

MINISTRY OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL RESEARCH

GEMZEK SURVEY REPORT

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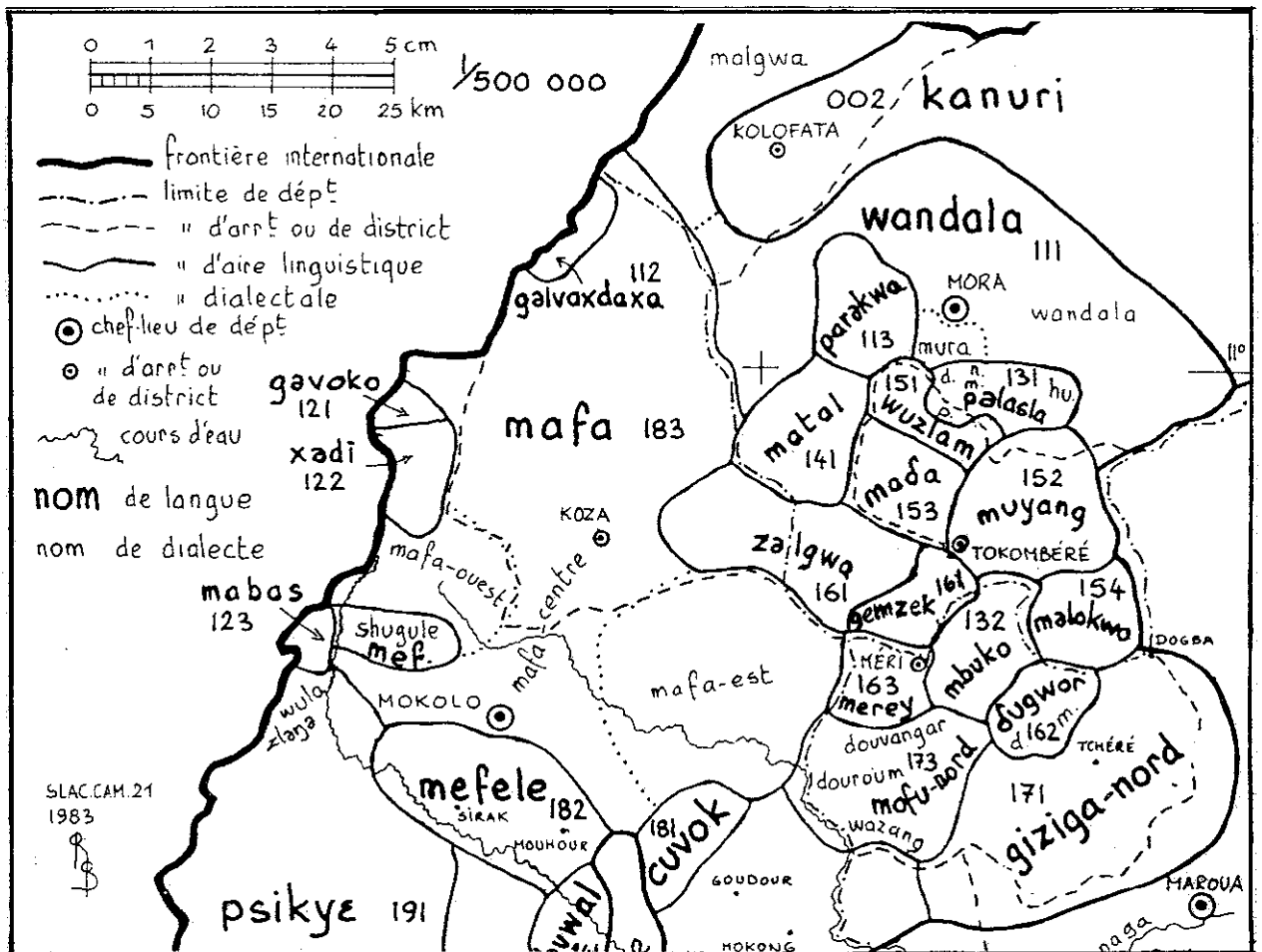
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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Gemzek is a speech form found in the Far North Province of Cameroon, in the Tokombéré Subdivision of the Mayo-Sava Division. It is reportedly spoken in sixteen villages spread along the road and in the mountains between Méri and Tokombéré, the two major towns in the area. According to figures from the 1987 census obtained at the sub-prefecture in Tokombéré there are over 8,000 speakers of this language.

