
**Language documentation and description
among refugee populations**

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Language documentation and description among refugee populations

ROBERT S. WILLIAMS & JADE COMFORT

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1. INTRODUCTION

Increasing forced migration of large numbers of people to urban centers such as Cairo has presented linguists with opportunities to document languages that have been, for a variety of reasons, previously difficult to access. Doing linguistic work within refugee populations is neither a new nor an uncontroversial undertaking. For certain kinds of linguistic work, such as second language acquisition (SLA) research, most linguists would agree that refugee populations are ideal. The same cannot not be said, however, of language documentation, as is attested by the ongoing and spirited debate over the legitimacy of doing fieldwork with refugees or other speakers outside of the traditional geographic home of a language. On the one hand, Austin, Haig, and others (Austin 2007) argue for the validity of *ex situ* fieldwork, and make the point that increasing global migration makes documentation work among displaced speech communities inevitable. The opponents of this view (Aikhenvald 2007; Crowley 2007; and others) maintain that it is not possible to do ‘comprehensible and reliable’ documentation fieldwork (Aikhenvald 2007:4) in a displaced speech community. Our research on the Sudanese language *Ghulfan* is based among the Ghulfan-speaking refugee community in Cairo, Egypt. As would be expected, our position in this debate is that it is possible to do valuable documentation work among refugees. Though we also concede the difficulties of working in a displaced community, many of which are central to the argument against *ex situ* fieldwork, we feel that the unique benefits outweigh the drawbacks. In fact, there is much precedent for such work. One such example is the research of UCLA linguist Pam Munro, whose work on the endangered American Indian languages Chickasaw (Munro & Willmond 1994), Tolkapaya Yavapai (1990; 1996), and Pima (1977; 1989) all began in Los Angeles.

In our case, we see the opportunity to create a broad sketch of Ghulfan within the refugee community and to later build on our work in Cairo by visiting Sudan. By that time, we will have much documentation completed on the Ghulfan speech community in Cairo, which will provide an invaluable basis for our work in Sudan. Because of the work we are doing now, we will be able to compare the grammatical and lexical structure of in situ speakers with migrant speakers, thus gaining insight into the effects of migration and urbanization on language change and on possible language obsolescence. While we are very much interested in the aforementioned debate, it will not be a central part of this paper, though we will allude to issues raised by both positions with respect to our fieldwork experiences.

Ghulfan, a Nilo-Saharan language that is a member of the Kordofan Nubian dialect group, is situated in the Sudanese state of South Kordofan. Because of long-standing political unrest in this area and in other regions of Sudan, namely

South Sudan and Darfur, there has been a large migration of people from these areas to Khartoum and to refugee resettlement centers such as Cairo and Nairobi. These conditions, which have also made it difficult to carry out fieldwork in the aforementioned areas, brought the small, but intact, Ghulfan speech community with which we work to Cairo.

Our Ghulfan Documentation Project (GDP) is housed in the Cairo Refugee Language Project (CRLP), a traditional and advocacy research umbrella at the American University in Cairo (AUC). The CRLP supports language documentation and language maintenance efforts among the refugee population in Cairo, as well as other language-based refugee projects, such as those working to train refugees as community interpreters and to offer pedagogical training to refugees working as teachers in refugee schools. Thus our project is situated not only in the Ghulfan speech community, but also in a number of other interrelated communities. The Ghulfan speakers with whom we work are mostly aged 50 and under, but are fluent speakers of the language, rather than semi-speakers (as defined by Dorian 1977; and Sasse 1992:15) or rememberers.

We began our work over two years ago because the refugee situation in Cairo provided us with the opportunity to work with a variety of underdocumented and threatened languages. While we would have liked to work in the Nuba Mountains from the beginning of the project, this was not an option for us. Since there is some urgency involved in the documenting of endangered languages, we were happy to begin our project in Cairo. What follows will be a discussion of linguistic, psychological, and political issues with which we are confronted that are mostly specific to working with refugees.

