

MINISTRY OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL RESEARCH

A RAPID APPRAISAL SURVEY OF NGOMBA (NDA'A)
[BAMBOUTOS DIVISION, WEST PROVINCE]

Caroline A. Grant

October 1993

Société Internationale de Linguistique
B.P. 1299, Yaoundé,
Republic of Cameroon.

A RAPID-APPRAISAL SURVEY OF NGOMBA (NDA'A)

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

This report describes a rapid-appraisal survey of the Ngomba language, carried out from 10-15 May 1993 by Dr Etienne Sadembouo of the University of Yaoundé I, and by Alan Starr and Caroline Grant of the Société Internationale de Linguistique (SIL).

The Ngomba language is spoken in the Mbouda Subdivision, Bamboutos Division, West Province of Cameroon. Population figures available for speakers of this language varied with the source. For example, Ethnologue (Grimes 1992) gives a population of 20,000, whereas the *Atlas linguistique du Cameroun* (ALCAM; Dieu and Renaud 1983) simply estimates the number of Ngomba speakers as more than 10,000.

ALCAM gives the following linguistic classification for Ngomba: Niger-Kordofanian, Benoue-Congo, Bantoid, Bantou, Grassfield, Eastern Grassfield, Central Bamileke. ALCAM also lists three dialects: Bamete, Bemendjinda, and Bamesso. The ALCAM classification code for this language is 940.

The classification in Ethnologue is as follows: Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Bantoid, Southern, Broad Bantu, Wide Grassfields, Narrow Grassfields, Mbam-Nkam, Bamileke. Ethnologue also lists the same three dialects that ALCAM does. The Ethnologue code for this language is NAO.

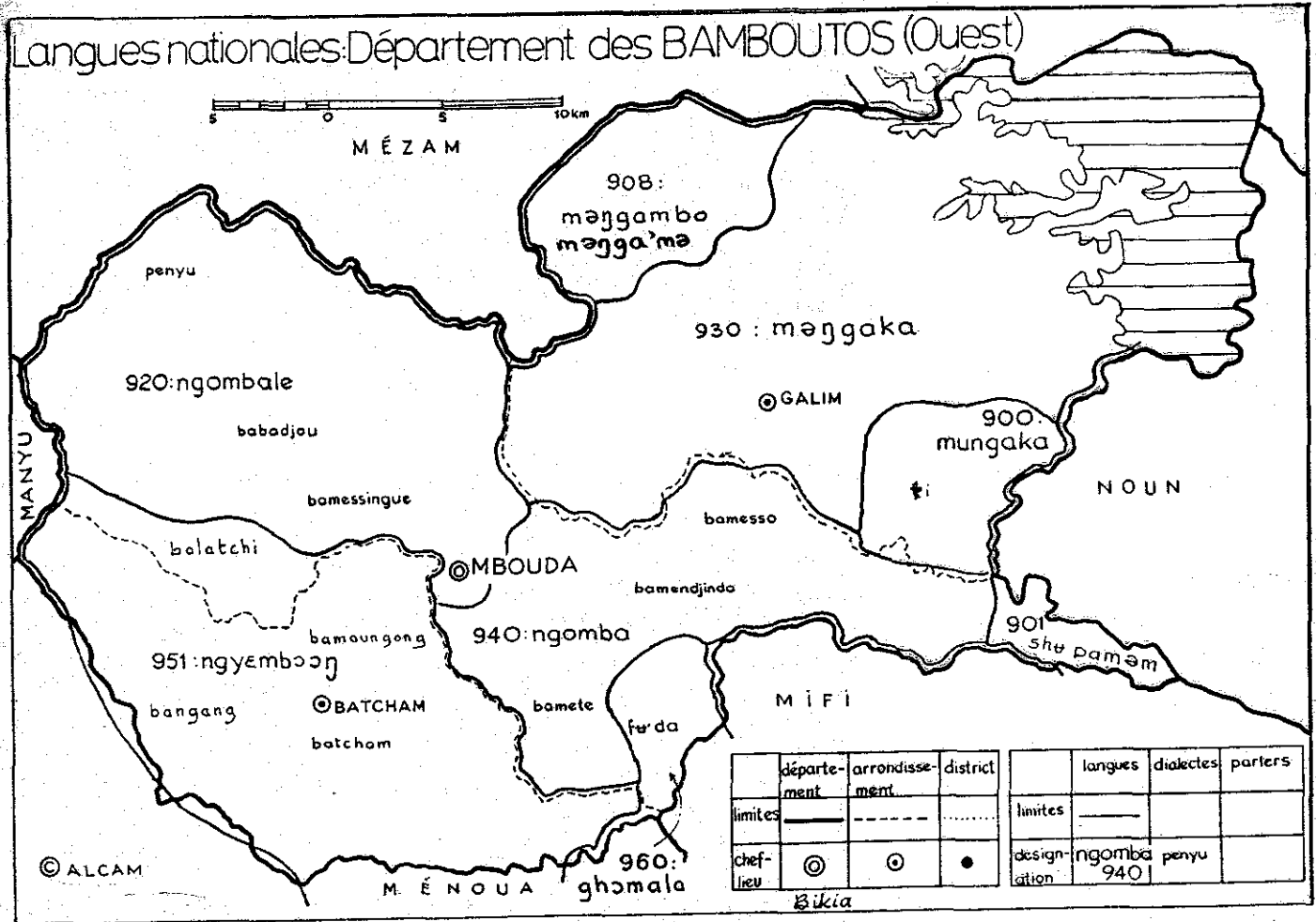
The speakers of this language prefer to use the name Nda'a to describe their mother tongue. Thus, where reference to Nda'a is made, this is the equivalent of Ngomba as described above.

