

The French Language: Variation and Change

Language shift

What do you think?

1. Why does language death matter?
2. When a language disappears, what else is lost?
3. Are there any indigenous minority languages in your country? If so, are any steps being taken to promote them?
4. Here is a case study of a speaker in a language shift situation. What are the main problems for the Ngbaka language? If you were a language planner, what could you suggest to help safeguard Ngbaka?

Country: Central African Republic

Language: Ngbaka

Location: Bangui (capital city)

Sex: male

Age: 18

Education level: secondary

Self-reported level in Ngbaka: poor

Occupation: student

Languages: L1 French, L2 Sango, L3 Ngbaka

Speaker's language use: speaks French to all the members of his family; speaks French to his fellow students; speaks French or Sango in the street (eg. when shopping); speaks Ngbaka to elders on rare visits to his parents' village.

Speaker's attitudes: local languages all over the country are dying out, which is inevitable. There are too many languages anyway, and this is one of the things hindering Africa's development. There's no point in learning a minority language because outside your village no one else speaks it, and it'll be no use if you want to get a job in France or Canada. It's embarrassing to speak Ngbaka because it makes you sound like a peasant and there are jokes about Ngbaka people, plus it's too difficult to learn, so he and all his friends speak French. When his parents speak to him in Ngbaka he ignores them or replies in French.

Useful websites

www.ethnologue.com

www.endangeredlanguages.com

www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/

Further reading

*J. A Fishman *Reversing Language Shift* (Multilingual Matters, 1991)

*J.A Fishman (ed.) *Can Threatened Languages be Saved?* (Multilingual Matters, 2001)

L.A. Grenoble and L.J. Whaley (eds.) *Endangered Languages: Current Issues and Future Prospects* (Cambridge University Press, 1998)

L. Grenoble, L. Whaley, *Saving languages: an introduction to language revitalization*. (Cambridge University Press 2006)

McMahon, A. (1994) *Understanding language change*, CUP

R. Mitchell (2012) 'Language, education and identity in Gabon' in Solly, M and Esch, E. (eds) *The Sociolinguistics of language education in international contexts*, Bern: Peter Lang

R. Mitchell (2015) 'To be a good westerner, you need to know where you come from': challenges facing language revitalization in central Africa', in Jones, M (ed.) *Language Endangerment: Policy and Planning*, Cambridge University Press.

Tsunoda, T (2006) *Language Endangerment and Language Revitalization*, Walter de Gruyter

Wright, S (2004) *Language policy and language planning: from nationalism to globalisation*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan

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Suggested answers to 'What do you think?'

1., 2. Both of these questions relate to similar things. When a language dies out, oral history, culture and traditions, access to ancient wisdom (such as medicinal properties of plants), individuality and diversity can all be lost as well. For many people, the language of their ethnic group or speech community is a very important part of their identity and heritage.

3. This is up to you!

4. A number of problems can be identified here, namely: in a multiethnic urban environment minority languages easily get swallowed up; French predominates in the education system; there is a very strong indigenous lingua franca (Sango) as well as French (these two languages also have co-official status); Ngbaka is associated with remote rural areas; some believe that multilingualism is detrimental and that languages die out as a matter of course; local languages are perceived as useless for social advancement; Ngbaka has low prestige; there is major vertical attrition.

Measures to safeguard it might include trying to rebrand Ngbaka and raise its level of prestige, perhaps by getting well-known speakers on board; introducing it in education at primary level to dispel notions early on that it is too difficult to learn; and creating written resources in Ngbaka to document it. These measures are likely to be much more effective if they are community-led, with help from linguists if necessary.