

The role of sensitisation in the success of community-gear language revitalisation programme: an experience from BASAL programme in Cameroon

O papel da sensibilização no sucesso do programa de revitalização da linguagem orientado à comunidade: uma experiência do programa BASAL em Cameroon

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Abstract: This paper aims at showing the importance of sensitisation in the success of a language revitalisation programme based on community-gear approach. Driving some experiences from BASAL (Basic Standardisation of all Unwritten African Languages), the paper shows that without a well-organised and strategic campaign which allows the researcher to get into direct contact with community members and community leaders in order to gain participation, the project would fail. When a linguist, researcher and outsider settles in a community in the perspective of developing their language, he must first find some strategies that will help him to nurture a conducive environment if he wishes to succeed. This requires sensitisation of local people. The main goal of sensitisation is to capture responsiveness of the native speakers and convince them to contribute and collaborate through their effective participation and empowerment toward success in the development of their language.

Palavras-chave: Revitalisation. Sensitisation. Community.

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Resumo: Este trabalho tem como objetivo demonstrar a importância da sensibilização no sucesso de um programa de revitalização da linguagem baseado em uma abordagem orientada à comunidade. Partindo de algumas experiências com o BASAL (Basic Standardisation of all Unwritten African Languages ou Normatização Básica de todas as Línguas Africanas Não Escritas), o trabalho demonstra que, sem uma campanha estratégica que permita que o pesquisador entre em contato direto com membros e líderes da comunidade, a fim de negociar sua participação, o projeto irá fracassar. Quando um pesquisador, linguista e estrangeiro se estabelece numa comunidade na perspectiva de desenvolver a linguagem dessa comunidade, primeiro ele precisa estabelecer estratégias que o auxiliarão a nutrir um ambiente favorável se ele deseja ser bem sucedido. Esse sucesso exige a sensibilização do povo local. O principal objetivo da sensibilização é capturar a capacidade de resposta dos falantes nativos e convencê-los a contribuir e colaborar através de sua participação efetiva e esforço em conseguir sucesso no desenvolvimento de sua língua.

Palavras-Chave: Revitalização. Sensibilização. Comunidade.

Introduction

Within a multilingual context governed by the predominance of former colonial languages such as English and French like in Cameroon, minorities, indigenous or rather local languages have long been, and are still threatened due to the consequences of the kind of policies implemented by colonial masters. Those policies are nurtured and maintained by their successors, local administrators trained in the same perspective and having no or little will for change and the promotion of quality education. In Cameroon, to challenge this situation, many projects have been designed and implemented. Among them, we point out the BASAL project, conceived with the idea of rescuing African endangered languages using African specialists and adopting a pragmatic view. This paper then discusses, as an aspect of the project, how sensitisation constitutes the backbone for success or failure within a community-directed language revitalisation programme. In order to expose the matters, the paper shall be organised in five main points. The first presents BASAL with a focus on the context of its history or its birth, its theoretical and methodological frameworks, its experimental phase and its expected outcomes. The second discusses the approach adopted within the project while the third focuses on the main concern of the paper, i.e., the importance of sensitisation campaigns. In the fourth section, we show how successful sensitisation eases the promotion of the development of the language under revitalisation through training while, in the fifth, we demonstrate that for sensitisation to be generalised, the volunteer-linguist must trot within the community. Some of the points are illuminated by our own experience as a former BASAL-volunteer.

The BASAL programme: what is BASAL?

BASAL is an acronym standing for Basic Standardisation of all Unwritten African Languages. It aims at endowing any unwritten or undescribed African language with minimal tools for its standardisation. It stands for the promotion of linguistic diversity in Africa. What is then the theoretical and methodological framework that underpins the project?

Theoretical and methodological framework of BASAL

The initial hypothesis for BASAL (SADEMBOUO; MBA, 2006) is that based on the volunteer corps of the African Union (AU) whose project was validated in Ouagadougou in 1997, a corps of volunteer-linguists (about 3000) could work for the rescuing of unwritten and endangered African languages through standardisation.

Volunteers are supposed to be selected among young linguists (with a minimum level of postgraduate diploma in Linguistics) after a call for application. They should be ready to spend three (3) years of their lives for the development and promotion of an African language. They should also be willing to live within the community and with the community through a total immersion approach. About 10 to 15 years, according to the hypothesis, would be sufficient to develop a literate environment all over Africa and in African mother tongues.

Through a day-to-day contact with the language and the community, the volunteer-researcher, young linguist, learns the language at the oral and written levels, taking advantage of his/her immediate environment depicting the cultural practices of the community. S/he then proceeds to a sociolinguistic survey and initial or elementary description of the language (phonology, morphology, syntax, etc.) and develops its reference standard documents for writing and for sustaining the literate environment being put in place.

