

**A Rapid Appraisal Language Survey of Njen**

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## 1. Introduction

This report describes a sociolinguistic survey of the Njen language conducted on February 13, 2001 by Edward and Elizabeth Brye of SIL and Bolima Flora, Swiri Roseta, and Akumbu Pius, all doctoral students in the Department of African Languages and Linguistics at the University of Yaounde I.

We gratefully acknowledge the authorisation and assistance received by the sub-divisional officer at Batibo and the welcome of the chief of Njen and the residents of Njen village. Without their cooperation our research would not have been possible.

### 1.1 Names

The people call themselves “Nzin” and their language “ɪnzɪŋ”. Their neighbours, however, refer to them as “Njen” and it is also by this name that they are known administratively. They answer to this name when talking with outsiders. For the remainder of this report, we will use “Njen” to refer to the language and the people who speak it.

### 1.2 Locality and Population

The Njen language community is situated in the Batibo Sub-division of the Momo Division of the North West Province of Cameroon. (See appendix A for map.) Njen speakers live primarily on a plateau between peak and valley within a dense forest. The Njen language is spoken only in Njen villages; there are eight sectors whose residents speak the language without variation. The neighborhoods were named after the families that first settled in the area. The chief and other persons interviewed gave estimated population figures for each neighborhood, the combined total being about 1,700. The 2001 estimate<sup>1</sup> based on the 1987 official census figure is just a bit higher.

**Table 1: Population Figures for Njen**

Njen neighborhoods	Reported population	1987 Census	2001 Census estimate
Boniguang	400		
Batwobi	350		
Bodambu	175		
Beli	200		
Beten	150		
Bomanya	200		
Bombulibet	100		
Bomangwet	125		
TOTAL	1,700	1,251	1,867

There are other Njen speakers who do not live in the village, but no one present in the group interview could estimate their numbers.

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<sup>1</sup>According to the 1987 Census Publication (Demo 87:5), between 1976–1987 Cameroon experienced a 2.9% annual growth. Assuming that the same 2.9% rate of growth continued over the next fourteen years and applied equally throughout the country, we can estimate the 2001 population based on the 1987 figure. There is no way of knowing if there has been significant immigration or emigration of the speech communities since 1987. Also, these figures do not include populations speaking the language outside of the village (in cities).

### 1.3 History of the Njen-speaking People

There are two groups of people who migrated from different places and settled in Njen and, after a long period of staying together, now speak the same language. One group came from Mendankwe of the Mezam Division, and the other from Kong (now known as Fontem) of the Lebialem Division. These two groups came with their respective languages long before the German occupation (more than 100 years ago) and, after a while, the two languages merged or one became dominant to form the present language called Njen.

### 1.4 Linguistic Classification

In the *Ethnologue*, Grimes (2000:49) classifies Njen (code MEN) with an alternate name *Nyen* and a linguistic classification of: Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Bantoid, Southern, Wide Grassfields, Narrow Grassfields, Momo.

*ALCAM* (Dieu and Renaud 1983) does not include a listing for Njen, but the *Atlas administratif des langues nationales du Cameroun* assigns it a code of [859] (Breton and Fohung 1991:135).

### 1.5 Research Objectives

This language survey was conducted as part of an overall goal of assessing the need for language development in national languages throughout Cameroon. The team carried out the research with the following objectives:

- Make a preliminary evaluation, based on lexicostatistics and self-reporting, of the level of intercomprehension between Njen and the adjacent languages.
- Determine the feasibility of developing literacy materials in the Njen language. To assess the vitality of Njen in terms of the use of the mother tongue and other languages and their interest in language development.
- To identify speakers' attitudes towards the possibility of reading and writing Njen or other languages.