2. IDENTIFYING SPEECH COMMUNITIES AND RECRUITING LANGUAGE CONSULTANTS

Identifying and contacting refugee speakers of minority languages in large metropolitan centers such as Cairo can be a difficult task. There are places, however, such as churches and schools, where refugees tend to gather. In our case, we were already involved in working with refugees on projects of interest and benefit to them, such as teaching English in refugee education centers. Another of our key involvements was providing training in linguistics to the Cairo Community Interpreters project (CCI), which provides interpreter training to bilingual refugees who are often asked to act as interpreters by other members of the refugee community. Because the CCI is sponsored by the Forced Migration and Refugee Studies program, an academic unit at AUC and a center for refugee education and political activity, we had access to speakers from a large number of languages spoken in Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Chad, and other African countries from which people were forced to migrate. Such ‘snowball’ techniques, where one personal contact leads to more, have long been used in research with refugees and other transient groups (Carey-Wood, et al. 1995; Jordan & Düvell, 2002; both in Bloch 2004: 144).

The GDP has its genesis in work done by Daniele Calvani, founder of the CCI, whose study on linguistic diversity in the Cairo refugee population (2003) began to identify various refugee speech communities. This report was distributed to several linguists, including Bernard Comrie of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology and Ekkehard Wolff and Gerald Heusing of Leipzig University, who identified languages among those listed in the report that were most in need of documentation. One such language was Dilling, also a member of the Kordofan Nubian dialect group.

We decided to try to document Dilling and sent out a call through the CCI for speakers of the language. As it turned out, the person who answered our call, Abdelbagi Daida, now our principal consultant and translator, later told us that he was actually a speaker of Ajang rather than Dilling. The term Ajang was familiar to us as an ethnic group but not a language, so one of our initial tasks was to identify Abdelbagi's language. We knew that his village was near the Nuba Mountain town of Dilling, so we were fairly certain that his language was closely related to Dilling, most probably Ghulfan. At this time, we began contacting people who had experience working on Nilo-Saharan languages, and from Angelika Jakobi, now a member of our team, were able to access a brief Ghulfan word list. We compared Jakobi's list to a list of lexical items we had gathered from Abdelbagi and from this were able to positively identify his language as Ghulfan. Abdelbagi identified one of the words on the list, *wunču*, as an indigenous name for his language, adding further certainty to our identification of Ghulfan.

Through Abdelbagi, we were able to meet other members of the Ghulfan speech community with whom we also work. This small group, probably no more than 30 fluent speakers, also includes rememberers and semi-speakers of Ghulfan, indicating that Ghulfan is a language, at least in its Diaspora, that has entered an obsolescence process. Most members of the Ghulfan speech community in Cairo come from the village of Angarko, though others are from different Ghulfan-speaking villages, which gives some geographical variation in our data. In addition, because of the work of one GDP member in training refugee school instructors, we have gotten to know speech community members of other Nuba Mountain languages, including some languages belonging to the Kordofan Nubian dialect group. This connection to a larger Nuba Mountain cultural community is of great value to our documentation work as well, since we have access to comparative data from other languages that it would be otherwise difficult to get.

While *in situ* documentation work is certainly preferable to any other kind, it is not always possible to carry out, due to teaching, financial, political, and other constraints on linguists. Therefore, given the current state of language obsolescence, it would be a tragedy not to begin documenting endangered languages among displaced persons. As our project demonstrates, especially in large urban centers, it is possible to find intact speech communities among refugees and other displaced persons in which to do serious documentation work.

3. SPECIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES INVOLVED IN WORKING WITH REFUGEES

Although there are certainly psychological, social, and political issues involved in any kind of language documentation, working with refugees presents different or heightened conditions in these areas. To begin with, it is impossible to underestimate the level of despair that is present among refugees. For example in Cairo, which is a refugee resettlement center but not a resettlement destination, refugees can wait years before they are either resettled to a permanent home, sent back to their homelands, or are deemed ‘persons of no concern’ by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which means for most that they are in a state of permanent limbo in Cairo. Work opportunities are scarce, especially for men. Refugee women have more opportunities, often finding work as domestics, making them the primary wage earners in their families. This reversal of traditional economic roles is a cause of social problems, adding to those already caused by unemployment. Another strain on families is the lack of educational opportunities for refugee children or young adults who have had interrupted schooling. Although the Egyptian government has agreed to allow refugee children to attend government schools, there are many practical hurdles that make attending government schools impossible for most refugees. Thus the burden of educating refugee children has fallen on an assortment of special schools for refugees, most supported by NGOs with religious affiliation. Some refugee schools are better than others, but all operate under highly difficult conditions, and most lack a systematic curriculum. None grant any kind of recognized credential to graduates, and the capacity of the 15 refugee schools now operating in Cairo is far exceeded by demand. Because of these conditions and others, refugee school directors are now reporting the kinds of social conditions in the refugee community that are found among economically and socially disadvantaged people in large western cities, i.e., mass unemployment, alcoholism, family violence, gang violence, mass and severe depression. These conditions, coupled with the trauma associated with forced migration and the condition of statelessness, create extremely negative psychological conditions among refugees.

