

When an Endangered Language Goes Global: Documenting Chimiini

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Chimiini was once spoken only in the port city of Brava on the coast of southern Somalia, the northernmost and most isolated of the Swahili 'dialects.' Though spoken in Brava for a millenium, the horrors of the ongoing civil war in Somalia have caused nearly all speakers of the language to become refugees now living in large international cities like Atlanta, London, and Mombasa. As a result, the unique language and culture of the Bravanese is quickly disappearing. In a three-year project (now in year two) funded by the NEH through the NSF/NEH program Documenting Endangered Languages program, I am working with Bravanese communities, as well as other scholars, to further document the Chimiini language. This includes writing a reference grammar and dictionary of Chimiini, archiving digital recordings of the language, publishing traditional stories, personal narratives, and other ethnolinguistic material, and developing web-based materials useful to the community and heritage speakers. It also includes exploring the language from a scientific perspective and bringing out insights that might be interesting for theoretical linguistics. Last summer I spent six weeks in London and Manchester in the United Kingdom meeting many of the thousands of Bravanese who live there and talking with them about their language. Together, we collected many oral stories and hundreds of specialized vocabulary. Working with native speakers and other scholars, I have also been able to finalize a written orthography for Chimiini that will be used for reading and other literacy materials, as well as the dictionary. Coming up with a practical orthography was not an easy task, particularly because many Bravanese are literate in many languages, including



Arabic, Somali, English, and Swahili. We had to balance many factors so that the writing system could capture the important contrasts in Chimiini, while at the same time not create confusion with these other familiar writing systems. Next year I will spend my summer in Mombasa, Kenya, where many Bravanese remain closely connected to their culture. There I hope to assess whether or not the language is being passed on to the next generation and to collect much more culturally-relevant linguistic data.

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