

Threatened languages and how people relate to them—a Cameroon case study

August 25 2017, by Jeff Good



In Lower Fungom, Cameroon men sing while working, highlighting the local

culture. Credit: Duylinh Nguyen

The world is going through an unprecedented period of language endangerment. Some [experts predict](#) that half of the world's languages will disappear within a century, with urbanisation and the increasing use of major world languages diminishing smaller languages' chances of survival.

The death of a language can be a significant loss for speaker communities who view their language as a key part of their heritage. This has led to revitalisation efforts, especially in parts of the world dominated by settler societies, such as Australia, Canada and the US. But the link between language and identity can differ greatly from community to community and is especially complex in societies dominated by multilingualism.

Since 2004 I have been working with my colleague [Pierpaolo Di Carlo](#) and other collaborators to understand the language dynamics of a region of Cameroon known as [Lower Fungom](#). Cameroon is one of the most [linguistically diverse countries](#) in the world. Around 300 languages are spoken by its approximately 20 million people. These include colonial languages such as [English and French as well as hundreds of local languages](#).

Lower Fungom is especially remarkable for its degree of linguistic diversity. In an area of around 100 square kilometres, roughly the size of the city of Paris, nine local languages are spoken by 12,000 people.

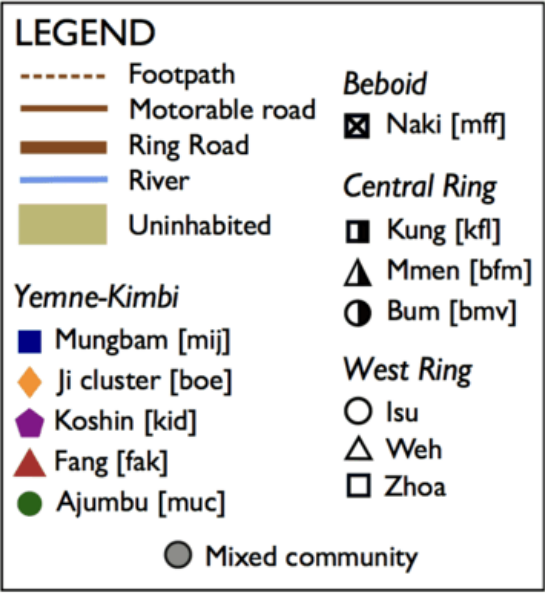
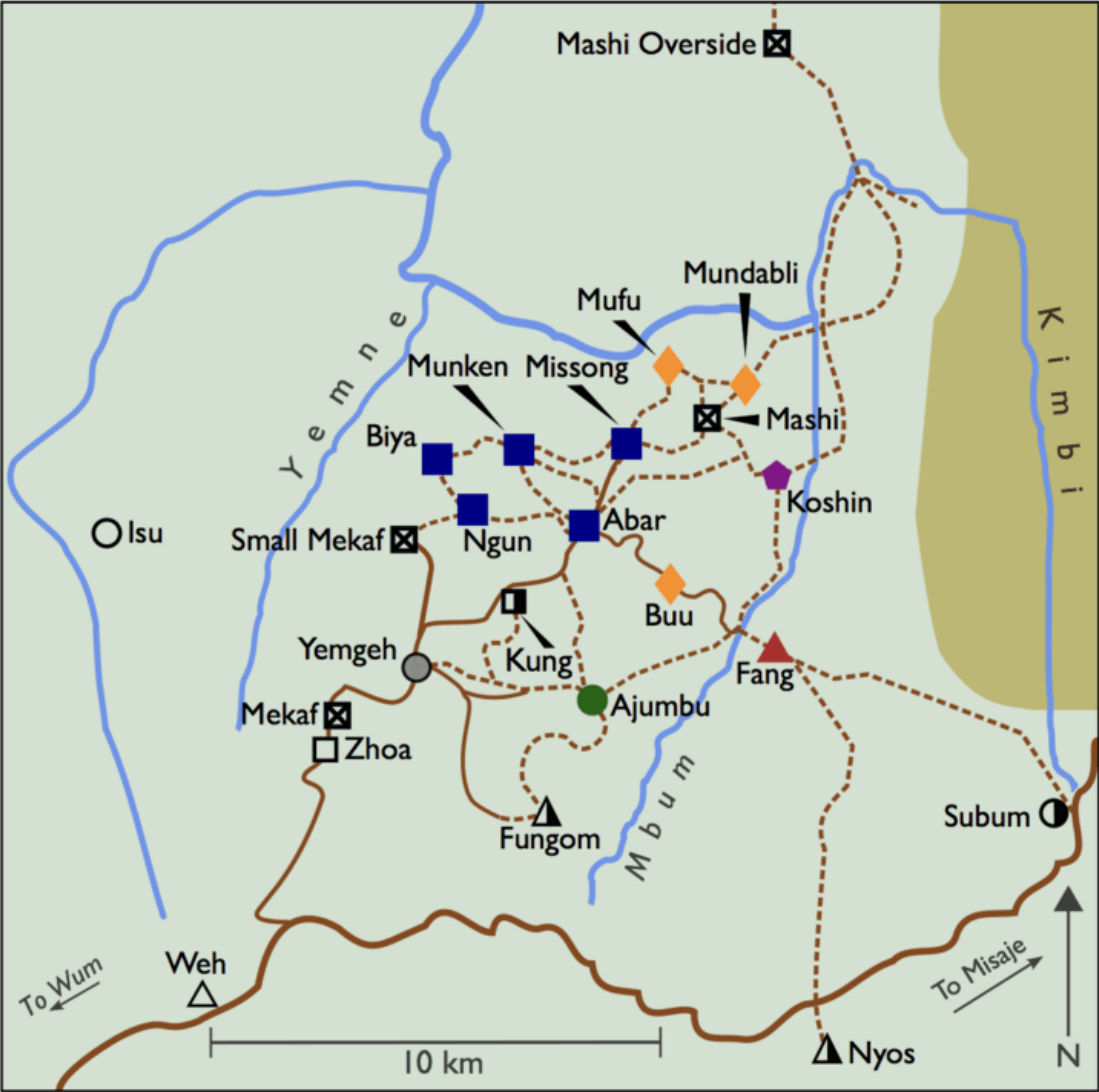
The languages of Lower Fungom, like so many others, are endangered. The ways that people use these languages are also endangered. Multilingualism is woven into the fabric of Lower Fungom society, as it