## 2. Methodology

The particular sociolinguistic research approach employed during this language survey was the "Rapid Appraisal" (see Bergman 1991 and Stalder 1996). This method involves the utilisation of group interviews and individual questionnaires as well as the elicitation of an ALCAM 126-word list (see Dieu and Renaud 1983:132–133). The rapid appraisal approach provides an overall impression of potential needs for codification through reports from local inhabitants that take a relatively short period of time. A rapid appraisal survey seeks to find out information with respect to the following domains:

- 1) Dialect Situation.** What are the exact locations where the language is spoken and how much dialectal variation occurs in the language? Questions are asked concerning the peoples' own perceptions of the degree of intercomprehension between groups speaking different speech varieties and, when applicable, wordlist comparisons are done using lexicostatistics in order to help predict intercomprehension based on lexical similarity.
- 2) Multilingualism.** The subject of multilingualism is examined to assess the level of understanding and oral competence in languages geographically and linguistically close to Njen, as well as any languages of wider communication.
- 3) Language Vitality and Viability.** To determine the potential success of a literacy development programme an understanding of language vitality and viability is important.

The research team first visited the sub-divisional officer at Batibo in order to obtain his assistance and authorization to proceed with the survey. He informed us that, from an administrative point of view, Njen is considered a sector of Ashong. (This was subsequently confirmed by the chief of Njen.) The sub-divisional officer further elaborated that Ashong consists of the following three sociocultural groups: Moghamo (which is the largest), Njen, and Kon. Since the focus of our research was the Njen language group, we proceeded immediately to Njen following the visit to Batibo.

In Njen, the research team interviewed a group of thirteen men and four women assembled by the chief (with about twenty-five onlookers, including children, young men, and women) in a classroom of Njen's only primary school, the Government Primary School-Njen (GPS-Njen). The team also separately interviewed the headmaster of the school. No religious official was present, but church attendees present in

the group interview made general statements about language use in religious contexts. Finally, the team elicited an ALCAM 126-word list with the help of Madame M. and Mr. T.

### 3. Research Results

#### 3.1 Dialect Situation

Responses to the group interview questions revealed that there is no variation in the manner in which the Njen language is spoken. Residents from each of the sectors say they speak the same as those from all the other sectors.

#### 3.2 Multilingualism

In this section, we will examine the degree of intercomprehension reported by Njen speakers between their language and the languages of the people around them.

##### 3.2.1 Languages linguistically and geographically close

*Moghamo*, a dialect of *Meta'* (ALCAM code 864) is the language reported to be the most closely related to the Njen language, and the village of Njen is considered a neighborhood of the Moghamo-based village of Ashong. A comparative analysis by Bolima Flora in which she employed an apparent cognate count of the Njen and Moghamo wordlists revealed about 47% similarity between the two languages.

Group interviewees claimed that about 75% of Njen speakers are able to speak and understand Moghamo, but that Moghamo speakers are not able to speak Njen. Njen people learn to understand and speak Moghamo since Moghamo speakers are the people they interact with most often, especially at the Guzang market and the local market at Baremb (Banteng?). Children start picking up the Moghamo language from the age of six years.

Another language close to Njen is *Bamumbu*, which is listed in both *ALCAM* and *Ethnologue* as a dialect of *Mundani* (ALCAM code 867). Bolima Flora did an apparent cognate count of 83 words from Njen and Mundani and found there to be 34.7% similarity between them. Since the Mundani and Njen language groups border one another, contact and intermarriage are common. Group interview results revealed that since the languages are somewhat related, depending on their individual degree of contact some Njen speakers learn Mundani, even starting as young as the age of eight.

Group interviewees in Njen also reported that beginning as young as age eight, some Njen speakers learn other adjacent languages. They referred to these as: *Ikwinimbu*, *Beti*, and *Bembut*. These three languages are, they reported, linguistically very close to each other, but are less near to Njen. We were unable to identify these as names or alternate names of languages or dialects listed in *Ethnologue* or *ALCAM*. Nor could we find villages by these names on any map.

*Benyi* (or *Pinyin* in *ALCAM* [916] and *Ethnologue*) is another language geographically close to Njen but the group interview revealed that only a small number of Njen speakers understand and/or can speak this language.

Of all languages linguistically and/or geographically close to Njen, the Moghamo dialect of *Meta'* is most easily understood and *Benyi* (*Pinyin*) is the one which they have the most difficulty understanding.

