

**The Uncunwee (Ghulfan) Documentation Project:
Linking language documentation to language conservation**

ROBERT S. WILLIAMS¹, ANGELIKA JAKOBI² & JADE COMFORT³

*The American University in Cairo*¹, *Universität zu Köln*² & *Leiden University*³

1. UNCUNWEE AND THE UNCUNWEE DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

Uncunwee (Ghulfan) is an endangered and underdocumented language spoken by the Uncu, an agrarian people living in the Uncu area, located south of the town of Dilling in the Nuba Mountains area of the Sudanese state of South Kordofan. This Nilo-Saharan, northern East Sudanic language is part of the Kordofan Nubian dialect cluster, made up of 13 mutually intelligible dialects, also known as Hill Nubian by academics and Ajang by its speakers. The endangered status of Uncunwee and other Kordofan Nubian dialects is widely recognized by their speakers and linguists alike. One indicator of this status is the dwindling numbers of mother-tongue speakers. Although reliable current figures are impossible to come by, there are certainly fewer speakers in the Uncu area now than indicated by Stevenson's (1984) estimate of 16,000. In the intervening years, several factors, among them a continued policy of Arabization by the Khartoum government and a protracted civil war, have led to the reduction of domains in which Uncunwee is used. Another factor is the outmigration to urban centers of many Uncu people, decreasing the number of Uncunwee speakers in situ and drastically weakening the status and use of Uncunwee in the Uncu area and in the Diaspora.

The Uncunwee Documentation Project (UDP) was established in 2005 in Cairo, Egypt, when we began working to document and describe Uncunwee spoken by Uncu refugees. The UDP team is made up of American, German, and Sudanese academic and community linguists and is headquartered at the American University in Cairo¹. Our early work with Uncu refugees led to funding from the Endangered Language Documentation Project (ELDP) at the School for Oriental and African Studies, University of London, which enabled us to make our first field trip to the Uncu area in Sudan in January 2009. At this time, we had been gathering data in Cairo for almost four years and had begun to analyze various aspects of Uncunwee grammar. Because of our work in Cairo, previous work in the Nuba Mountains by UDP team member Angelika Jakobi, and a previous visit to Sudan by PI Robert Williams, we already had some contacts to the Uncu community in Sudan, which enabled us to quickly establish a working relationship with the Uncu people in Khartoum and in the Nuba Mountains.

Our goals at this point were twofold. First, we wanted to describe the language, and in doing so produce an Uncunwee grammar and Uncunwee-English-Arabic dictionary, as well as gain insight into the relationship between Uncunwee, the other Kordofan Nubian dialects, and other Nubian languages. We also wanted to gather data in various formats that we could analyze and archive, as per our agreement with ELDP, our main funding

¹ We also receive generous support from the Linguistics Department of the Max Planck Institute of Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany and the Gesellschaft für bedrohte Sprachen, in Cologne, Germany. Additional past support has also come from the Endangered Language Fund at Yale University.

source. While it was our intention to continue to focus on documentary and descriptive work, we realized early in our stay in Sudan that the primary linguistic goal of a group of influential Uncu community leaders and intellectuals was to maintain Uncunwee as a viable language.

2. THE STATE OF UNCUNWEE AND LANGUAGE CONSERVATION IN THE UNCUNWEE COMMUNITY

It became apparent to us at the beginning of our stay in Sudan that the Uncu community was already well aware of the erosion of both their language and culture, and had already begun earnest discussion on this matter. Especially in the Nuba Mountains Uncu area, if not in the Uncu communities in Khartoum, the elder generation has acquired Uncunwee as a first language but their children tend to grow up with Arabic as a first language. Uncunwee is used in family and community domains in the Nuba Mountains, but not as a language of instruction in the schools or as a lingua franca outside of the Kordofan Nubian group. Arabic, as the result of a long-standing policy of Arabization by the Khartoum government, dominates in these areas. Since Uncunwee is a non-written language, there has also been no formal teaching of the language or the culture in the schools.