Experimenting the project in Cameroon: some historical cues

The project was conceived in 1998, and in 2001, two (2) volunteers were recruited for the experimental phase of the project. They were respectively engaged for the Bangolan (spoken in the North West Region of Cameroon) and Mada (spoken in the Far North of Cameroon) languages. In 2002, a new batch of volunteers took over for five (5)

languages: Kwasio (East Region), Mfumte (North West Region), Bikele (East Region), Tuki (Centre Region), Bambalang (North West Region). In 2005, two more volunteers were recruited respectively for the Gbete (East Region) and the Bembele languages (Centre and East Regions) still in Cameroon. Within the same frame, in 2010, two volunteers were recruited for Iyasa (Littoral Region) and Laka (Far North Region) within BASAL Relad⁴, financed by UNESCOCAT Barcelona, for Linguapax Africa.

Within this same framework, two languages were selected in Ethiopia, namely Argobba and Oromo and were handled by two volunteers under the coordination of the University of Addis Ababa. The choice of these languages was based on their degree of endangerment and the presupposed will and commitment of the volunteers to work on them.

Expected outcomes

The following are the expected outcomes of the project or what the supervisor of the project expected from the volunteers. The volunteers were expected to come up with the following:

- a) a sociolinguistic survey and linguistic analysis of the language and proposal of an alphabet;
- b) production of an alphabet chart, an alphabet book and an orthography book;
- c) production of reading books for illiterates and literates who are native speakers of the language;
- d) production of a bilingual lexicon.

To these immediate outcomes from the volunteers, an external outcome could be a Master or a Doctoral thesis. This will simply be an outgrowth of the results of the project.

The carrying out of these activities was based on the choice of an approach which was deemed efficient for the volunteers with regards to the outcomes to be attained.

The language revitalisation approach adopted within BASAL: the volunteer-researcher and total immersion

Ethically, if a fieldworker is not wanted in a community, s/he would not stay in that community. A fieldworker will only go and stay in

a community which welcomes him/her and the work s/he is doing. This justifies the rationale underpinning the adoption of total immersion as the language revitalisation approach within the BASAL framework. This was viewed as a fruitful approach in the perspective of a community-gearred language revitalisation project.

Dixon (2007) points out that usually when a language is still spoken as a first language by everyone in the community, such a community is likely to welcome a stranger or outsider who wishes to learn their language and to provide whatever linguistic feedback the community requests. But this cannot be effective if sensitisation is not well-organised and conducted.

The total immersion approach is an opportunity to the researcher to get involved in the natural milieu of the language and to chat with local people. This occasion allows the field researcher to learn the language at the same time s/he is developing and teaching it.

The approach helps volunteers to be able to learn the local culture, acquire day-to-day communication tools and try to speak the language. Through daily exposure to the local culture and the local people, s/he learns the social know-how of the community, tries to get assimilated. For instance, s/he is able to go to the farm, to fetch water and to play with other young native people.

In general, the volunteer is advised to have many consultants. When I worked as a volunteer, I had many consultants outside the classrooms in each locality. However, usually, I had two to three permanent language consultants who were elders and who could no more carry out effective farm work. They spent most of their time at home. With such consultants, I had to arrange a timetable that convened them such that I was able to work with each of them for successive days.

A mistake one should not make as a young researcher without sustainable financial means is to start fieldwork providing substantial concrete financial compensation to one's language consultants. If the researcher does so, this could make a special resonance in the community such that everywhere the researcher goes, s/he is asked for incentives from his consultants, regularly or at times. What could be done to motivate the consultants is, for instance, giving them a recompense in kindness, by systematically checking what they like and granting them when necessary: this is what was given as advice to each of the volunteers. In most cases, I noticed that in my research community men usually like red wine, whereas women were in need

of some common goods such as soap, and salt. What I usually did was then keeping a bottle of red wine to each of the men consultants and soap and salt for women from time to time. This was not, in fact, to be considered as a pay for the job they were doing, but as a gift in respect of services rendered. This had to be considered as a gift because it was exactly like a service rendered by a community member to his fellow. Since field situations are different, if a consultant has a regular job, the language researcher should arrange to have time off to work with him.

In immersion field research, one builds a relationship with each of a small exclusive group of intelligent reliable language consultants. The consultants should move at the same speed as the linguist, understand what s/he is trying to do and help him to learn the language. The consultants may even anticipate in what the linguist is looking for. This is the result of a priceless community-based, total immersion-related partnership. The researcher must become part of the community in order to be accepted to the extent that could allow him to carry out the research.