##### 3.2.2 Language of Wider Communication (LWC)—Pidgin English

*Cameroonian Pidgin English* (hereafter referred to as *Pidgin*) is the LWC of the North West Province, and *Standard English* is the language of education. In Njen, the youth are the most proficient speakers of *Pidgin*, and boys (who go to school more than girls) are the most proficient in *Standard English*.

### 3.3 Vitality and Viability

In this section, we will see how mother-tongue speakers of Njen view the extent to which their language is used in daily life.

In Njen, the mother tongue is used at home and during conversations with friends, as well as when working on the farms.

In both the local and larger markets, Pidgin and Moghamo are used due to the mixed populations that congregate at these locations.

At the AID Post in Njen, Pidgin is the preferred language of communication.

Pidgin is used for local public announcements and regional council meetings, while the mother tongue is used at local council meetings and during traditional religious ceremonies. Pidgin can be used in these latter occasions if there are strangers present.

At school, the headmaster and another teacher reported that the only language spoken by the children in school is English; the children use English in class even in the absence of the teacher and also during recess when talking with fellow schoolmates. (Three children interviewed reported that they use English in class when the teacher is around but the mother tongue when he is not.) They also use the mother tongue during recess when talking with schoolmates of the same language group but use Pidgin when talking with fellow students who are from another language group.

The research team noticed a bold warning on the wall of the classroom, which read: NO VERNACULAR. NO PIDGIN. School authorities discourage the use of any other language but English on the school premises.

In Njen, most children attend the Government Primary School (which is the only school in the area). More boys attend school than do girls.

The headmaster of the Government Primary School at Njen said he did not think that it would be in the children's best interest to learn to read and write Njen. The instructors from the school who were interviewed likewise were not positive about the possibility of introducing the mother tongue as a language of instruction. They explained that their approach to teaching the children is to use English until the children eventually understand, so they don't use the mother tongue to clarify concepts for the students.

Njen has six religious denominations or groups. These include: Bahai, Baptist, Full Gospel, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Apostolic. There was no church leader from any of these churches available for an interview but the group interview of Christians from the various churches revealed that English<sup>2</sup> is the dominant language. Prayers and songs are in both English and Njen, while sermons are in English only. Bible studies are in English with interpretation into Njen. Prayer meetings are conducted in English only.

### 3.4 Language Attitudes

#### 3.4.1 *Toward the Mother Tongue*

Those interviewed had a positive attitude towards their language. They stated that the youth do not speak another language more than their mother tongue and also do not mix Pidgin or any other language with their mother tongue while conversing. The youth feel free and happy using their mother tongue. Group interview responses revealed that, if given the opportunity, they would prefer to learn to read and write their mother tongue first. The youth use English in school but change to the mother tongue when outside of school.

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<sup>2</sup>Interview respondents referred only to English being used, but they sometimes use the term "English" to refer to Pidgin English.

The mother tongue is used much more than Pidgin. Those interviewed stated that they are not offended if their children speak Pidgin at home but that they will not be happy if they do so at school.

#### ***3.4.2 Standardisation Efforts***

The sub-divisional officer at Batibo and the group interviewees at Njen both reported to the research team that a teacher in Bamenda, is interested in developing Njen and has been writing some things in the language. The team did not see this teacher to find out what he was writing. The Njen people declared their willingness to assist and support the development of their language in any way they could.

#### ***3.4.3 Attitudes toward Other Languages***

Njen speakers have a positive attitude towards the two neighbouring languages of Moghamo and Mundani. When asked to list the languages, in order of preference, which they would choose to read and write, they listed first their mother tongue, followed by Moghamo and then Mundani. The reasons they gave for their interest in Moghamo were “because they are neighbours” and “to have a common written language”. For Mundani, they said “because they are neighbours” and “to make communication easy”. As we will see in the next section, these two language groups happen to be the ones with whom the Njen people prefer to intermarry.

#### ***3.4.4 Migration and Inter-marriage***

As mentioned in section 3.2, most of the children of Njen attend primary school. Those who are financially capable then move to either Batibo, Bali, or Wabuni for secondary education. Others go to the South West Province in search of jobs at the CDC Plantation, while the majority stay in the village to work on the farms.

