

'Stemming the tide': language endangerment and linguistic documentation in Ethiopia

The Foundation for Endangered Languages Manifesto (2007) states that we are living at a point in human history where many languages in the world are in danger of being lost forever within perhaps two generations. Just 25 of the world's 7,100 living languages function as mother tongues of almost half of the world's population of 8 billion. Each of the 25 languages is spoken by over 100 million people, whereas 38% of the world's languages have speaker communities with only 100 to 1,000 individuals.

Loss of languages leads to the loss of direct transmission of knowledge about tradition, history, and the environment. In situations where it is not possible to prevent loss, at least, effort should be exerted to retain records of linguistic and cultural knowledge. As home to 2,158 living languages, Africa contributes about one third of the world's linguistic diversity. At the same time, numerous languages have already gone extinct in this continent. Currently, 396 of Africa's languages are endangered and 127 are dying because their speakers are not able to effectively transmit their languages to younger generations. The latter are shifting to dominant languages that are not their mother tongue.

Since the 1990s linguists worldwide have prioritized the study of endangered and least-known languages. Language documentation was developed to create a lasting, multi-purpose and multi-modal record of language in use that is accessible to society at large, including the speech community itself. The recording and processing of archive material must involve active participation of members of the speech community and it requires their consent. As such, the archived resources are useful not only for grammatical-lexical analyses of the endangered languages but they also serve as stepping stones for researchers from other disciplines, such as anthropology and history. Resources in the archive must be representative including speech forms from community members from all walks of life, its content should be varied, and it needs to include transcribed, translated and annotated texts from discourse on day-to-day life of the community: e.g., livelihood activities, religion, music, technology.

At Leiden University, a lot of work is done to document African languages, among which several Ethiopian languages. The studies have produced numerous grammars, dictionaries and rich records on spoken and signed African languages. An example of this is, the ongoing research of Azeb Amha at the African Studies Center, which involves documentation of terrace-farming and house-construction practices of the Zargula people in Ethiopia, speakers of an endangered language known by the same name. Zargula has ~8000 speakers, but its younger generation speakers are shifting to Gamo, a mother-tongue to 1.1 million people and a socially influential language, as it is the language of administration, education and media in the Zargula area as well. The project is financed by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme.



Ato Birhanu HUMbe at a house he built himself, Dhimalle 2017



Storing Maize, Kettele 2017

The social and scientific relevance of the archival collections concerns 1) in the undesirable eventuality that transmission of the Zargula language is interrupted, future generations will have a secure audio and visual record of the day-to-day life of the community at work, leisure (singing and dancing), and engaged in conversation with each other or story-telling using their own language; and 2) the scientific value of documenting the Zargula language include providing empirical material on the grammar of this fascinating language and contribute to theoretical and methodological discussions in (African) linguistics, e.g., unusual floating verb agreement markers; distinct pattern of gender-marking on inanimate nouns; interesting and varied questioning strategies tied to discourse structure, particularly focus-marking; clause-chaining and switch-reference system.

Documentation results are continually archived at the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR): <https://www.elararchive.org/dk0447>. Material archived so far include 186 audio- and 111 video-recorded interview or demonstration sessions; numerous transcribed, translated and/or annotated text in ELAN and PraatTextGrid; a 3328-item word-list for dictionary-making, and photos. Content of the interview sessions cover, a.o., discourse on various types of houses and farming products; organization of space (distribution of land for dwellings and farming), processes and stages involved in farming and house-construction practices; the way labor is organized and/or monetized in realizing construction and farming activities; crafting, acquiring skills and tools needed for construction and farming addressing knowledge of technical aspects as well as flora-and-fauna in the area; animals as means/ tools and results of farming activities and human-animal interaction; gender-based division of labor in farming and construction practices; work-songs and personal stories.

Levelling the house for ground construction, Dhimalle 2017

