

Preparing Documentary Outputs for an Endangered Community

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This summer I traveled with two actors and one videographer through Twi-speaking (Akan) areas in Ghana to record materials for web-based Beginning, Intermediate, and Business Akan courses. The project is supported by the UF Center for International Business Education & Research (CIBER) and the Center for African Studies. I also took advantage of the time in Ghana to finalize work on *Ekla Tutrugbu*, a reader for speakers of Nyagbo, with help from Kofi Dorvlo (Legon) and Felix Ameka (Leiden).

One important consideration for every language documenter is how to give back to the community, and one exciting part of my project on documenting the language and culture of the Nyagbo was to provide a reader for the speakers. Initially, this looked as easy as transcribing their oral histories, and a number of cultural practices and folk stories which I had recorded, and putting them in the reader. However, finding the right orthography for a language that is undergoing change can be tricky. Considering that spoken language is necessarily different from written one, the question we faced was what exactly to represent. Nyagbo speakers drop a lot of agreement markers when they speak and, initially, we thought that we should include every morpheme that is left out in order not to perpetuate a morphologically “deficient” language system. In Nyagbo, most speakers could not make sense of the full form when they occurred in sentences because, as some said, “that is not how we talk.”

In the end, to ensure the intelligibility of what we had written for the speakers, and main-



tain regularity of structure for the linguist, we produced a reader that had the full form on the left pages and their spoken versions on the right. Before the leaders of the community accepted the reader, we had to deal with issues concerning the oral traditions which we had included in a draft version. As soon as the traditions, which are usually narrated to anyone who visited the area, were seen in print in the draft version, disagreements concerning them heated up to the point where it looked like we were going to have an intra-ethnic conflict on our hands. We were therefore compelled to take them out. By then I had started to despair that the reader would not see its day in print. Thankfully all was resolved and the final version appeared in print in September. We donated a number to the chiefs and schools and gave a quantity to be sold to the community to defray the cost of publishing. I was thrilled

at the beginning of November to receive a call that the reader was going to be launched at a big festival of the Nyagbo - could we send more copies? My gratitude goes to the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research for funding the publication.

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