Njen speakers prefer to intermarry with Ashong (Moghamo-speaking) and Bamumbu (Mundani-speaking) people, but there are no marriage restrictions. They are free to marry whomever they like, as long as the partners come from different families.

Strangers, especially from Bamumbu and Kom, come to Njen, some to settle (the soil is quite fertile) and some just to visit or receive native treatments. Njen residents use Pidgin in communicating with these strangers, but strangers who stay long eventually pick up the Njen language.

#### ***3.4.5 Language Shift***

In Njen, there is no large exodus of youth to larger cities. Only the privileged are able to move away from the village. The fact that the youth feel happy about their mother tongue and use it more than any other language, never mixing the language with another language during conversation, indicates that language shift is not yet occurring. Although the adults do not see anything wrong with their children using Pidgin at home, the youth nevertheless do not use Pidgin as often as they use their mother tongue. Although most young people go to primary school and learn English and also pick up Pidgin, the mother tongue is still very much preferred. There is thus the belief that the language will continue to be spoken for a long time.

### **3.5 Socioeconomic Factors**

According to Watters (1990:6.7.1), there are three factors in particular that affect the development of language programmes: the homogeneity of the linguistic community, their openness to change and development, and the presence of a middle-aged leadership at the local level. We follow with a discussion of these three factors in the context of the Njen language community.

In general, the Njen community meets the criteria outlined by Watters as predictive of successful participation in a language development project.

#### ***3.5.1 Social Cohesion***

As observed in section 1.2, Njen is spoken only in the village of Njen. Although the village has several sectors, they interact with each other all year round in all activities. People travel by foot to get anywhere

in the village. There is thus relatively easy access between the various sectors with none cut off from any of the others even during rainy seasons.

### ***3.5.2 Attitudes toward Change and Development***

Those interviewed in Njen indicated their willingness to learn to read and write their mother tongue. However, there is no language development committee in place.

There is a development committee at Njen known as Njen Development Association (N.D.A.) which has carried out development projects in the village, including both water and school projects. Even though the only school found in Njen is a government school, the buildings were constructed by N.D.A. Another project, still ongoing, is the construction of a road. The local people find it difficult to transport their products to the big markets due to the lack of motorable roads. Their soil is very fertile, and they grow foodstuffs such as plantains, cocoyams, bananas, palm oil, coffee, cocoa, etc. So far, they carry these on their heads to the big markets. The road is thus very important to them so that they can export more to the various markets and thus get more revenue to help them in other development projects.

### ***3.5.3 Village-based Leadership***

Interviewees in Njen reported that they have a chief (who was present during the interview) and seven “kingmakers.” There is no age restriction in succession of either the chief or a kingmaker. The firstborn son is usually the one to succeed the father as a chief or a kingmaker. The policy of inheritance is thus very clear in the village. There is, therefore, no dispute as to who inherits from the father when he dies, for everyone knows that it is the firstborn son, even if he is only five years old. The present chief of Njen is about 60 years old (or younger), and the kingmakers are all younger than he. The chief and the kingmakers all live in the village.

## **4. SIL/CABTAL/NACALCO Activities and Plans**

Aside from this language survey, SIL workers have had no previous contact with this language group. Neither CABTAL nor NACALCO has plans to work on the Njen language.

## **5. Conclusions and Recommendations**

In summary, the Njen language appears to be vital and there is little indication that language shift is occurring. The mother tongue is the dominant language in the lives of the people. The youth use it more than any other language and do not mix it with any other language during conversations. Furthermore, there is a low degree of rural exodus. The speakers of Njen form a distinct linguistic unit.

The following factors point to the potential success of a language development programme in this language:

- There is apparently someone who is interested in working on the language and is already doing some writing in the language.
- The village has a functioning development committee.
- The language is vital. Newcomers coming to live in the village eventually learn it.