This is the psychological backdrop of our documentation work. While it is impossible for us to alleviate the situations underlying these conditions, being aware of them and being alert to the effect they can have on our consultants is an essential part of our work. For example, asking refugees to provide narratives related to their lives can, on the one hand, trigger emotional stress. On the other hand, some experience psychological benefit by telling their stories. So, there are both negative and positive psychological aspects of working with refugees that need to be taken into account by the researcher. On the negative side, working as language consultants could cause refugees to feel singled out in a way that is threatening or to feel that they are being taken advantage of by being asked to give something important to someone outside of their cultural group. In addition, refugees could be more interested in embracing a ‘prestige’ language rather than their own language, which in Cairo would mean Arabic or English. All of these

factors save the last can be addressed, if not overcome, by honest communication between researchers and consultants, by researcher involvement in volunteer activities, such as teaching or tutoring, that benefit refugees, and by fair remuneration for consultants' time. On the positive side, participation in documentation work can help to boost self esteem that is often badly damaged, by giving refugees the feeling that their culture and language is valuable, which is often not the case in their daily lives. In addition, participating in documentation work gives consultants the opportunity to work at preserving their culture and language in a day-to-day context that works to marginalize both.

There are also political issues specific to working with displaced persons. In many places, refugees and other migrants face harassment from the police. The 2006 Cairo demonstration by South Sudanese refugees and the police violence that followed, resulting in the deaths of many refugees, is one example of this. It is not uncommon for migrants and refugees to lack proper visas and other documents necessary for legal residence in transient or resettlement centers. In Cairo, police routinely detain Sudanese refugees, often for up to one week, for lack of proper documentation. This means that refugees participating in documentation projects may need special measures to safeguard their confidentiality. As a part of our documentation project, we are collecting narratives that tell forced migration stories. We are careful to explain to our consultants that they do not have to tell us these stories, and that if they do, we will do everything in our power to safeguard their identities. Given the highly political nature of the narrative, we have decided to take the extra precaution of making only audio, rather than video, recordings of forced-migration narratives, in order to make it more difficult to for those outside of the research team to identify the speakers. Despite all of this, all consultants working with the project have been eager to tell their stories.

Another issue of concern is that our presence in refugee neighborhoods could call unwanted attention to our consultants. Refugees in Cairo are generally unwanted by the general population and thus do not have a good relationship with their Egyptian neighbors or Egyptian government officials. In fact, on several field visits to refugee schools, Egyptian men have interrupted our visits to enquire as to our purpose there. While we do fieldwork in refugee homes, neighborhoods, and other gathering places, we are also able to invite our consultants to AUC, where our work with them is invisible to their Egyptian neighbors and to the authorities.

4. LINGUISTIC ISSUES SPECIFIC TO REFUGEE CONSULTANTS

As previously mentioned, the authentication of languages is a linguistic issue that is generally not present in *in situ* fieldwork, but often a challenge when working with displaced speakers. Other linguistic challenges include the effects of separation from home speech communities and urbanization on linguistic structures. In particular, we have noticed certain phonetic and tone variation from the data collected by Jakobi in 1986 and 1987 from three speakers in the Nuba

Mountains and data we are currently gathering in Cairo (Jakobi & Williams 2007). Roger Blench (personal communication) believes that tone leveling found among displaced speakers of other African languages is a possible result of urbanization. Since the Nuba Mountain data is impressionistic where tone is concerned, we probably won't be able to confirm tone leveling until we are able to work again in Sudan. We are still in the process of investigating these discrepancies, which could represent possible obsolescence effects among refugee speakers.