Languages neighbouring Ngomba (together with ALCAM codes) are: Ngombale (920) to the northwest; Ngyemboon (951) to the southwest; Ghomala' (960) to the south and southeast; She Pamem (901) to the southeast; Mungaka (900) to the northeast; and Mengaka (930) to the north.

1.2 Purpose of the Survey

The survey was carried out in order to clarify the existing language situation for Ngomba, especially the potential need for codification and standardisation of the language.

Map showing the extent of the Ngomba-speaking area, and surrounding languages.



Acknowledgement for map to ALCAM, Breton and Fohtung, 1992.

2.0 PROCEDURES

This survey was based on the "rapid-appraisal" approach, which is characterised by its limited goals (to gain a general overview of the sociolinguistic situation in a particular area), and by its specific, non-technical procedures (usually limited to interviews with administrative and traditional authorities, church and mission leaders, and group and individual questionnaires, where deemed necessary). Other data may also be collected where relevant, such as additional linguistic data and information on the community's felt needs for development.

Throughout the survey, three major areas were kept under consideration:

- (a) the dialect situation and the level of comprehension of related speech forms, and the corresponding attitudes;
- (b) possible bilingualism with neighbouring languages, and with languages of wider communication (particularly with French and Pidgin English), as well as corresponding attitudes;
- (c) the viability of the language and the feasibility of a language development project, as revealed in overall language attitudes and reported patterns of language use.

The following two diagnostic questions were used for estimating how well related languages are understood, and whether comprehension seems to be based on inherent intelligibility (due to linguistic similarity) or on acquired intelligibility and language learning (due to contact with speakers of the language):

- (1) "If you are in that place, where language X is spoken, what language do you use, what language do they use, and how well do you understand each other?"
- (2) "Can even a young child from this place understand someone from that place? (If not, how old must the child be before he understands?)"

One group interview with traditional leaders was conducted in each of the following six villages: Bamesso, Bamendjinda, Babe, Bamenkumbo, Bamendjo and Bafounda. Interviews were also held with representatives of the Eglise Evangélique du Cameroun (EEC) as well as Abbé Tene Rigobert of Sainte-Anne de Mbouda Roman Catholic parish.

3.0 RESULTS AND EVALUATION

3.1 Dialect Situation and Inherent Intercomprehension

As already noted above, ALCAM lists the Ngomba or "Nda'a" language as having three dialects named after the villages in which they are spoken: Bamesso, Bamendjinda and Babete. However, in addition to these three villages there are two others which claim to speak the same language, i.e. Bamenkumbo and Bamendjo. Each of these five villages is situated to the east or west of the Bafoussam-Bamenda road in the Bamboutos Division, West Province.