From what precedes, we notice that in the field, within the perspective of revitalising the language of a community, the linguist must be working simultaneously on many fronts, six of them being prominent according to the BASAL expectations and principles of total immersion:

- a) becoming part of the community and beginning to learn to speak the language. This will give more esteem to the volunteer-researcher;
- b) collecting data for analysis;
- c) recording and analysing texts;
- d) developing a standard model for the language;
- e) promoting the standard model developed;
- f) developing basic reference materials;
- g) empowering the community.

The approach helps volunteers to often check the accuracy of their data by asking native speakers to listen and to correct them, by constructing short sentences and asking them to check their correctness. A mistake fieldworkers are usually invited to avoid is to record their texts and transcribe them out of the field. They should transcribe them at home when they are still in the community and when texts are

recorded with a recorder, then the following day, they must go back to their consultants to check the accuracy of the transcription.

All the issues evoked above show that when the researcher is welcomed in the community of the language s/he is going to develop, s/he must assimilate into the community, immerse themselves into the community and try as far as possible to acquire the good local cultural habits. These considerations will pave the way to the success of his field activities. Because the different activities carried out by the researcher are community-geared, in case s/he is an “outsider” and must leave the community at some point in time, s/he must empower the community such that even after his departure, the literacy activities could continue. In Cameroon, in general, in such contexts, the linguist fieldworker, before leaving the community sets a local entity that will continue the promotion of the language and look after its correct usage at least at the level of writing. This approach will also favour learning by doing in the community because as Mba (2007, p. 38) points out “the learning by doing process will better be a way to acquire ownership and boost the local managerial capacities”.

Every field research being exclusive, every field researcher must mould his or her strategies to match the very situation s/he faces. It is therefore worth pointing out that for/in a collaborative fieldwork, many potential obstacles are to be overcome by the researcher in order to maintain an ongoing working relationship with community members. To overcome these obstacles, the researcher must tactfully plan his activities and for this to be effective and efficient, s/he must succeed in convincing local people to be part of the project. There is no appropriate way to do this than organising strategic sensitisation campaigns.

Sensitisation of the community: a strategic task

Sensitisation is viewed as a strategic task in language revitalisation in that it is the corner stone for the success of the programme. In fact, if one fails to build a reasonable strategic plan, he could not be able to capture local people's community response.

Most often, according to ideas spread all over the years about indigenous local languages, even some of those who speak these languages as natives do not perceive any interest in their development. This behaviour is usually construed from the underestimation glued to those local minority mother tongues. This attitude dates back to

a colonial era where domination and stigmatisation from the major or dominant languages, nurtured at a given moment by the national, regional or local governments, consciously or unconsciously favoured and is still favouring to some extents a sentiment of reject and shame from the speakers of minority languages. Although in these days, the situation is changing, most people are still not convinced of the role their language can play in their education and development. This is the case of most African mother tongues because, nowadays, some Africans have developed a foreign language as their mother tongue. It is actually the case of English and French in Cameroon, as pointed out by Bitja'a Kody (2001). Thus, to convince the population to adhere to the project, language promoters and rescuers should establish strategic programmes for sensitisation.

Hence, as soon as a BASAL volunteer arrives in a research community, a few days after s/he should convene a number of people, selected on the basis of their assumed willingness to attend a general sensitisation meeting and capable of influencing other fellows for participation. This should be done with the help of some local peoples. In my case, the local traditional ruler and his dignitaries assisted me to identify and select those people. This is where and how each volunteer starts to involve community members in the (language development) activities.

The sensitisation campaigns usually consisted in:

- a) explaining to community members the role and goal of the presence of the volunteer linguist in the community;
- b) explaining to the native-speakers the role of language committee in the socio-economic, political and cultural development of the community;
- c) encouraging parents to take care of the intergenerational transmission of the language;
- d) inviting the local population to effectively cooperate all along the execution of the project;
- e) inviting the population to be part of the programme (the volunteer and the local people) to be established for the development of the language;
- f) convincing influential local people to raise awareness in the community for participation in the project.

Most often, s/he raises special attention on the issue of dialectal differences (not as a source of conflict) and the need to develop a standard model for all. In fact, sensitisation on dialectal differences and dialect unification in the written form is a crucial task in the promotion of a language. Community members are instructed to preserve a unique written form of their language while at the speaking level every speaker could keep his/her own dialectal accent. Community members are all informed on the advantages of dialect unification.