On the other hand, other factors suggest that the need for a literacy development programme in Njen is not immediate:

- The total population of speakers of the language, including those who now live outside of the village, is less than 2,000. It is a one-village language, and the small number of speakers may not be able to support a literacy development programme.
- Even though the lexical similarity between Njen and Moghamo is only approximately 47% (thus clearly proving that they are two different languages), interviewees reported that about 75% of Njen speakers speak Moghamo fluently, with children picking up the language by the age of six. This would seem to indicate that the people of Njen might easily learn to read literature in Moghamo. They even expressed that they would like to learn to read and write Moghamo, although this was their second choice after their own mother tongue.

The degree and extent of bilingualism on the part of Njen speakers in Moghamo and Meta' should be measured. At this point no practical method exists for precisely measuring the degree of bilingualism in a language not yet standardised. The RTT, however, can be used as a pilot test of the bilingual ability in a community (Blair 1990:74). Comprehension of recorded texts in both dialects of Meta' (Moghamo and the reference dialect) should be measured. If scores are uniformly high (85% or higher), this would indicate the potential presence of a bilingual ability high enough and widespread enough that Njen speakers could benefit from literature in Meta'. If RTT scores are low, particularly in the reference dialect of Meta', the Njen could not benefit from literature in Meta'.

## Appendix A

### ALCAM Map of Njen between Moghamo and Pinyin (Breton and Fohitung 1991:114 modified)



## Appendix B: ALCAM Wordlist

L1: Language name: Njen

Language associates: Madam M./Mr. T.

Age: 35/50

Native village: Njen

Father's group: Njen

Mother's group: Njen

Level of education: class seven

Location: Government Primary School Njen

Date: 3/2/01

	English	French	Njen
1	mouth	bouche	itʃû
2	eye	œil	ɪyí
3	head	tête	ətú
4	hair (on head)	cheveux	nyðm ətú
5	tooth	dent	ɪsɔŋ
6	tongue	langue	ɪlɪní
7	nose	nez	ɪdʒí
8	ear	oreille	ətɔk
9a	neck	cou	əmî
9b	back of neck (nape)	nuque	ɪkót
9c	throat	gorge	ɪŋkɪ
10	breast	sein	ɪbín
11	arm/hand	bras/main	ɪbók
12a	claw	griffe	f'ɪwúwí
12b	nail	ongle	f'ɪwúwí
13a	leg	jambe	ifin
13b	foot	pied	əwú
14	buttock	fesse	ɪntá ntwòn
15	belly	ventre	ábəm

<b>16</b>	navel	nombril	átòŋ
<b>17</b>	intestines/insides	intestins/boyaux	ìtók
<b>18</b>	blood	sang	àlyám
<b>19</b>	urine	urine	mĩtsín
<b>20</b>	bone	os	àkwón
<b>21</b>	skin	peau	ìnyít
<b>22</b>	wing	aile	ìbá
<b>23</b>	feather	plume	ìgwírì
<b>24</b>	horn	corne	ndóŋ
<b>25</b>	tail	queue	ìkwón
<b>26</b>	human being	être humain	wót
<b>27</b>	man	homme	mbēn
<b>28</b>	woman	femme	wòwék
<b>29</b>	husband	mari	lwóm
<b>30</b>	child	enfant	wyéŋ
<b>31</b>	name	nom	ìléŋ
<b>32</b>	sky	ciel	ìgút
<b>33</b>	night	nuit	ndzòm
<b>34</b>	moon	lune	ìŋwú
<b>35</b>	sun	soleil	ŋàm
<b>36</b>	wind	vent	àfwàt
<b>37</b>	cloud	nuage	mpàʔ
<b>38</b>	dew	rosée	àmwāʔ
<b>39</b>	rain	pluie	mbèŋ
<b>40</b>	ground	terre	ìtsáʔ
<b>41</b>	sand	sable	íísáŋ
<b>42</b>	path	chemin	ìlwóm
<b>43</b>	water	eau	milóp
<b>44</b>	stream (river)	cours d'eau	ágì
<b>45</b>	house	maison	lyó
<b>46</b>	fire	feu	ìwít
<b>47</b>	firewood	bois a brûler	ìwén
<b>48</b>	smoke	fumée	ndíʔ
<b>49</b>	ash	cendre	mót
<b>50</b>	knife	couteau	ámběk
<b>51</b>	rope	corde	ìlíʔ
<b>52</b>	spear	lance, sagaie	ìsáŋ
<b>53</b>	war (fight)	guerre (combat)	ìbét
<b>54a</b>	animal	animal	áŋàm
<b>54b</b>	meat	viande	ŋàm
<b>55</b>	dog	chien	ábū
<b>56</b>	elephant	éléphant	ìʃōŋ
<b>57</b>	goat	chèvre	gwí