Gemzek is a Chadic language classified by the Linguistic Atlas of Cameroon (ALCAM; Dieu 1983) in the Mafa Group. ALCAM lists Gemzek as a dialect of Zulgwa, number 161, while the Ethnologue (Grimes 1988a:174) classifies it as a distinct language and identifies it with the three letter code GND. Neighboring speech forms include Zulgwa, Merrey, Mbuko, Muyang, and Mada, all belonging also to the Mafa group.



Map of the Gemzek and surrounding areas adapted (with modifications) from ALCAM, p. 389

1.2 The Survey

The Gemzek rapid appraisal survey was conducted by SIL members Dave and Karen Bradley along with Caroline Grant. The field research was carried out on the 7th and 8th of May, 1992.

1.3 Purpose of the Survey

Gemzek is listed in the Bible Translation Needs Bulletin 1 (Grimes 1988b:53) as a "possible translation need". This is to say that little or nothing was known about the need of the Gemzek people for local-language Scriptures. The purpose of this survey was to revise this status to either "probable translation need" or "unlikely translation need" by means of a rapid appraisal of the sociolinguistic situation in the Gemzek area. More broadly, the purpose was to evaluate the need for codification (development of a standard written form) and for Bible translation in Gemzek.

2 PROCEDURES

Rapid appraisal surveys attempt to gain a general overview of the sociolinguistic situation of a particular language area, in view of the need for codification of the local language. The procedures were designed to obtain the appropriate information in a short time (usually less than one week) using informal and group interviews, as well as individual questionnaires.

This report is based on group interviews, which included church leaders, in two of the Gemzek villages, Sirem and Girziga, as well as on several informal interviews and seven individual questionnaires. Since the rains had just begun the previous night, almost everyone was out planting their crops and it was very difficult to find individuals to respond to the questionnaire. Hence the sample is by no means representative, but it does give a broader base of information from which to make observations.

The survey team pursued the research with the following three aspects of the sociolinguistic situation in mind:

- (a) dialect situation - the distribution and comprehension of related speech forms, as well as the corresponding attitudes,
- (b) bilingualism - the extent of proficiency in Fulfulde, French and/or any other languages of wider communication (LWCs) used in the area, as well as the corresponding attitudes, and
- (c) viability - the prospect of a successful language development project in the local language as revealed by attitudes toward the mother tongue and by reported patterns of language use.

A wordlist of about 120 items was also elicited in Gemzek for lexical similarity comparison with related speech forms. Wordlists for the others were already available from previous research.

3 RESULTS AND EVALUATION

3.1 Dialect Situation

There is evidently very little variation in the way Gemzek is spoken. In only one of the 16 villages where it is spoken as mother tongue is the speech said to be a little different from that of the other villages. These differences reportedly present no difficulties in terms of intercomprehension for Gemzek speakers from the different villages.

According to ALCAM the most closely related speech forms to Gemzek would be Zulgwa (161), Merey (162), and Dugwor (163). Lexical similarity percentages, computed using Lexistat, between Gemzek and these closely related languages are not strikingly high. The results are as follows:

Zulgwa			
697	GEMZEK		
564	604	Merey	
487	529	663	Dugwor

Similarity percentages for Gemzek and closely related languages (figures from Lexistat)

Gemzek and Zulgwa appear to be the most closely related of these four, at least lexically. Also, Ethnologue states that the Gemzek are bilingual in Zulgwa, so the survey team paid special attention to the question of intercomprehension with Zulgwa.

Gemzek does appear to be fairly closely related to Zulgwa, which is the neighboring speech form to the west and north. Evidently, however, comprehension between these two speech forms is dependent on a certain degree of language learning, at least for the Gemzek. It was generally stated that a Gemzek child between the ages of about 8 and 12 years old, depending on the amount of contact s/he has had with Zulgwa speakers, would be able to understand Zulgwa. However, one 15 year old interviewee said he did not understand Zulgwa, this probably due to the fact that he had reportedly never visited a Zulgwa village and most of his non-Gemzek acquaintances (ie. school, mother's relatives, etc.) are evidently Merey speakers from the south and east. At any rate, the normal pattern is reportedly for Gemzek speakers to be able to understand Zulgwa after a certain age.

In spite of the linguistic similarity, the Gemzek evidently feel no particular ethnic unity with the Zulgwa and they consider their languages to be different from each other. However, possibly due to the amount of contact with each other, including intermarriage, the Gemzek seem to be open to learning to read in Zulgwa. The Zulgwa New Testament is reportedly already being used in several Gemzek churches.

3.2 Bilingualism

The use of Fulfulde is apparently fairly widespread. It is used in the larger markets and with people from outside the Gemzek area when there is no other language in common. It is also used in church services for singing, preaching, and Scripture reading, but the general practice is to interpret into Gemzek. This might indicate that the church leaders do not consider comprehension of Fulfulde by the general Gemzek population to be adequate.

