

**How to pretend you speak a dying language when you don't really know how to:
methodological worries in documenting dying languages**

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This paper examines a crucial methodological consideration to all linguistics, namely, identifying fully competent speakers. This problem is, of course, especially acute in documenting dying languages, where social factors often obscure a speaker's language ability. The most obvious causes for unreliable data are those proceeding from the sociolinguistic status of the language as dying. Crucial factors in such contexts include stigmatization of the language, the perception of socioeconomic advantage associated with the intruding language, etc.

What is perhaps more pernicious are factors at the micro level of individual psychology, when a speaker seeks to portray his or her language ability as that which it is not. At times this deception may be unconscious and may be motivated by noble intentions of serving the language, its culture, and/or the documentation effort. At others it may proceed from quite conscious and deliberate intentions to deceive, motivated by more selfish hopes of personal gain or advancement.

Whatever the motivation, the results are pernicious and undermine the whole investigative enterprise. What this paper does is identify the telltale linguistic marks of deception in the documentation of three South Atlantic languages spoken along the coasts of Guinea and Sierra Leone. Although the marks are linguistically specific in that they come from geographically close and genetically related languages (Bom, Kim, and Mani, all belonging to the Bullom sub-group), the analysis can be generalized to other field situations, even when the language of focus is in no danger of dying.