Perhaps the most serious threat to the existence of Uncunwee lies in the area of first language acquisition. Even in the remotest villages, there is now a growing trend among young mothers, themselves schooled in Arabic, to raise their children as monolingual Arabic speakers. This behavior seems to be based on a shared ingrained and perhaps subconscious belief among younger adults that Uncunwee is a tribal language that is inferior to Arabic, thus marking its users with a social stigma. This mirrors other language obsolescence situations. For example, this same pattern was found among speakers of American Indian languages in Oklahoma during the early part of the 20th century, resulting with one exception, in near-language-death states for the Oklahoma tribes. It is also possible that Uncu parents believe that bilingual first language acquisition will result in incomplete acquisition of one or both languages, though this has yet to be determined. Though our interviews with various Uncu people revealed an awareness of the seriousness of this trend, this problem had not yet been recognized in community discussions of language conservation issues.

However, some efforts aimed at language maintenance, such as attempts to develop an Uncunwee orthography and create an Uncunwee-Arabic word list, were already being undertaken by individuals, and efforts to organize language conservation endeavors were underway among Uncu leaders and intellectuals. This ad hoc language and culture conservation group recognized the importance of the ongoing orthography and lexicography work. They also understood both to be precursors to establishing Uncunwee as a written language, which was in turn seen as a condition necessary to halt the language obsolescence process. It was believed that an orthography and word list would facilitate the development of Uncunwee texts that could be used to teach the Uncu language and culture in schools.

At present, there is no place for the teaching of the Uncu language and culture in the Sudanese national curriculum. However, the budding Uncu language conservation efforts come at a propitious time, coinciding as they do with the 2005 Comprehensive

Peace Agreement between the state of South Kordofan, the ten states comprising South Sudan, and the Khartoum government. This agreement gives the southern signatories a modicum of autonomy in language and education policy, allowing them to designate the language of instruction and, to some extent, the curriculum that is used in their schools. So if and when Uncunwee texts are developed, it is quite possible that the language and culture might be taught in schools with a large majority of Uncu students.

The fact that the Uncu community was already aware that their language and culture were undergoing a process of obsolescence and had begun efforts to address this situation when we arrived in Sudan in January 2009, was very fortunate for us and, we hope, the Uncu people. This meant that our documentation and description agendas were seen by Uncu elders and intellectuals as being helpful to, and compatible with, their language and culture conservation goals. For us, this meant a relatively easy and immediate access to Uncunwee speakers who were willing to cooperate with us in our work. For the Uncu community, it meant that they would have access to various types of linguistic and technical expertise not present among community members. Thus we agreed to broaden our mandate to include assisting in the Uncunwee conservation effort.

3. LINKING DOCUMENTATION AND CONSERVATION

It is our position that any successful language conservation effort must be led and carried out by the speakers themselves, and not by outsiders, such as linguists or anthropologists. This is not to say, however, that documentary linguists should play no part in language conservation, and in fact, UDP team members feel an obligation to assist community member in maintaining and conserving Uncunwee. We can do this in a variety of ways, including providing assistance in the learning of relevant linguistic and computer skills by community language conservers; helping community members identify and focus on important aspects of language conservation; assisting in developing writing systems, where needed, as well as written language learning materials such as readers and other texts; helping to develop language awareness campaigns targeted at community members; and helping to connect community language conservers with other language conservation groups meeting similar challenges.

To this end, our initial response to the community's request involved offering to train community members in some elementary language documentation skills, such as use of the IPA and the writing of the Uncunwee tones. We also began discussion with the Uncu group interested in language conservation about other important issues involved in language maintenance, including the aforementioned language transmission situation.

