

The Theory of Reference Dialect in Yamba Orthography Development: Revitalisation or Endangerment?

Talah Benard Sanda, Vincent A Tanda

The University of Bamenda, Cameroon

Abstract: Orthography development over decades has been at the onset of mother tongue literacy, language revitalization and preservation. This was informed by the fact that language in its oral form run the risk of getting extinct gradually. The development of writing systems (orthographies) therefore, became necessary in different minority languages in order to bridge the gap between orality and the written form of languages. Many languages are endowed with many variants or dialects and for this reason, a variant is chosen for standardization. Many linguists have responded to this need by laying down criteria on how a reference dialect should be chosen among many variants. Over the years, this has not gone without problems as the speakers of the dialect not chosen either gave up learning to read and write the reference or dialect demonstrated a silent rejection of the standard form. At the inception of standardization of the language, the Yamba people were already opposed to the choice of the reference dialect. It was observed by Bradley (1986b) that there is a major problem in the usage of materials produced in the language using the Mbem dialect as reference. Despite the publication of the orthography statement Bradley (1986a), the Yamba language has remained essentially oral, thereby promoting the gradual death of the language. The attempt to revitalize the language using a single dialect has turned to promote the endangerment of 16 of the 17 dialects. Reference dialect theory therefore, singles out a dialect for revitalization thereby indirectly endangering the language. Developing a multidialectal orthography would be a block building process of safeguarding a language.

Key words: Reference dialect, endangerment, revitalization, orthography.

I. INTRODUCTION

Yamba is a language spoken by some eighty thousand (80,000) people spread out in 17 villages in the Donga Mantung Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. Each of these villages (Mbem, Nwa, Gom, Ngung, Mfe, Bom, Yang, Rom, Nkot, Ntong, Sih, Fam, Saam, Ntim, Gamfe, Gwembe, and Kwak) speak a different variant of the Yamba language. Despite the codification of the language using Mbem as the reference dialect, literacy rate in the mother tongue is less than 10% (Talah, 2018), (Bradley, 1986). According to UNESCO (2011) "Languages are vehicles of our cultures, collective memory and values. They are an essential component of our identities and a building block of our diversity and living heritage" but the reference dialect theory seems to promote the

loss of these values in the hitherto non-standardized variants of the language.

1.1. Problem statement and Research questions

Many languages are endowed with different variants which necessitates the selection of one variant for standardization. For the case of Yamba, Mbem dialect was chosen and developed as the standard or reference dialect following theories and criteria laid down by (Bos et al, 2004:4), (Sadembouo, 1980) sanctioning the selection of a reference dialect. The present orthography or alphabet of Yamba have been used to promote literacy for over thirty years and a number of difficulties have been observed. Though much literacy efforts were made at the inception of Yamba orthography development, the fortunes dwindled with time as the question of intercomprehension gradually surfaced. Simons and Fennig, (2018) states that about 10% of the population is literate in the mother tongue out of a total population of about 80,000 people. The fact that the didactic materials and the New Testament of the Bible are all produced in the reference dialect causes enormous problems to speakers of the 16 other dialects. The problem is further compounded by the fact that most speakers of the 16 dialects have a limited comprehension of the reference dialect as Bradley, (1986) states:

"At the beginning of linguistic work on the language, people immediately began to inform me that each village had a different dialect of Yamba, some very different from the Mbem one. From these comments I received the general impression that some of the furthest-out villages from Mbem, geographically speaking, were not mutually intelligible with the Mbem dialect"

Though the Yamba people cherish their dialects and would like to use it in all spheres of life, it has largely been limited to orality because linguistic elements of the various dialects are not incorporated in the standardized version thereby leaving the dialects with no choice than facing endangerment. The fact that intelligibility between the dialects; especially between the reference dialect, Mbem and the rest of the 16 dialects has dwindled over the years due to very limited interaction between the speakers of the reference dialect and the other 16, greatly affect revitalization efforts. Many decades ago, most basic health and educational establishments were found in Mbem and acted as pull factors. This means that

movement towards Mbem has reduced considerably since people can get primary and secondary education and health services in their own villages (Talah, 2018). The main goal of SIL¹ Cameroon linguists for developing the Yamba language was the translation of the Bible and evangelism. The revitalization of the language through mother tongue literacy, translation and development various audio and video resources was secondary, thereby paying little attention to the hidden resentment of the speakers of the other dialects.

