Waida, along with Joseph Zera and Luka John. Simon is from the village of Rugudum in the valley, while Joseph Zera is from Baba up on the western ridge, and Luka John is from Gwassa next to the Chief's palace on the hilltop. Having members of the team drawn from each major geographic area occupied by Sakun immediately gave the project input from across the community. The training of the documentation team began with an introduction to computers and the development of a working orthography for the transcription of the corpus. The members of the documentation team knew of computers, but none of them had ever used one before the start of the project. Likewise, the team were all literate in English and Hausa, but had never attempted to write Sakun. Issues regarding the writing system will be discussed below in section 3. The computer training began with turning the machine on and manoeuvring the cursor. Each machine was prepared with a typing-training program and the first day was spent turning the machine on and off and familiarizing the team with the keyboard by playing the typing games. The majority of Sakun are guinea corn farmers whose work is hard on the body, and each of the team members had at some point suffered an injury to the hands such that touch typing would never be possible for them to acquire. However, spending the time initially focusing on typing instilled a sense of confidence with the machines, in addition to speeding up the subsequent typing. By the end of the project the team was undertaking unsupervised time-alignment, transcription and translation using the ELAN software tool. Team members often stated that learning how to use the computers was an early motivator for participation in the project and time was spent each week working on general computing skills such as understanding

files and folders, running programs, using Word and Excel, as well as the work specific to the language documentation. Since the team was learning both the use of the computers and working out issues in the orthography, the learning curve was steep. At the end of the first month only an hour of the proposed 24 hours were time-aligned, transcribed and translated. However, the pace of work quickened, and by the end of the second month three hours were complete, and by the end of the third month 12 hours were complete. The full 24 hours of the corpus were prepared in first-draft format with enough time in the project remaining for review and revision of the corpus.

2.2. Garnering stakeholder support

Speaker communities are often presented as monolithic entities, and the researcher is often discussed as being in a relation with a ‘speech community’. While outsiders may view the speech community as a cohesive group, the situation in Sakun was far more complex, with a range of individuals with distinct and often contradictory agendas which affected the possible results of the documentation project, and the likelihood that the stated community goals could be achieved. Negotiating the local political terrain would not have been possible without the assistance of the lead consultant, Simon Waida. While a researcher may be inclined to spend limited time and energy at the field site focused on building the corpus, eliciting data and analyzing the language system, neglecting the obligations of local politics would have seriously decreased the quality of the corpus collected and decreased the chances that the project could be of service to the community after its conclusion. So, for example, greetings are an important aspect of the local culture, and to visit the hilltop without stopping to greet the chief is seen as a serious offense. It is not the case that the chief will punish the researcher - allowances are made for *mātəbəi* ‘guests’ - however, people in the village will discuss such lapses of etiquette and be less likely to speak with the documentation team. It is obvious, but worth stating clearly, that local leadership is often an excellent source of information about the people and culture, providing important contacts for data collection. Time spent visiting the local government representatives, both traditional and modern, members of the Sakun Development Association, church leaders and educators, and participating in management committee meetings, all served to give the various factions of the ‘community’ a sense of investment in the project and a voice in both its conduct and the outcomes.

2.3. Identifying areas for documentation

There was already a growing ethnographic literature on the Sakun before the outset of the project. As a result of UNESCO enlistment, the group was already familiar to many scholars at the University of Maiduguri and beyond. The Sakun were given priority in deciding what was to be documented. This was then balanced by areas which had gaps in the ethnographic coverage, as identified through collaboration with scholars in other fields.⁶ The corpus was also balanced for speech genres. The documentation project further served the broader community of stakeholders of the site by providing an additional record of intangible cultural heritage called for in the site management plan.

3. Orthography development

Creating a writing system is more than simply choosing symbols to represent the sound system. The intonational phonology of Sakun is such that word boundaries can be difficult to establish. With three native speakers working on orthographic transcription, we were able to establish areas of difficulty as the work unfolded and were able to come to a consensus on the conventions to be established that would make the most intuitive sense to future users of the system. The work site for corpus development was opened to any member of the community during the project. The location was next to the path leading up to the hilltop villages, so visitors were frequent, especially on market days. What at first appeared to be distractions ended up being instances of the broader community providing input to the project. The choice of graphemes to represent the language was influenced by the desire to have a system as similar as possible to Hausa and to English. Hooked *ɓ* and *ɗ* (representing implosives) are both found in the Hausa orthography, with only the use of engma *ɲ* and schwa *ə* being distinct for Sakun. The digraphs *tl* and *dl* are used for voiceless and voiced lateral fricatives respectively, and *c* is used for a voiceless palatal affricate. These are also common in other regional orthographies. As is common in the region, phonemic tone is not represented in the orthography. The decision to omit tone from the orthography was conditioned by (1) common practice in the area and (2) the fact that on occasions where attempts were made to include tone the consultants found it quite difficult to be consistent, and (3) often only after long discussions could any kind of consensus be reached in particular instances. While the researcher may have wanted every phonemic contrast to be made explicit in the

⁶ Thanks go to Professor N. David, Ishanlosen Odiuaa, and staff members at the University of Maiduguri for input on items for inclusion in the corpus.

transcriptions, practical concerns about the feasibility of later implementation typically won the day.