Group interviews conducted in all five of the villages gave a strong indication that there is a homogenous dialect situation between the five communities. There are no reported problems of intercomprehension among the five varieties of Nda'a, and small children (aged 5 years) can understand speakers from every other speech form named among the five. This seems to indicate that there is adequate inherent intercomprehension between all the Nda'a speech forms.

It was claimed by people interviewed in Bamesso and Bamendjo that the variants spoken in the three villages of Bamesso, Bamendjinda and Bamenkumbo are the most similar of the five varieties, being almost the same. Interviews in the village of Bamendjinda served to confirm this. Bamendjinda speakers mentioned that people from Bamendjo pronounced the sound "r" in a different way to themselves.

The general feeling of those interviewed in Bamete was that they would prefer to have the varieties of Bamendjinda, Bamendjo and Bamenkumbo developed before their own speech form.

There is, however, another "Nda'a" village that is linguistically different from the others, namely, Bafounda. Although all those interviewed in the five Nda'a villages surveyed consider Bafounda villagers to be "Nda'a" people like themselves, they said that the language spoken there, "Fu'da," was very different from their own, such that it was unlikely that a small child could understand the Bafounda speech form without ever having spent time there. (It was reported that at one time, the village of Bafounda was invaded and taken over by speakers of a neighbouring language, Mifi, a dialect of Ghomala'. This language has prevailed ever since, at least in Bafounda village. This would seem to indicate that, although there is only one demographic community, there are, in fact, two quite distinct *linguistic* communities.

As far as Bafounda villagers are considered, they said that although their comprehension of Nda'a as spoken by the other five villages is not immediate (ie. they have to learn it through contact), they would prefer to use written materials in the Nda'a speech form rather than written materials developed for the Ghomala' language, which they claim to understand "perfectly." This reveals a positive attitude on the part of Fu'da speakers towards Nda'a speakers and towards the development of the Nda'a language. It seems that most Fu'da speakers acquire a good understanding of Nda'a by adulthood, mainly because of frequent contact with their Nda'a-speaking neighbours.

LEXICAL SIMILARITY OF DIALECTS UNDER CONSIDERATION:

A wordlist of 120 items was taken in each of the communities being studied, and each of these was compared with the others to determine the degree of lexical similarity between the different dialects or speech forms. The variance is 7% for the Bafounda figures, and 2 - 5% for the others. The wordlists taken are available through the Survey Department, SIL, Yaoundé.

BAFOUNDA

63	BAMESSO				
65	97	BAMENDJINDA			
64	98	96	BABETE		
65	93	94	95	BAMENDJO	
57	86	83	84	83	BAMENKUMBO

Table showing the degree of lexical similarity between the five dialects of Nda'a, and Bafounda, based on wordlists of 120 words.

3.2 Multilingualism

3.2.1 Knowledge of neighbouring languages

As stated in the introductory section, the Ngomba-speaking area is surrounded by several other languages, i.e. Məngaka, Ngyemboon, Ngombale, and Ghomala'. Most of those interviewed in the five Nda'a villages (ie. excluding Bafounda) reported that they did not understand the above languages, unless they had had considerable contact with speakers. This strongly implies that comprehension is acquired and not inherent. Those interviewed said that the majority of Nda'a speakers in the five villages do not have extensive contact with speakers of neighbouring languages, and that the language of wider communication is generally Pidgin English or French.

However, some Bamete villagers said that they are able to understand Ngyemboon speakers, but have to communicate in Pidgin or in French because Ngyemboon speakers do not understand Nda'a. This phenomenon of one-way comprehension may occur because Ngyemboon is used in the Catholic Mission in Bamete, and so some passive knowledge of Ngyemboon may have been acquired by certain individuals in this way.

The general impression gained was that those belonging to the five villages of the Nda'a "family" are able to speak and understand neighbouring speech forms only after contact with speakers of those speech forms. There seems to be no single language among the neighbouring languages which is extensively spoken or understood by all five villages as a second language.

3.2.2 French

French is spoken by many adults, particularly adult men, who have either studied in French or been exposed to French by travelling outside the language area in search of employment. Apart from this segment of the population, many of the older women do not speak French beyond greetings and "market French."