One is left asking the following questions:

- What is the effect of using one dialect as the standard reference dialect in a multidialectal language like Yamba?
- What are the causes of reference dialect orthography rejection in Yamba?
- What can be done to promote acceptability of the reference dialect in Yamba in an attempt to revitalize the language?

1.2. Aims and objective

This paper seeks to

- Examine the validity of language preservation and revitalization using the reference dialect theory.
- Propose an alternative way of developing orthographies for multidialectal languages.

II. REVIEW OF SOME WORKS

An in-depth review of the works of other linguists on orthography development, indicates that the theory of reference dialect was strictly followed in Yamba. Terry (1980)'s work on the Segmental phonology of Yamba with particular reference to the segments that make up the noun roots used Mbem as the reference dialect. She focuses on the morphonemic alternations of both vowels and consonants in the Mbem dialect. The phonetic variations, phonemic contrasts and morphophonemic alternations are treated in detail with focus on the noun but she fails demonstrate whether such phenomenon occurs in the other dialects. However, she notes that "the high degree of independence and separateness of each village (dialect) is responsible for the balkanisation of the language with 17 dialects. Bradley (1986b) acknowledges that Mbem is significantly different from many of the dialects. Mbem was chosen as the reference dialect based on some sociological factors which leaves much to be desired. Nzenge (2001)) did a morphosyntatic study of the basic sentence in Yamba, in other words in Mbem dialect. She states that the Mbem dialect can be used as the reference dialect for materials production. She identifies only 10 of the 17 dialects implying that more problems could be witnessed with the other dialects whose existence she does not even recognize. The fact that integibility between Mbem and the other dialects is low puts to question the nortion of revitalization and preservation.

III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

Research in the area of orthography development within the context of languages with multiple dialects has very much focused on reference dialect theories. This study is expected to fill a gap in the literature and to be helpful to other researchers who are interested in studying orthography development for multilectal languages globally. It will also be of help to studies on mother tongue literacy, multilingualism, language preservation and linguistic identity and cultural studies within multilectal communities. In as much as it is difficult to include all the dialects in an orthography, this work will be an eye opener to linguistic researcher about the dangers of using only one variant in developing an orthography for multidialectal languages.

IV. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION

Different standard reference dialects principles of theories have been put forth by different linguists. Eyoh (2008) articulates reference dialect theory as he states that the choice of the reference dialect for Mfumte took into consideration the factors put forward by Wisemann et al (1988) in choosing a reference dialect which will be the standardized form of the language.

Sadembou (1980:183-203) outlines the criteria for selecting a standard reference dialect for orthography development for multi-dialectal langauges. These factors include but not limited to high level of intelligibility of the dialect chosen with the other dialects, the degree of inter-comprehension, the location of the dialect chosen, the number of speakers of the dialect, the number of speakers, Social prestige of the dialect, government and religious authorities' attitude towards the dialect, religious influence, the socio-economic importance of a dialect, group dynamism and movement, the purity of the dialect and understanding, the existence of works done by other researchers, general consensus, the availability of a consultant, and the social status of the speakers.

Note that even when all the criteria outlined above are followed, other socio-cultural, and political factors may intervene, especially when it comes to acceptability and usage of the orthography. This is basically because the speakers of every dialect or a variant of a language are imbibed with very profound intrinsic cultural identity values that manifest through the linguistic outlet.