It is reported that French is very seldom used, especially among adults. However, up to 80% of the children are said to go to school so this may change to some degree in the future. It is difficult to predict what effect this may have on the future pattern of French use in the culture.

Other neighboring languages such as Merey and Mbuko are apparently learned and used only by those who have frequent or extended contact with speakers of these languages. In these cases, bilingualism does not seem to be generalized throughout the Gemzek population.

3.3 Viability

Gemzek is reportedly used quite vigorously in the home, church, local dispensaries, local markets, and in normal village interactions. Young children (pre-school age) are said to use Gemzek exclusively. It seems that none of the neighboring languages are encroaching upon the use of Gemzek in these domains, with the exception of Fulfulde in church as mentioned above.

Language use patterns in church are a crucial factor. Evangelists are often from outside the Gemzek area and so Fulfulde is the most commonly used language in church services for Scripture reading and preaching. Apparently there are no church songs in the local language so all the singing is also in Fulfulde. In Sirem village, the Bible reading and preaching are reportedly interpreted into Gemzek and the announcements are given in Gemzek. They expressed some hesitation about using the Zulgwa New Testament for Scripture reading in church because they were afraid that they (as non-Zulgwa speakers) would not be able to read the Zulgwa well enough orally for the congregation to understand well. Evidently they were not as much concerned about the general comprehension of Zulgwa as they were about their own ability to read Zulgwa orally. This problem might be alleviated with a Zulgwa literacy program specifically for Gemzek speakers.

In Girziga village, a new evangelist who is a Zulgwa mother tongue speaker had recently begun working at the church. He reported that when there were outsiders (i.e. non-Gemzek speakers such as the school teachers) present at church, he would preach in Fulfulde for their benefit and someone would then interpret into Gemzek. However, when there were only Gemzek present he would preach in Zulgwa (his mother tongue) and there would be no interpretation into Gemzek. They also sometimes read from the Zulgwa New Testament, but more often they use the Fulfulde Bible for the Scripture reading. The explanation given for this was that it would be considered "impolite" to read in Zulgwa because few people own a Zulgwa New Testament. Evidently, it is much more common for people to own a Fulfulde Bible than a Zulgwa New Testament (which was published in 1988 and has only been available within the last few years). As with preaching, Fulfulde Scripture reading is followed by interpretation into Gemzek but the Zulgwa Scriptures are not interpreted. Evidently the church leaders feel that not all the people understand Fulfulde well enough and so provide interpretation, but that Zulgwa is adequately understood and hence no interpretation is necessary.

The Gemzek seem to be quite open to development but have evidently not yet made any efforts in the area of language development, nor is there any apparent interest in such a project at the present time. This does not seem to be a felt need for the people.

4 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This survey confirmed that there is a unified and distinct speech form called Gemzek, spoken by over 8,000 people in 16 villages. There is apparently very little variation and no difficulty of intercomprehension between Gemzek speakers.

Lexically, it appears to be fairly closely related to Zulgwa. The Gemzek people recognize this linguistic proximity and evidently have no difficulty understanding Zulgwa, given a certain amount of contact with Zulgwa speakers which they normally acquire before the age of about 12 years. However, they don't seem to feel any particular ethnic kinship with the Zulgwa and they each perceive their languages to be different from the other.

Fulfulde is used in the larger markets, with people from outside the area, and in church. It seems to serve a strictly utilitarian function as an LWC and is evidently not considered to be adequate in the realm of church language use.

French is not used very much at all, especially among the adult population. Although a large proportion of the children reportedly go to school, the use of French has apparently not penetrated very deeply into the Gemzek population.

The Gemzek language appears to be vital and there are no indications that its use will diminish at all in the near future. The Gemzek people appear to maintain vigorous use of the mother tongue in the home and within the village context as well as in the church.

From the standpoint of comprehension, it seems that the Gemzek would be adequately served by the Zulgwa Scriptures. There seems to be a positive attitude towards reading Zulgwa, and apparently several Gemzek churches are already using the Zulgwa New Testament in their services. However, this would probably require a concerted effort in Zulgwa literacy for the Gemzek.

Given the apparent lack of interest among the Gemzek for developing their own language, it seems questionable whether such a project in Gemzek would be successful. Also, considering the development of Zulgwa and the existence of the Zulgwa New Testament, the present situation does not seem to justify the development of Gemzek, and it seems reasonable to recommend that the Bible translation need status of Gemzek be revised to "unlikely translation need".

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