The invitees to the first meeting are informed that, sociologically, dialect unification (in its written form) is a source of togetherness and social cohesion when mutual intelligibility is attested. This does not imply that the oral use of the language in all its dialectal components is a source of the problem. In fact, unity is prescribed for the written form, but not at the oral level. From an economic point of view, documents produced in one dialect are cost-effective. It goes alike with personnel training which will be less expensive with the development of one dialect.

The sensitisation of community members consisted in presenting the advantages of a common written model, in instructing them on the broadcasting and popularisation of the standard norm. In addition, the speakers of the non-standard dialect were invited to show a conducive and positive attitude towards the standard norms. According to Watters (1989), this attitude favours social cohesion.

It is not always easy to convince everybody on the facts stated above. For instance, in the Bəmbələ community where I volunteered from 2005 to 2008, this task was not easy at all. Whenever I went in the community, I was compelled to provide strong argumentation in order to clarify, convince and reinsure some incredulous native speakers. The native speakers were already aware of their dialectal differences and their mutual intelligibility according to their reactions about the issue. Therefore, a much more accent on sensitisation galvanised them and led them towards the understanding of the necessity of dialect unification.

This sensitisation campaign must be generalised in the whole linguistic area by the volunteer because it is a continuous task. Wherever the volunteer goes, s/he is obliged to proceed alike and say the same thing given that community members usually have the same degree of interest or the same concern. The sensitisation campaigns are synchronised according to the volunteer's working days. Most often, from one locality to another, s/he must be accompanied at least by a native speaker, neo-learner, who already masters the contours and

concepts of the project and who could easily explain the goal of the project to his/her fellows in the local language: s/he is then acting as facilitator.

As pointed out above, when one arrives in a locality, s/he meets with the local traditional rulers at first (who usually helps in the organisation of sensitisation campaigns), and other local authorities. For example, local people were astonished each time I went to a new area in the community and exclaimed: “À tàgha ambələ, à tə alaŋ, à tə anək Bəmbələ, inde a vè à alaŋ nə bèès: mə avè ayəklì bənəŋ alaŋ nə acil ilaŋi yes”. *I tàgha nyiyəŋ*. Otherwise, “He does not speak nor understand our language; however he comes and tells us that he is going to teach us how to write and read it, it is strange!” Fortunately, the earlier facilitators who assisted me when I arrived in the field were always present to channel the sentiments and reiterate the idea behind the project. This feeling is almost the same in each community where a volunteer-linguist settles. Sensitisation campaigns took place until the end of fieldwork activities. They were spread over urban centres, mainly in Yaoundé and other towns. In general, sensitisation helps in the continuation of literacy activities in Bəmbələ because it was also intended to cure those minds who were still doubting the capability of the local language to favour local development.

This sensitisation is then the first factor whose success or failure will condition the participation of the population, native speakers and learners to whom the programme is destined. The involvement of the local population, even to a lesser extent, shows the positive reaction and reception of the programme in the community through collaboration. Otherwise, the volunteer researcher could not continue to implement the project.

As sensitisation gains ground and local people gradually become part of the project, promotion of the standard model becomes possible.

Sensitisation and promotion of the standard model through training and teaching material design

This section shows how the developed model is promoted through the training of local people. It is indeed during the training sessions that the volunteer is also able to acquire the elementary grammatical structures of the language for day-to-day communication. Furthermore, training sessions allow him/her to gather materials useful for elaborating the

different booklets s/he must produce. This training is possible thanks to the fact that local community members are convinced after sensitisation, and have decided to be part of the project.

Promotion of the standard model through literacy classes

The initial literacy classes organised in the field shall firstly be to establish and validate the alphabet and the orthography principles elaborated with community members. This is in fact, the first step in building a community-based orthography, an orthography made with the community and for the community.

Basic literacy begins with reading, writing and calculating. This is why volunteers must start the promotion of the standard model by training local people to write and read. This could only be possible if sensitisation succeeds and gets deeply rooted into local people's mind. The training takes the form of literacy classes where participant observation is the main data elicitation technique, formal classroom the main setting and teacher/student role-playing the teaching-learning strategy while respecting the principles of andragogy. This is the occasion to gather useful data for the elaboration of some teaching materials.

For instance, literacy in the Bəmbələ community started the very day we met with the speakers (native) to set up the working plan of our activities. Thereafter, the following days, we started elaborating, testing and validating the alphabet, and then the orthography. At the same time, we were identifying the keywords, short sentences for the conception of the wall alphabet and alphabet book. In fact, literacy activities in this community were presented according to the following three (3) axes¹:

- a) teach volunteer speaker-hearers to write and read their language through an alphabet and a well-established orthography. After a few months of apprenticeship/learning, some neo-learners could be able to acknowledge/recognise, identify and read any grapheme. They could be able to find a concrete word (within which is found the grapheme, focus of the lesson of the day), which materialised the graphemes, and finally, use it in a short sentence. This was a huge task because I was not a speaker

¹ See Djomeni (2012).

