

PROCEEDINGS OF THE ROUND TABLE  
ON  
ASSURING THE FEASIBILITY OF STANDARDIZATION  
WITHIN DIALECT CHAINS

NOORDWIJKERHOUT, THE NETHERLANDS

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## foreword

Of necessity, communication involves standardization. The sender and receiver adjust to each other's idiolect or dialect or language. For written communication to be used successfully, it is desirable for the sake of the people involved that a single form be used by as large a number of communities and dialects as possible. It is desirable because increasing the number of people who can communicate with each other increases the pool of potential authors and readers. Having more audience motivates the authors to write. Having more to read motivates literacy. Governments request maximum standardization in language planning. It reduces the cost to government and for education thus allowing them to accomplish what otherwise they find difficult or impossible. Knowing your neighbors better should also lower tension and promote unity.

Yet, the circle must not be drawn too large. If people cannot learn to understand the standard form easily and quickly, literacy will fail just as surely as it will if the circle is drawn too small. The chosen standard must be both understandable and desired by the people involved. Thus the task is to discover the optimum speech form to serve the maximum feasible number of dialects or languages; it involves both linguistic and non-linguistic factors.

In the past, boundary drawing has usually been part of dialect intelligibility analysis, modified subsequently by the results of language attitude evaluation. Political and social pressures in many places, however, indicate the need for efforts toward standardization over a broader scope of dialects and languages than has been assumed from intelligibility tests. Over time the written form for major languages such as English and German has adequately served dialects with wide differences. We need to find ways to facilitate and promote that in other language continua where the circumstances (political, social, motivational) make it appropriate. There is strong interest in, indeed insistence on, standardization in many countries of Africa. We assume this will include initial literacy and preparation of some literature in a greater number of dialects/languages coordinated with definite promotion and instruction toward a smaller number of standards.

To put it differently, standardization may be possible between speech varieties that are not comprehensible on first meeting, but which with adequate exposure may become comprehensible. One can talk of a two-day or of a three-week difference, for example, referring to the length of time living with the new variety before understanding it. People with widely differentiated speech may be able to agree on a standard written form while retaining differences in spoken form and pronunciation.

Although a large body of literature exists on language planning on a

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national or large regional level, not much has been written for the local level. This round table conference was sponsored by SIL and the J. Howard Pew Freedom Trust in September 1988 to begin correcting that situation. It is anticipated that more will be developed on this subject in the future.

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## preface

The idea that the Summer Institute of Linguistics should proactively study the possibilities of wider dialect standardization is an idea that crystalized with Frank Robbins after talking with Mark Karan. Mark outlined the situation in southern Benin with the many Gbe dialects, the problems this presents to the Benin government, and the potential advantages that would accrue if the way to unite these many speech varieties could be found. Frank decided SIL should find ways to put its best efforts into wider standardization and asked me to organize the task.

Language planning at the national and regional level has been studied extensively. But almost nothing exists in the literature describing standardization on the local level. It was thought that a major contribution would be made if projects that SIL embarked upon should be well documented so that whether successful or not, others could learn from the experience.

The first phase of any such project is background research, next, language survey assessment, then, strategy planning. A proposal was written for this beginning phase which set objectives, outlined a plan of action, and estimated costs. Supplemental funding was requested and granted from the J. Howard Pew Freedom Trust. Eight dialect groups from different parts of Africa where SIL was working were selected and sociolinguists, both guests and members of SIL, were invited to attend a round table to discuss the issues and help each other with ideas and information. Travel expenses for the Round Table were provided by the Trust.

Since this was the first meeting in this effort, it was primarily the invited guests who had prepared material to present. For most participants, there was interaction on a more informal basis. Although it was not planned beforehand, the quality of the prepared presentations by our guests was such that it was felt that others would benefit if a proceedings were prepared for general distribution. A second round table meeting is planned for May 1989.

The chart which follows shows the eight African dialect clusters that were chosen for special study and development. The persons shown as SIL leaders were chosen by the SIL administrators of the countries involved and were each participants in the Round Table. They are Ole Bjorn Kristensen, Rene Vallette, Andrew Ring, Robert Carlson, Richard Watson, Keith Beavon and Gordon Williams. Other participants were Frank Robbins, Ethel Robbins, Elizabeth Johnson, Constance Kutsch Lojenga, Mark Karan, Deborah Hatfield, Kate Ring, and Ted Bergman in addition to the authors of the articles in this volume listed later.