Eyoh (2008)'s proposal failed to consider the sentiments of those whose dialects were not chosen and the linguistic components which are found in the other dialects neglected. It was only later that Nathan (2011) proposed that apart from Lus, which Eyoh proposed, Kwaja and Kofa should be considered as separate languages for development. This work was meant to preserve and revitalize the language as Eyoh (2008) suggests but with the speakers of the other dialects showing little or no interest in the literacy efforts, their dialects would surely get endangered. In addition to the criteria above, Sadembou,

¹ SIL – Summer Institute of Linguistics

(1980), had earlier laid out another reference dialect theory. He proposed two ways of developing or standardizing a language. The first one is based on a dialect choice and the second is based on the synthesis of all the dialects. The later has hardly been used in developing orthographies in Cameroon thereby indirectly promoting language endangerment rather than revitalization.

Maduabuchi (2013) in his theory of social acceptability states that everyone must accept the choice of the form of writing else it will be invalid. It can be concluded from this study that this theory is not sustainable since not every Yamba speaker accepts the Mbem dialect as the reference dialect. This is clearly seen in the non-usage of the present orthography by the majority of the Yamba population. It is therefore necessary to look for a different solution to the literacy problem within the Yamba.

V. METHODOLOGY

The method adopted for this study was principally questionnaires to investigate the attitude of the people towards the reference dialect, and its effects on language revitalization. Also, structured interviews were used to investigate the effects of choosing one dialect to develop an orthography for the entire language especially the case of Yamba where intelligibility between the dialects is relatively low. In all, close to 200 people were interviewed or responded to questionnaires across the 17 dialects.

The examination of documents about the existing literacy materials using the reference dialect and structured interviews were equally adopted to collect data. The results served as a basis for recommendations and proposals for developing a reference orthography for the language.

The data is presented and analysed using tables to demonstrate the lapses in using the reference dialect orthography. To establish if revitalization is taking place in the entire language group, the EGIDS scale was used to determine the viability of the dialects.

The language vitality index is therefore assessed through a combination of nine different factors as articulated by UNESCO (2003). All the factors are considered to be equally important whereby each factor is rated on a scale of zero (which is the worst-case scenario) to five (being the best possible situation). These nine factors can be applied to different languages in the world to assess the level of a language's vitality, and the type of action needed for the maintenance, revitalization, perpetuation, and documentation of different languages. This was just apt for this research given that a language is evaluated based on the multiplicity of the varieties that it possesses.

As a result, the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) and the Ethno-linguistic Vitality theory were chosen to assess language attitude, function and status of the 16 Yamba dialects in relation to Mbem, the standard reference dialect.

The table below provides a detailed description of EGIDS

Table 1: EGIDS scale

Level	Label	Description	UNESCO
0	International	The language is used internationally for a broad range of functions	Safe
1	National	The language is used in education, work, mass media, and government at the nationwide level.	Safe
2	Regional	The language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services.	Safe
3	Trade	The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders.	Safe
4	Educational	Literacy in the language is being transmitted through a system of public education.	Safe
5	Written	The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community.	Safe
6a	Vigorous	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language.	Safe
6b	Threatened	The language is used orally by all generations but only some of the child-bearing generations are transmitting it to their children.	Vulnerable
7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it among themselves but none are transmitting it to their children.	Definitely Endangered
8a	Moribund	The only remaining active speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation.	Severely Endangered
8b	Nearly Extinct	The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.	Nearly Extinct
9	Dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community. No one has more than symbolic proficiency.	Dormant
10	Extinct	No one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language, even for symbolic purposes.	Extinct

Source: Ethnologue (Lewis & Simons 2010)

VI. RESULT OF FINDINGS

Different orthography development theories have been advanced by different linguists to guide the choice of reference dialects in multilingual languages. But the data presented here will throw more light on the situation of the unchosen dialects of Yamba. The different aspects examined or evaluated range from acceptability of the reference dialect to the vitality of the language globally.