<b>58</b>	bird	oiseau	ánìn
<b>59</b>	tortoise	tortue	kíkòṅ
<b>60</b>	snake	serpent	àyáàbòṅ
<b>61</b>	fish	poisson	ḡú
<b>62</b>	(head) louse	pou (de tete)	kàt
<b>63</b>	egg	œuf	ìbwóm
<b>64</b>	tree	arbre	àzít
<b>65</b>	bark	écorce	gòzít
<b>66</b>	leaf	feuille	ìfú?
<b>67</b>	root	racine	ìyáṅ
<b>68</b>	salt	sel	ágbwāṅ
<b>69</b>	fat	graisse	mífwóm
<b>70a</b>	hunger (general)	faim (général)	ndzèk
<b>70b</b>	hunger (for meat)	faim (de viande)	ndzèkálìṅṅm
<b>71</b>	iron (the metal)	fer (le métal)	àtíní
<b>72</b>	one	un	mò?
<b>73</b>	two	deux	byá
<b>74</b>	three	trois	tát
<b>75</b>	four	quatre	kwèk
<b>76</b>	five	cinq	těyn
<b>77</b>	six	six	ntò
<b>78</b>	seven	sept	sāmbiyá
<b>79</b>	eight	huit	fǎ
<b>80</b>	nine	neuf	bùó
<b>81</b>	ten	dix	íyóm
<b>82</b>	come	venir	yíyé
<b>83</b>	send (someone)	envoyer	twóm
<b>84</b>	walk	marcher	íyíní
<b>85</b>	fall	tomber	ìkpání
<b>86</b>	leave	partir	dòk
<b>87</b>	fly	voler (oiseau)	bárá
<b>88</b>	pour	verser	tʃímíní
<b>89</b>	strike	frapper	bó?
<b>90</b>	bite	mordre	lwóm
<b>91</b>	wash (transitive)	laver (transitif)	sō
<b>92</b>	split (wood)	fendre	sóní
<b>93</b>	give	donner	ná?á
<b>94</b>	steal	voler (derober)	tsóṅ
<b>95</b>	squeeze	presser	ménéé
<b>96</b>	cultivate	cultiver	íííí
<b>97</b>	bury (transitive)	enterrer (transitif)	ítók
<b>98</b>	burn (transitive)	brûler (transitif)	ítóní
<b>99</b>	eat	manger	ídzì

<b>100</b>	drink	boire	ínók
<b>101</b>	vomit	vomir	mitó
<b>102</b>	suck	sucer	ḡój
<b>103</b>	spit (saliva)	cracher (salive)	mát
<b>104</b>	blow (on)	souffler (sur)	f̂
<b>105</b>	swell	enfler	mót
<b>106</b>	give birth	engendrer	íbí
<b>107</b>	die	mourir	kú
<b>108</b>	kill	tuer	zétí
<b>109</b>	push	pousser	téní
<b>110</b>	pull	tirer	íjú
<b>111</b>	sing	chanter	íkwóní
<b>112</b>	play (a game)	jouer (un jeu)	íyíndo
<b>113</b>	be afraid	avoir peur	íbó
<b>114</b>	want	vouloir	íkí
<b>115</b>	say	dire	ísók
<b>116</b>	see	voir	zín
<b>117</b>	show	montrer	tê
<b>118</b>	hear	entendre	zú
<b>119</b>	know	savoir/connaître	íkárí
<b>120</b>	count	compter	ípéní

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