

Language shift in northern Nigeria: the precarious situation of the minority languages of the region

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If the linguists have waited for the American Indians to lead the campaign for the research on their languages, many of the endangered languages would have died (Kuju 1999). The extinction of a language is a distressing matter, since the cultural tradition connected to it and the socio-cultural or even ethnic independence of the group that speaks it very often perish with it. Yet it is a common phenomenon world over and in particular the northern region of Nigeria that the ethnic languages of weak minority groups go into extinction dragging down with them the social identity of such groups. The northern region of Nigeria is unique because it is a meeting point of the three great African linguistic phyla found in the country; the Afroasiatic phylum; namely, Chadic e.g. Hausa and its nearest relatives; the Nilo-Saharan phylum, e.g. Kanuri; and the Niger-Congo phylum, represented by Benue-Congo languages, (Jungraithmayr and Leger 1993). These groups are intermingled because they have had some kind of contact over a long period of time (Haruna 1994 and 2000, 2003 and 2005a and b). For many years, I have been working on the minority languages of the area within the framework of the linguistic tradition (grammar, lexicon and a corpus of texts). A preliminary socio-linguistic survey of the region revealed that apart from a few medium size languages most of the other languages are rather small and are spoken by a few hundred to a few thousand speakers, Shimizu (1978) and Haruna (2000, 2003 and 2005a and b). These languages are of interest and concern only to a small group of linguists, historians and some other experts who look at the past. Many of the languages have remained unresearched and face eminent extinction being minority languages. A number of the languages lead a pseudo-life as revered monuments of the past with some restricted roles to play today, e.g. in traditional ceremonies. A substantial number of speakers only retain their ethnic identities without any convincing knowledge of their ethnic language because Hausa (the main lingua franca of the region) is rapidly replacing the rest of the indigenous languages" (Shimizu 1978:8). Shimizu's (1978) prediction that "in a generation or two, more or less than sixty distinct speech communities will be merged together and their speech forms will become extinct" seem to be finding fulfilment already in northern Nigeria as more and more minority languages lose grounds to Hausa. We therefore have had the reason to raise the alarm that there is serious "desertification" and "deforestation" in the linguistic landscape of the region and to begin to think of what to do to save the remaining minority languages. In order to provide a background to the causes of language shift amongst the minority languages of the region, the paper examines some of the causes of language shift which led to and still leading to assimilation. It also examines the stages or phases which some of the speakers of the minority languages seem to be going through on their way to losing their languages. The aim is, (a) to report on the fate of these minority languages before they disappear, and (b) to enlarge, deepen and improve our linguistic knowledge of the region. It is believed that a work like this will have a direct social and cultural impact as well as contribute to the active preservation of a treasure of the people – their spoken language, and even more so, for Northern Nigerian historical, cultural and linguistic enrichment. The outcome will provide or form the foundation of the badly needed information (an indispensable prerequisite) which serves for multi-disciplinary studies of (a) the aspects of the cultural history of the region, and of the ethnic groups with their languages, especially languages which are on their way to extinction. In general, the paper will contribute to the documentation of the dying

members of the Chadic language family. Information emerging from this will be invaluable to linguists and other scholars with similar interest.