1.1. The rate of acceptability and rejection of the reference dialect

Investigating the acceptability of the reference dialect was very important. From the percentage it is clear that a majority of the respondents do not accept Mbem as the

reference dialect for written and standardized Yamba. The table and the chart below elucidate this.

Table 2: Feelings about the reference dialect

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	30	24.0	24.0	24.0
	Strongly Agree	17	13.6	13.6	37.6
	Disagree	41	32.8	32.8	70.4
	Strongly Disagree	37	29.6	29.6	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

Do you feel proud using Mbem as a reference dialect for Yamba in written form

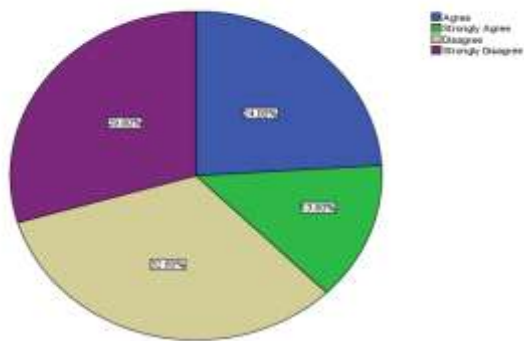


Figure 1: Feelings about reference dialect.

Finding out the reasons for the non-acceptability of the reference dialect is also very important for the study. Different reasons were advanced for this depending on the distance of the dialect for the reference dialect and other factors. Sadembouo (1980) lays down the criteria for the reference dialect to be accepted by all. The results here expose the different reasons for the non-acceptability of Mbem as the reference dialect for Yamba.

Also, no literacy class has even been organized in the village of Yamba North (Ngung, Ntong, Saam, Ntim, Sih and Fam) since the inception of literacy in the area. Even though people from these areas attended literacy teacher’s trainings on several occasions but never organized literacy classes. This could be responsible for the lack of interest or the non-acceptability of Mbem as the reference dialect for the Yamba language. Talking to one of the people who attended the trainings, he claimed it can never work claiming he understands Mbem because he schooled there but the others from his village don’t understand Mbem.

1.2. Literacy in Yamba

The ability to read and write Yamba was also an important element. Less than 30% of respondents are literate in reading and writing Yamba. This is surely due to the problems of the orthography or feeling about the reference dialect. Some people can barely read but the development of the writing skill has received less attention from the people especially speakers of other dialect than Mbem.

Table 3: Reading and writing ability in Yamba

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	22	17.6	17.6	17.6
	Strongly Agree	10	8.0	8.0	25.6
	Disagree	35	28.0	28.0	53.6
	Strongly Disagree	58	46.4	46.4	100.0
	Total	125	100.0	100.0	

Fig. Literacy in Yamba

From the above figure, it is clear that the literacy rate is higher in the speakers of the dialect than in the other dialects. The conclusion here could be that literacy was not spread out to cover all the Yamba villages due to the imposition of a reference dialect on them.

Also, the younger generation have had very little contact with the orthography, thus the little or lack of interest in language development is a looming danger because intergenerational transmission is low. There could be many reasons for this lack of awareness. From the statistics, only 25 percent of those interviewed could read and write the language. The 17 dialects were grouped into two; the group of 11 dialects including the reference dialect and the group of six which are further from the reference dialect. Surprisingly no one could read and write from the Yamba north villages. Many of them were aware that the language has been written but considered it was done for the Mbem people. This, by implication means that the rest of the dialect will exist only in the oral form, thereby leading to the endangerment of those dialects except for the reference dialect.

1.3. Language vitality

Finding out the vitality of the dialect too was very important to this paper since it was set as one of the objectives of this study.

1.3.1. The rate of acceptability and rejection of the reference dialect

Investigating the acceptability of the reference dialect was very important. From the percentage it is clear that a majority of the respondents do not accept Mbem as the reference dialect for written and standardized Yamba. The table and the chart below elucidate this.