3.1. The current state of the writing system

The orthography currently in use is laid out in Table 1 (for consonants) and Table 2 (for vowels).

Table 1: Sakun Consonants

| | labial | labio-dental | alveolar | lateral | palatal | velar | pharyngeal | glottal |
|----------------|--------|--------------|----------|---------|---------|------------------|------------|---------|
| Stops | | | | | | | | |
| - voiceless | p | | t | | | k | | |
| -voiced | b | | d | | | g | | |
| - glottalised | ɸ | | tʰ | | | k'u ⁷ | | |
| - prenasalised | mb | | nd | | | ng | | |
| Fricatives | | | | | | | | |
| - voiceless | | f | s | tl | sh | | h | |
| - voiced | | v | z | dl | zh | gh | | |
| Affricates | | | | | | | | |
| - voiceless | | | ts | | c | | | |
| - voiced | | | sz | | j | | | |
| Nasals | m | | n | | | ŋ | | |
| Liquids | | | l, r | | | | | |
| Glides | w | | | | y | | | |

Table 2: Sakun Vowels

| | Front | Central | Back |
|------|-------|---------|------|
| High | i | | u |
| Mid | | ə | |
| Low | | | a |

⁷ k'u represents a labialised velar ejective

Note that the schwa is epenthetic. There is also a labio-dental flap that occurs in ideophones; it is written *v*. The following excerpt from a traditional story about Hyena and Squirrel provides an example of the current orthography in practice.

‘ŋəna ya kwa mbə ka tsau ghər kwa pə shaushawai. Ghərəi mədzahən kara givi shi batəkə na. Kəna kai da tsaw da ŋaw na?’ hanawa a Dəgəvu.

“Where do you come in so that you plant a farm on sandy soil. The clear farm without suffering (from weeding) is better. I am not going to plant mine?” said Hyena.

3.2. Issues in implementation

There are two main issues confronting us with regard to implementing the orthography: clitics and word boundaries.

Both the clause final negation particle, =*w* and the determiner, =*j* trigger gemination if they cliticize to a word ending with a closed syllable. This is illustrated in the following table which shows the phonetic transcription followed by the English translation and then the representation in the current orthography.

Table 3: Clitics

| Phonetic | English | Orthography |
|-------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| jim | stone | yim |
| jim.məj | that stone | yiməi |
| ká jim.məw | There’s no stone | ka yiməw |
| ká ka jim.məj.jəw | It’s not this stone. | ka ka yiməiw |

In the implementation of the orthography, this has caused some issues. The current convention is to include the schwa, but not to represent the gemination. In the case of the clause-final negative marker, the symbol *w* is restricted to the negative (except in word-initial position) and in other cases, *u* is used. This is illustrated in the following table.

Table 4: *w and u*

| Phonetic | English | Orthography |
|----------|---------|-------------|
| waŋ | ten | waŋ |
| tsaw | plant | tsau |
| rwi | child | rui |

The second area of difficulty is the definition of word boundaries. Verbal morphology is particularly problematic, resulting in inconsistencies in the orthographic transcriptions by members of the documentation team. For example, when verbs take both an object pronoun and a directional extension often the object pronoun will be separated from the root and written as a single word together with the directional extension. Without the object pronoun, team members consistently write the root and extension as a single word. This is illustrated in the following two examples of the different ways the same groups of morphemes have appeared in the corpus.

Written forms: gan cava, gancava, gan ca va

| | | |
|-------------|--------|-----|
| gán | tʃá | và |
| show | 3M.OBJ | OUT |
| ‘Show him!’ | | |

Written forms: bəŋŋa ma, bən ŋa ma, bəŋŋama

| | | |
|-----------------|---------|----|
| bón | ŋa | má |
| do | 1SG.OBJ | UP |
| ‘Do it for me!’ | | |

Despite these issues, the current orthography is being adopted by the community and is perceived as superior to previous attempts at transliteration of the language. Negotiating the conventions is an ongoing process.

4. Language maintenance in Sakun

Language endangerment takes many different forms. While Sakun and related languages in the Mandara mountains are under serious threat from Hausa, Sakun is not moribund. The tools and approaches needed for language maintenance are different from those needed for revitalization. There is a part of the Sakun population growing up without having learned Sakun, e.g. those

growing up in Mubi or beyond. But they can still return to the community of speakers and learn the language informally. It is the maintenance of the language within that community of speakers which is the focus of planning for local development initiatives.