In considering linguistic variation between the Nuba Mountain and Cairo data, it is important to remember that our Cairo consultants are all fluent speakers of Ghulfan, though like many people from the Nuba Mountains, they migrated first to Khartoum before leaving Sudan for Cairo. Most were brought to the Nuba Mountain community in North Khartoum when they began their primary schooling, and continued to live in Khartoum through their secondary, and in some cases university, years. This means that variation in the Cairo data could be a result of displacement and urbanization, even though the Cairo speakers lived in a relatively large and age-diverse Ghulfan speech community in Khartoum. Urbanization works to shrink domains of usage for transplanted languages such as Ghulfan, and is a possible cause of the kind of language change that occurs when groups of speakers are geographically displaced. Such displacement, especially if it eventually leads to fragmentation of displaced speech communities, can also be a harbinger of language obsolescence.

We now have evidence, based on interviews with younger displaced speakers of Ghulfan, Tagle, and Dilling, all members of the Kordofan Nubian dialect group, that younger speakers living outside of the Nuba Mountains are no longer able to understand other dialects in the group, though their elders still can. Loss of mutual intelligibility among dialects is intriguing and could, in an era of linguistic homogenization, also signal the beginning of a language obsolescence process.

5. USE OF PROJECT DATA AND OUTCOMES FOR COMMUNITY BENEFIT

With *in situ* documentation projects, it is often, though not always, possible to find speech communities that are also organized political or social entities. For example, tribal governments, cultural associations, and even religious organizations associated with a speech community can function as partners in documentation projects for the purpose of finding speakers, being representatives in the negotiation and assigning of intellectual property rights to data and materials generated by the project, and acting as access points to data and materials for community members. Refugees also often form cultural associations and group-specific religious organizations, but this is not always so. In our case, there is a general Nuba Mountains cultural association in Cairo, but the Ghulfan speech community has no organized cultural association, and since Ghulfan speakers are Muslim, there is no centralized religious organization comprised only of Ghulfan-speaking people.

This is not to say that the Ghulfan speech community in Cairo lacks a social hierarchy. Speech community members defer to elders among the group, but there is no clear representative organization with which we can interact. We work instead with a group of speakers who are interested in documenting and preserving Ghulfan, brought into the project by our primary Ghulfan consultant. This group includes the ‘materfamilias’ of the Ghulfan refugee community, who is often a first point of contact for new Ghulfan-speaking refugees. While we believe that the group of speakers with whom we work makes up a legitimate sample of the larger Ghulfan refugee community, we cannot know to what extent all Ghulfan-speaking refugees support our project. We have, however, made efforts to make our plans and intentions known within the community and to address any concerns that have arisen. Because the Ghulfan speech community in Cairo is not officially organized, the assignment of intellectual property rights and community guardianship of data and materials remain difficult challenges.

While our consultants share the GDP’s primary goal of documenting, analyzing, and archiving as much of the language as possible, they also have other collective and individual goals with respect to the project. Our primary consultant is very interested in developing orthography for Ghulfan so that a dictionary and language learning materials can be created. Some are primarily interested in having their forced migration experiences documented, while others value the opportunity working with us gives them to learn and speak English. Finally, working with the project provides financial help and meaningful employment for all consultants, both of which are important to them as members of a disenfranchised group.

6. CONCLUSION

Clearly the traditional geographic home of a language is the most desirable and productive venue for doing language documentation. As long as it is possible to do *in situ* documentation, linguists should strive to do so. However, given the state of language loss that exists today, the difficult political situations which impact many endangered languages, and the fact that languages are just as transient as the people who speak them, it would be irresponsible of linguists not to use every available opportunity to document endangered languages, even if the documentation is *ex situ*. In addition, *ex situ* documentation work can provide insights into language change and obsolescence processes not easily gained by *in situ* documentation. For these reasons, documentation work among refugees and other displaced persons is not only desirable but also necessary.

Our discussion of issues relevant to our work with refugees in Cairo is by no means exhaustive. To be certain, there are many other things to be aware of and to compensate for in *ex situ* documentation research, and linguists working in field situations such as ours should always be mindful of them. While we concede that our data and analyses of Ghulfan may only be truly representative once we have carried out fieldwork in the Nuba Mountains, we also believe that our work in Cairo is an important and necessary phase of our project. Even when it is not

possible to do *in situ* fieldwork, careful documentation work among refugees and other displaced persons can have great value on its own.

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