Table 4: Intergenerational transmission index (within the 16 dialects)

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	20	19.6	19.6	19.6
	Strongly Agree	11	10.8	30.4	30.4
	Disagree	41	40.1	70.5	70.5
	Strongly Disagree	30	29.4	100.0	100.0
	Total	102	100.0	100.0	

A critical look at the vitality of the 16 dialects, it is clear that intergenerational transmission is dwindling. Only 30% of those who responded to the questionnaire attested to the transmission of their dialects to the younger generation. On the contrary, 70% of them affirmed that there is almost no intentional intergenerational transmission of their dialects to their children. This justifies the question of whether it is revitalization or endangerment.

1.3.2. *The revitalization of the Yamba language*

As an effort to revitalize the Yamba language, a number of activities have been carried out ranging from material production to training of teachers, not leaving out the running of literacy classes. After the publication of the orthography statement by Bradley (1986), the first didactic material followed immediately; the Reading and Writing Book (Bradley, 1986b), and the alphabet chart. These were the first efforts towards revitalization of the language.

In addition, trainings were also organized to train literacy teachers and Bible translators. These training yielded some fruits especially in Mbem where the reference dialect is spoken. Many literacy classes were opened in churches and within the community to teach the acquisition of reading and writing skills in the language. Some teaching also took place in some few primary schools. Also, the translation of the New Testament Bible crowned with its dedication in 1992 published by the Bible Society. In order to facilitate the teaching and learning in the language, a lexicon of 2000 words was produced by Bradley (1992). Apart from printed resources, there was also the production of some audio and video resources such as The Jesus Film, Audio Bible and many other materials.

It should be noted that all of these materials were produced in the Mbem dialect and for that reason, literacy classes and the use of the resources gradually dwindled. The speakers of the other 16 villages started rejecting the materials produced in Mbem. Some even claimed that it was an attempt to kill their own dialects while promoting Mbem (the reference dialect). This rejection was manifested through an attempt by speakers of some of the dialects to develop their own writing system. In order to establish whether the revitalization of the language is successful, it will be good to look at the vitality of the language.

1.3.3. *Language Vitality index*

The question of whether reference dialect theory promotes revitalization or endangerment can better be answered by examining the vitality index of the dialects of Yamba. Apart from the reference dialect that has the possibility of being revitalized, the rest of the other 16 dialects misses the opportunity of codification for use in mother tongue education and mother tongue literacy. Simon and Lewis (2010) EGIDS scale for Intergenerational Language Transmission was used to examine the vitality of the Yamba language which revealed diverse fortunes for different dialects. The vitality level can be used to predict the future of the language or dialect. While Mbem dialect enjoys a vitality level of 4 (the language is used

orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community.), the rest of the 16 dialects seem to fall lower on the vitality scale.

The Gom, Nwa, Mfe, Rom and Yang are at 6a (The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language). This means that the language is still safe because intergenerational transmission of the dialect from parents to children though mostly oral. Despite the fact that the dialects are stable and safe, they will not remain safe because the written materials (in Mbem dialect) are not used to teach reading and writing, thus only the oral form is promoted and handed down to younger generation.

Another group of dialects which are more in danger are the Ntong, Ngung, Sih, Fam, Gwembe, Gamfe, Nkot, Bom and Kwak. They are at level 6b (vulnerable). This means that many people still speak the language and some transmission is taking place but there is a good portion of the population that does not use the dialects as would be expected. These are dialects that have never had a functional literacy class in the mother tongue because the speakers silently reject materials in the reference dialect. This situation can get worse, pushing the dialect to an endangered level below the present state.

Salient is also the fact that some dialects are at level 7 (definitely endangered). These dialects are Ntim, and Saam. The learning of the language by the younger generation dwindles as the days go by. These dialect are far from the reference dialect and the intelligibility level is obviously be very low. The fact that these dialects are neighbours to other languages that are stronger (Mfumte and Mambilla), exposes them to endangerment.