4.1. Corpus planning: A domain-specific approach

The Sakun community advocates what can be described as a domain-specific approach to corpus planning in order to ensure the continued use and development of the language. Targeted domains include:

- mother tongue education;
- translation of texts widely used by the community into Sakun;
- writing of histories; and
- development of oral story telling traditions into a written literature.

At the same time, there is also a need for second language learning materials to serve the Sakun diaspora who have grown up outside the community and wish to learn the language. At present, the corpus of texts in Sakun consists of the previously mentioned wordlists published by Meek and David, Bishop Waziri's pamphlets, Simon Waida's stories, and the corpus collected for the documentation project. Community goals include putting collections of these stories on the market, writing local histories of people, places and clans, producing a dictionary, and developing pedagogical materials. Related projects are the collections of Sakun proverbs being developed by Joseph Zera, and a collection of traditional prohibitions being developed by Markus Ezram. There has also been discussion of the use of Sakun as the official language for meetings of the Sakun Development Association.

4.2. Multilingualism in Sakun

Multilingualism is common to the region and the Sakun are no exception. Based on an informal survey carried out by the participants in the documentation project of 200 Sakun speakers, Sakun speak between 2 and 7 languages, with the average being 4-5. The distribution of languages used by native speakers of Sakun is provided in the following tables.

Table 5: Speakers of lingua francas (out of 200)

| Language | Hausa | English | Fulfulde | Kanuri |
|--------------------|-------|---------|----------|--------|
| Number of speakers | 157 | 37 | 65 | 1 |

Table 6: Speakers of Local Languages (out of 200)

| Language | Margi | Dwa (Kapsiki) | Rwa (Wula) | Ghumshi (Higi) | Ciduk; Mədəvu (Wula) | Dəvun | Matakam; Kilba |
|--------------------|-------|------------------|---------------|-------------------|----------------------------|-------|-------------------|
| Number of speakers | 56 | 86 | 45 | 9 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

Typically those Sakun who did not speak Hausa also did not speak English. Access to education appeared to be the driving force behind the acquisition of the national languages.

4.3. Nigerian language policy and community-initiated language maintenance

Language policy in Nigeria is generally supportive of minority languages, although with limited resources federal government efforts at development are focused primarily on the official and national languages. The 1999 constitution recognises English, Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo as the national languages. However subsection 19(4) states that ‘Government shall encourage the learning of indigenous languages.’ Likewise, the National Policy on Education (1981) states that in primary school each child must study English and ‘his mother-tongue (if available for study) or an indigenous language of wider communication in his area of domicile.’ Because of the lack of a writing system, pedagogical materials, and Sakun with teaching posts, the mother-tongue is replaced with the language of wider communication in the area, i.e. Hausa. Documentation projects can serve an important role in supporting closure of this development gap. Fortunately for the Sakun, government policy does not prevent the development of minority languages and community-initiated development efforts at least have a chance of moving forward without state interference, even if the state is not in a position to fund policy implementations.

As a UNESCO site, the group of stakeholders involved in the project is broader than is typically the case. From the beginning phases of the project, government agencies from the state and federal level were involved, as well as the local community. Part of the UNESCO enlistment involves the drafting of

management plans, and there was already a framework in place for explicitly generating community comment on any work conducted in and around the site. The preparation of periodic management plans also provides an avenue for planning the shift from the documentation project to application of the results in community-initiated development plans. Currently efforts are being made to formally include a section on language development in the management plan.

5. Conclusion

Community participation has been part of the Sakun language documentation project on many levels, from deciding what to document to the construction of the corpus. The result is a 24 hour corpus of transcribed and translated video texts providing a balanced coverage of language practices and important cultural practices. The corpus addressed the goals of the researcher, but members of the Sakun community are in a strong position as a direct result of the documentation project to initiate development steps they identified as crucial for the maintenance of their language. The training of the documentation team in the use of the laptops and the donation of the project laptops to the community means that community members can access the results of the documentation project locally. Moreover, the consultants for the project are familiar with its entire contents. The equipment is also being used to advance the community's development agenda of text production for the local market. By employing a practical orthography in the transcription of the corpus, developed in consultation with the community, the resulting transcriptions are consistent and of a scale which could not have been accomplished by the researcher alone in the time frame of the project. By actively seeking broad input from members of the community, issues that would have arisen from several conflicting orthographies have been averted. The first texts produced locally, the pamphlets published by Bishop Waziri, have now been reissued in the new orthography.

The lesson learned from building community participation into the documentation project in Sakun is that the more the community participates, the better the documentation, and the more useful the documentation can be in furthering the community's own agendas.

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