- of the language. Consequently, in our classes we used French and Bèmbəlè (French-Bèmbəlè/Bèmbəlè-French. The language under revitalisation is spoken in the French speaking area of Cameroon);
- b) literacy allowed us to identify and solve some problems related to those speakers who were literate in French and who had the possibility for self-literacy in their language. With the contribution/assistance of some neo-literates who already knew how to read and write in French, we elaborated some manuals. This was done alternatively with the teaching activities;
 - c) literacy classes were those instances where we were able to identify community members who could possibly be empowered and later on become trainers of the trainers. During alphabetisation classes, we could collect some texts, thanks to neo-literates for the elaboration of the primer.

During this stage of our many activities, we were obliged to move from one area to another in order to set up new literacy centres and to teach. Normally, in each area, classes took place twice a week and were organised as follows:

- a) test of orthography: the strategy here was to start from what is known to what is unknown to the learners. We began with those graphemes and rules that also exist in French (given that learners were almost all literate in French) to those specific to Bèmbəlè;
- b) presentation of the whole alphabet: this activity was done in collaboration with the learners in the vein of improving on what we initially established;
- c) systematic presentation of the alphabet: at the beginning of each session (teaching session), we revised the previous lesson and the alphabet. Each learner went to the board and read the wall alphabet we built on a large sheet of paper (A2), which was pasted on the board at the beginning of each session. This was an exceptional opportunity for evaluating neo-learners' knowledge acquisition speed and aptitudes, and their different areas of difficulties and then providing efficient panacea to tackle them.

This working plan was established, once settled in the community, and with common agreements with all the volunteers according to BASAL principles.

Moving within the community to generalise the model

In case of positive effect of sensitisation, the volunteer is able to trot within the community to generalise its activities.

To the volunteer, the promotion of the developed standard model is not only the matter of those community members who are around the area where s/he settles. S/he must go to the different local areas within the linguistic area to instruct other local people on how to read and write the language that is to generalise the language revitalisation activities according to its initial goals. Most often, since the community is enclosed in difficult-to-access areas, the volunteer has to move on foot or to run long distances on foot because of lack of means of transportation.

The adopted strategy is very simple. Every time s/he wants to move from one locality to another, s/he has to move at least with a neo-learner who could possibly facilitate communication. Once in the locality, the first step is to contact the local authorities, commencing with the local traditional ruler: this is fundamental in field contacts, in sensitisation strategies. When the contacts are secured, the first day during which s/he explains to everybody the goal of his/her presence, s/he could discuss and schedule the first meeting day. Then, the volunteer and his/her facilitator(s) could go back to his/her settling place.

When the meeting day comes, the volunteer goes back to the community, and according to the terms and conditions established during the previous discussions, those who were expected to be the first learners come to the literacy centre. Generally, once the contact with the traditional ruler is established, he becomes the intermediary between the volunteer and the director of the nearby primary school to negotiate the acquisition of a classroom where the literacy sessions will henceforth take place. If there is not a school in the locality, he shall find out what community hall – where it exists – could be used to this end. Literacy classes are shaped according to the model already described above. During lectures, the volunteer could collect new words, and out of classes, new texts.

In my case, most of the time, in the majority of the areas where I

went, the local traditional ruler lodged me. This was so because the first facilitator I had was a local powerful man whose only “word of mouth” could have a great influence. This was therefore possible because of community involvement and commitment due to the positive effects of sensitisation.

Conclusion

Sensitisation is proven as the backbone to success in any community-gearred language revitalisation project or programme. In fact, total immersion is only possible and successful when sensitisation roots have previously been deeply fixed. The BASAL programme relies on the hypothesis that for language revitalisation to be a community concern, it requires that the volunteer/researcher and the community work hand in hand. Within this framework, the volunteer/researcher and the community are bedfellows as it is often observed in the fields. Within this perspective, the outcomes are not only for the selfish or egoistic advantages of the researcher but are mostly geared towards the development of the community through ownership. For this to be possible, sensitisation must have been quite well-managed and explanations convincing. This is the starting point; the impulse which later on governs or rather provokes adhesion, favours community contribution and participation to literacy classes, instances where materials are collected for the designing of initial pedagogic documents.

Today, the project faces one main challenge, that of funding. It is not easy to find financial resources to revive it with the selection of new languages for revitalisation and the recruitment of more volunteers.

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