French is used predominantly in public places, e.g., in market situations, at the local dispensary, and at local government and administrative offices. If French is required in a certain situation, and the speaker is unable to communicate, he or she will either use an interpreter, or attempt to communicate in Pidgin English. The level and extent of French bilingualism across the community was not ascertained, however.

3.2.3 Pidgin English

Pidgin English is spoken by adults and young people, in situations where they are unable to make themselves understood in their mother tongue, e.g., in contact with non-Nda'a speakers with whom they cannot communicate in any other language.

Pidgin use seems to alternate with use of French, although on this survey it was not possible to distinguish which of the two languages is preferred. Again, Pidgin is used in public places, as described above.

3.3 Language Vitality and Viability

3.3.1 Language Use in the Community

The general view from the interviews was that the mother tongue is always used in domestic domains and by all age groups, ie. within the family home, within the local community with contemporaries, and in the fields working. The exceptions to this pattern occurred when people met non-Nda'a speakers, or where the head of the household is not a mother-tongue speaker of Nda'a.

Church Use in the five Nda'a-speaking villages

Within the Protestant churches (Eglise Evangélique du Cameroun: EEC), there is some use of the Nda'a language. If the parish Pastor is preaching, he will translate the Bible readings and his sermon from French into Nda'a. However, songs, certain prayers, and other aspects of the service are conducted either in Bangangté (a dialect of Mə̀dumba, ALCAM code 902), Ngyemboon (ALCAM code 951), or French, and only in Nda'a when there are no "outsiders" present.

Announcements are always translated from French into Nda'a in the town of Mbouda, but are usually given directly in Nda'a in the rural churches. There has been some effort made to translate some of the songs and prayers into Nda'a, but as yet, nothing has been written down. Church workers apart from the Pastor, who usually come from outside the language area, tend to use Ngyemboon in their work, which then has to be interpreted by someone well-versed in both languages. Whenever there is a mother-tongue preacher, the sermon is in Nda'a, and not translated.

Youth activities and Sunday School are led in French and translated into Nda'a within the Protestant church.

There are several problems associated with using languages other than the mother tongue in church, namely, that older women and those with little education have difficulty understanding French or Bangangté.

It seems that in the Catholic church Ngyemboon is mostly used, with occasional

songs in Nda'a, although if there is an interpreter available, interpretation of parts of the service is sometimes made, either into the mother tongue, or into French or Pidgin English. Notices for the congregation are always given in Nda'a. Although the Catholic church leader interviewed thought that the majority of the congregation understood Ngyembɔɔɔ sufficiently well, there is an apparent need for interpretation into Nda'a for at least part of the congregation, the degree of which need was not determined during this survey.

Church language use in Bafounda village

In the EEC in Bafounda, it is predominantly French which is used, and then interpreted into the Bafounda mother tongue. Ngyembɔɔɔ is used in the Catholic church services. The use of the mother tongue in the Catholic church was not determined.

3.3.2 Attitudes to the Mother Tongue

Overall, it was evident that all those spoken to were well-disposed towards their mother tongue and its development. Although no one expressed anxiety that his language was being replaced by another, several people did express concern that some young people were inserting French words into their use of Nda'a.

Everyone would prefer to learn to read and write in his own speech variety if it were written down, rather than another language. However, the only exception to this, as already mentioned, were the Bafounda villagers, who would prefer to use Nda'a written materials instead of Ghɔmala' materials.

3.3.3 Language Maintenance and Shift

The different varieties of the Nda'a language are not perceived to be in immediate danger of dying out or of being replaced by other languages or speech forms. The mother tongue is used in all domestic domains, and all other domains where there is contact with other mother-tongue speakers.

Nda'a speakers marry both outside and inside their own villages. However, the majority of people find spouses within the Bamboutos Division. If a man marries someone from outside the Nda'a-speaking villages, then the wife is obliged to learn to speak the language of her husband, and the children are brought up to speak their father's language. However, if a man marries a woman from another Nda'a village, then the wife continues to use her mother tongue, and the children grow up familiar with both speech forms, since the difference seems not to be very significant.

Education is available to all Nda'a-speaking children in French. Most children attend primary school, usually within their own village. However, very few, even as little as a third, are able to continue into secondary education, mostly because of financial constraints. The area's main secondary school is in the town of Mbouda.