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THE EIGHT AFRICAN DIALECT CLUSTERS REPRESENTED AT THE ROUND TABLE ON DIALECT STANDARDIZATION, 1988

	TEXE	FULFULDE	MOLE	SENUFO	MORU-MA'DI	MEKAA	GBE	MANDE, N.
COUNTRIES	Congo, (Gabon, Zaire)	Senegal, Benin, Mauritania, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Burkina, Cote d'Ivoire, Togo, Liberia, Ghana, Nigeria, Niger, Sudan, Cameroon, Chad, Cen. Afr. Rep.	Ghana	Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Zaire, Ghana, Mali	Sudan, Zaire, Uganda	Cameroon, (Eq. Guinea, C. A. R., Congo)	Benin (Togo, Nigeria)	Mali, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Gambia, Mauritania, Liberia, Sierra Leone
LGS. MAX/MIN	7 / 4	10 / 7	5 / 2	16 / 7	10 / 6	16 / 8	17 / 1-3	? 25 / 15
SIL LEADER entity	Kristensen Cen Af Gr	Vallette BF/Niger	Ring Ghana	Carlson CI/Mali	Hatson Sudan	Beavon Cam/Chad	-- Togo/Benin	Williams Senegal/G/G-8
POPULATION	400,000	12,000,000	500,000	1,500,000	900,000	? 300,000	? 1,500,000	? 10,000,000+
LITERACY	? <50%	? <5%	5 - 10%	<25% in CI <5% BF & Mali	? 10 - 30%	5 - 25%	15% +/-	?
TRANSLATIONS finished	Yaka/Laali	Adomawa (Cam.)	Mbele	3 NT	Lugbara,	none	Gen,	Bambara
in-progress	Kukuya	Parakou (Ben.)	Lauana	8	Avokaya, Ma'di	Koozias Mekaa Bujiye	Gun, Fon	Dyula (SIL) Mandinka (NTM) Xassonke (Mor/F) Mandinka (NEC) Kono (LBT) Sontinke, plus ?



## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Prof. Dr. Ursula Wiessmann, who is the principal technical consultant to this project, gave the keynote address. Her paper concerns the Kaingang people with whom she worked in Brazil where standardization was successful. Not only does it provide us with a scientific case study, but it also provides inspiration that standardization, at least in the circumstance cited, is possible. She saw people with varying speech varieties come together to use a common literature who would not have done so at all based on the usual linguistic differences criteria.

Dr. Etienne Sadembouo proposes two procedures: how to combine community involvement and sociolinguistic expertise through the use of a language committee, and how to choose the best speech form out of a dialect complex for written standardization. He bases these recommendations on his very extensive review of each of the language programs in his country, Cameroon, where he has drawn from their experience in failures and successes. The typology and weighting procedure recommended for decision making was tried out by the participants of the Round Table who felt that it works very well. If it proves to be acceptable it provides the missing link between SIL's *Sociolinguistic Profile*, which is a checklist of factors important to decision making, and the decisions themselves. Dr. Sadembouo finds that even in the early stage of language survey assessment, the communities affected should participate in the planning.

Prof. Dr. H. B. C. Capo's paper concerns orthographic principles and ideas for uniting the huge number of Gbe dialects--22 spoken in southern Benin, 16 in Togo, 18 in Ghana, and 7 in Nigeria. Dr. Capo thinks that all speakers could learn to read the Gen variety with just a little effort and write the way they speak once a unified orthography could be agreed upon. He himself speaks four of the dialects belonging to three of the five clusters within the Gbe network.

Mr. Leonce Bouka has written a paper for us describing the Teke dialects in Congo and Gabon. His paper was translated for us from the French by Mr. Ole Bjorn Kristensen. Both these men have begun work on this dialect chain which has four main divisions and other subdivisions. Although he is Congolese he is not a native Teke speaker. His doctoral studies in Brussels are concerning the whole Teke continuum.

Dr. Richard Watson coordinates three survey teams conducting the first phase of research on the Moro-Ms'di dialect complex. One team works among the people living in Sudan, another works in Zaire and the third is in Uganda. His paper has to do with the orthography approach

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necessary to standardize in the different nations with their differing literacy and political expectations.

Dr. Musimbi Kanyoro offers balance out of her knowledge of the Luiya, cautioning against combining too many dialects without adequate basis for doing so or without adequate provision of necessary concomitants. Dr. Kanyoro's native tongue is one of the 17 varieties of Luyia. Her grandfather was one of the principals involved when the Bible was produced in a "standard" Luyia. And, she has studied the language professionally. When the Scriptures were first published, they were received and bought with great enthusiasm. But despite great hope they have not been used widely at all. Verb tenses can change to mean opposite tenses in certain dialects, word meanings change drastically, only five of seven contrasting vowels are written, tone is not marked at all. People do not identify with it as their language. At the time when the "union translation" came out, the people were feeling a need for unity against other, larger groups which threatened them. Later when the threat was removed, there was more felt need for emphasizing individuality. As Dr. Kanyoro analyses the situation, several things must be recognized: Bible translation alone is not sufficient, other written literature must be produced as well; the orthography decided upon must be backed by the government and taught in the public schools; the churches, too, must support the Union translation; the mood of the people needs to be positive toward wanting to become unified.