is in [much of Africa](#). What is especially remarkable is the sheer number of languages spoken by each individual in Lower Fungom. A survey conducted by [Angiachi Esene Agwara](#), a Cameroonian collaborator, found there to be no monolinguals in Lower Fungom. The average adult is able to speak or understand around five to six different languages. Most are learned without any formal schooling and are acquired through family relationships, friendships or for work.

Shift to major languages

All over the world, the [dominant trend](#) is for small speaker communities to shift to major languages such as English, Spanish, or Chinese. But in Lower Fungom, individuals are actively learning both local languages as well as socioeconomically powerful ones.

We have been investigating what motivates people to become multilingual in Lower Fungom. From a Western perspective, a striking finding is that languages are not strongly connected to ["deep" identities](#), such as ethnicity. In a country like France, speaking the French language is an integral part of [what it means to be French](#). In countries like Australia and the US, immigrants are expected to master English if they want to become citizens of their new countries.



Lower Fungom in Cameroon.

In Lower Fungom, we found something different. Each [village](#) is viewed locally as having its own "language". A linguist might classify some of these [languages as "dialects"](#), but, for those living in Lower Fungom, a distinct way of talking is a key marker of an independent village.

Villages are an important part of local life and the means through which individuals can access resources, such as food and shelter, and achieve personal security. Speaking a language is the clearest way for an individual to signal that they are part of a village community and that they should be allowed access to its resources. Being multilingual is a kind of insurance policy. The more languages a person speaks, the greater variety of resources they can claim access to.

Language saves man from drowning

Sometimes the connection between speaking a language and personal security is quite direct. A Cameroonian collaborator, Nelson Tsong Tsonghongi, working on the language of the Mbuk village, found close to Lower Fungom, collected a story about a man drowning in a river in the [Mbuk area](#).

The man was not from Mbuk, but he knew the language of the village. He shouted for help in the Mbuk language and people from the village came to rescue him. After he was rescued, they were surprised to find out that was not from Mbuk. If he had shouted in Cameroonian Pidgin English, he almost certainly would have been understood, but people may not have come to help him.

Other times the connection between language and identity is more subtle. The fragment of a conversation given below, collected by another Cameroonian collaborator, Rachel Ojong, has been translated into English. It originally took place in two Lower Fungom languages, Buu and Missong.



Dance of the Mndong ‘juju’ in the village of Ngun. Each village is characterised by having a distinctive set of ‘jujus’, where a juju is to be understood as a group owning exclusive rights on a mask and its associated dances, instruments, and songs. Credit: Pierpaolo Di Carlo

There are two men speaking, one senior (S) and one junior (J). The senior man is from the Buu village. The junior man is from the Missong village, but his mother is from Buu. The Buu language dominates the conversation. This is because the junior man is showing deference to the

seniority of the man from Buu.

Senior Man: Did you come up to Fang? I heard that you were chased away there.

Junior Man: Chased away? It was not me, it was Manto.

The senior man is accusing the junior man of some wrongdoing in a nearby village. The junior man first protests in Buu, but he then changes his language and speaks for one turn in Missong. This irritates the senior man, who ends the conversation immediately after.

S: So where did you go?

J: I reached here and saw you in this bar. (*Language changes to Missong.*)

S: You are still a child.

The junior man has switched his [language](#) to send a signal that he is no longer accepting the senior man's authority: He should not be treated as a junior man from Buu, but as someone from another village entirely. This can be seen as a kind of [codeswitching](#), with a very specific social meaning embedded within the local culture.

If we want to understand the full scale of the world's linguistic diversity, we should be thinking not only about languages, but also how speakers relate to their languages.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Threatened languages and how people relate to them—a Cameroon case study (2017, August 25) retrieved 10 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-08-threatened-languages-people-thema-cameroon.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.