VII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It is clear that despite the level of development of the language, it will be difficult to achieve a high literacy rate in the mother tongue in the entire Yamba community. The Standard Reference Dialect (SRD) theory is counterproductive in language development, documentation and revitalization. The SRD ends up being the only dialect revitalized thereby promoting the endangerment of the rest of the dialects. The case of Yamba is not an isolated case because languages are endowed with varieties that enrich the language. It can therefore, be advised that the standard reference dialect theories should be revisited. Many Yamba dialects (Ngung, Ntong, Gom, and Nkot) are already making attempts to develop their own writing systems in order to revitalize their dialect. Those efforts should be exploited to do participatory language development. The community can sponsor adaptations from the SRD thereby safeguarding the language from drifting down the ladder of EGIDS scale.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bikoi (2012) Atlas Linguistique du Cameroun. CERDOTOLA : Yaounde, Cameroon.
- [2] Bos Kees J, Bos Mirjam, Page Christiana. (2010). Community-based orthography development Experiences from the Kuy. International cooperation for Cambodia.

- [3] Bradely, V. (1982). Serial Verbs ad Clauses in Yamba. Yaounde: SIL International.
- [4] (1986). Alphabet and Orthography statement of Yamba. Yaounde: SIL, Cameroon.
- [5] (1986). A Survey of the Yamba Dialect Situation and its Effects on the use of the Primer. Yaounde: SIL Cameroon.
- [6] Eyoh, J. (2008). Mfunte Phonology and Revitalizaiton of the language. Yaounde: Unpublished disssertation. University of Yaounde I.
- [7] Simons and Fennig (2018). Ethnologue, Languages of the World (Vol. 19). (G. F. Lewis, Ed.) Dallas: SIL International.
- [8] Grenoble, L. and Lindsay, J. Whaley. (2006). Saving Languages: An introduction to language revitalization. Cambridge: CUP.
- [9] Casad, Eugen H. (1974). Dialect intelligibility Testing. Oklahoma: Oklahoma Univirsity.
- [10] Keith, S. (2001). Linguistic factors in orthography Design: Focus on Cameroon, 323-322.) Yaounde: Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.
- [11] Lewi, M. P. (2005). Towards a Categorization of Endangerment of World's Languages. 5- 6.
- [12] Maduabuchi, S. A. (2013, April). Orthography Theories and the standard of Igbo Orthography. Language in India, 13.4(1930-2940).
- [13] Njerim, I. (2003). Verb Phrase Syntax in Yamba. The University of Buea: Unpublished MA dissertation.
- [14] Sadembouo, E. (1980). Critere D'identification du Dialecte de Reference Standard.University of Yaounde, Department Des Langues Africaines et Linguistique. Yaounde: Unpublished PhD Disertation.
- [15] Simons, G. F. (1994). Principles of Multidialectal orthography design: Notes on literacy. Cambridge: CUP. Britain.
- [16] Tadadjeu and Sadembouo,. (1980). General Alphabet of Cameroon Languages. National Committee for the Unification and Harmonization of the alphabets of Cameroon Languages (p. 3). Yaounde: SIL.
- [17] Talah, B et al. (2010). Bridging the Gaps between mother Tongue Education and Second Language learning and Teaching: the Case of Kom, and Yamba. Maroua: Unpublished Disertation.
- [18] Terry, S. (1980). Segmental Phonology of Nouns in Yamba. Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary.
- [19] UNESCO. ((2003)). Document submitted to the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages. UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (pp. 14- 15). Paris: UNESCO.
- [20] UNESCO (2003) UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages. Document submitted to the International Expert Meeting on UNESCO Programme Safeguarding of Endangered Languages Paris. France.
- [21] Wisemann, Ursula et al. (1988). A practical Guide for developing the writings of African languages. A PROPELCA series No. 2. Yaounde: Department of African languages and linguistics. Univeristy of Yaounde 1.