Most young people are reported to leave the Nda'a-speaking area in order to look for employment in the main towns. Although most return to their home villages to visit their families, very few seem to return to settle long-term until retirement age.

In each village there are local level development committees, which seem to meet regularly. There is also an overall development committee for the entire Nda'a area, which apparently meets every year to discuss development issues and funding for different projects.

3.4 Socio-economic Factors

From the limited data available, it seems apparent that the Nda'a-speaking village communities are internally homogenous. Between the six villages, there seem to be few elements of culture which separate them as being markedly different from each other. Sociologically, the communities see themselves as being one people, or family. Linguistically, the villages of Bamesso, Bamendjinda, Bamenkumbo, Bamete, and Bamendjo claim that they speak the same language, and that it is only Bafounda whose speech form is different from the other five.

However, people from the five villages mentioned above, plus the inhabitants of Bafounda village whose language is more similar to Ghomala', see themselves as one people, and act as a group, as far as culture, traditions, and development are concerned.

All six communities depend on Mbouda town for their main market, which is easily reachable by road, and there seems to be a regular exchange between the local markets in the different villages. Hospital treatment is available in Mbouda, and there are dispensaries in each village.

4.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Taking into account each of the three main areas of investigation in this survey, our conclusions on the Nda'a speech form are the following:

Findings from informal group interviews indicate that Nda'a speakers in Bamesso, Bamendjinda, Bamenkumbo, Bamete and Bamendjo villages speak the same language, with minor differences. In all five villages, the two languages of wider communication are French and Pidgin English, these two being used whenever Nda'a cannot be understood.

The Nda'a language is used in all domestic domains and in most aspects of daily life. Use of the mother tongue in these various domains seems to indicate that there is no immediate danger of the Nda'a language dying out, or of being replaced by another speech form, including either French or English, although this should be re-evaluated in future years as the language community potentially undergoes change.

Use of the Nda'a language in church services demonstrates that there is a perceived need to translate or interpret into the mother tongue for adequate communication to take place. Attitudes to development of the mother tongue are positive. However, there has not yet been any initiative towards beginning this on a local level in terms of attempting to put the language into written form. It is, nevertheless, worthy of note that the issue of language development was discussed in a meeting of the six Nda'a chiefs in 1992.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 The Five Nda'a-speaking Villages

It seems, from the information gathered, that the Nda'a speech form has a probable need for standardisation and language development. However, consideration needs to be made of the slight differences in pronunciation between the different varieties of Nda'a, when an orthography is drawn up, and representatives from each of the villages should be involved in discussions concerning this. It seems possible that the same orthography may be acceptable to all groups, so that a standard reference "dialect" would need to be decided upon by representatives of each of the various villages.

From the somewhat limited perspective of this survey, it seems that the form of Nda'a spoken in the villages of Bamendjinda, Bamesso and Bamenkumbo may prove the most acceptable to the other groups to be put into written form. Nevertheless, further in-depth analysis of the situation needs to be made before a decision is taken in relation to this. This could take the form of intelligibility testing and/or attitude studies.

5.2 Bafounda

After discussion with community leaders in Bafounda it seems that the villagers would prefer to use Nda'a written materials, once these have been developed, rather than materials produced in Ghomala', of which Fu'da is considered to be a dialect.

In the light of this preference, there is a need to examine further the attitudes of the Bafounda population towards using Ghomala' written materials. If these prove to be negative, and the stated preference still seems to be towards Nda'a, then it may well be advisable for Fu'da speakers to be included in a language development project for Nda'a speakers. This possibility should be taken into account when a standard reference dialect for Nda'a is established.

5.3 ALCAM Changes

It is recommended that the name "Nda'a" be added as an alternate name for "Ngomba", and that the five speech varieties representing the five villages be indicated. In the prose description, mention should be made of the "Nda'a" ethnic clan and the special relationship of Bafounda to it.

REFERENCES

- Dieu, Michel and Patrick Renaud, eds. 1983. Atlas linguistique de l'Afrique centrale (ALAC), Atlas linguistique du Cameroun (ALCAM). Yaoundé: DGRST-CERDOTOLA; and Paris: ACCT.
- Grimes, Barbara F., ed. 1992. Ethnologue: Languages of the World. 12th edition. Dallas, Texas: Summer Institute of Linguistics.