3.1. Bringing descriptive linguistic skills to the Uncu community

We initially began working together with the two Nuba Mountain-based Uncunwee speakers who were already engaged in developing the aforementioned orthography and Uncunwee-Arabic word list. These two young men, who are acknowledged by elder group members as excellent Uncunwee speakers, also became our translators and guides on visits to Uncu villages. They graciously put in long hours everyday, coming to our compound in the evenings after field work days to help us translate data and to begin learning IPA transcription and how to identify and write the tones of Uncunwee. This

was of immediate value to the orthography development work, since prior to our arrival, lack of linguistic knowledge made it impossible for Uncu language conservers to identify phonemes and allophonic relationships in the Uncunwee phonetic inventory. One of our first successes in working with our new Uncu colleagues was to accomplish this task, so that we are now in a position to assign characters to Uncunwee phonemes, a necessary first step in the making of a writing system. In fact, this was not our first field school. We have been training our Uncu project member in Cairo in the basics of descriptive linguistics for the last two years. This helped in our initial training efforts in the Nuba Mountains and our experience there helped to refine our training in Cairo.

Our work with these two young men, who have now become UDP team members, combined with previous work with our Cairo team, also greatly advanced our knowledge of the Uncunwee tone system, important for our grammatical and lexicography work as well as for the development of an Uncunwee alphabet. Because of this collaboration, the Uncu community is now in a position to begin the long and difficult linguistic and political work that is involved in the establishment of a writing system. We hope to expand our field school on our next visit, teaching more language documentation skills and offering this training to more community members. In addition, we are planning to bring a lexicography expert to the University of Khartoum in January 2010, to offer an elementary dictionary making workshop to Uncunwee language conservers as well as academic and community linguists working to document other languages.

3.2. Community expertise put to use

We have thus far discussed a traditional symbiotic relationship between the language community and documentary linguists, with the community providing data and the linguists providing technical expertise. However, the Uncu community has also been providing us with skills and tutelage in cultural relevance that has benefited us in the making of more effective elicitation devices. For example, community members and local linguists have assisted us by drawing culturally relevant elicitation prompts and by making video recordings of elicitation prompt directions in the national language. We now have picture prompts and video-taped directions for the elicitation of locative marking and plan to expand this effort on our next visit. We have also been able to put these prompt directions, as well as video clip prompts from the Nijmegen ‘put’ project, onto iPods, which allows easy use of these elicitation devices in the field. Involving speech community members in activities such as these will eventually enable trained Uncunwee speakers to carry out linguistic elicitation on their own, or under long distance supervision through the use of programs such as Skype, which we have been using for elicitation checks since our return from the field.

3.3. Advising community language conservers

During our stay in the Uncu area, we had two meetings with Uncu and other Ajang leaders to discuss language and culture conservation issues. In one of the meetings, the topic was the possibility of developing an orthography that could be used by all Kordofan Nubian dialects. Some of the participants brought to this meeting a clear political agenda, seeking linguistic support for a cultural and political unification effort among

Ajang groups. This underscored for us the intensely political aspect of language conservation in general and more specifically the adoption of writing systems, and gave us the opportunity to make clear the desired political neutrality of our work and to establish that we would provide necessary linguistic data for conservation but would not engage in the internal politics of language maintenance efforts.

The second meeting, held with members of the UDP and Uncu intellectuals and community leaders, focused on the various necessary conditions for successful Uncunwee language conservation. The Uncu group placed primary emphasis on orthography development and the production of written Uncu language and culture materials, and we agreed that this was a vital area for conservation. In the discussion on this point, we were asked when the texts would be ready. This gave us the opportunity to talk about the importance of the primacy of community leadership and involvement in language conservation. We made a point that while we would do initial work with the community in orthography development, and would eventually produce an Uncunwee grammar and a dictionary, the development of Uncunwee texts must come from the community, albeit with our help.

Finally, we talked about what is perhaps the most urgent issue in the Uncunwee obsolescence process, the cessation of Uncunwee first language transfer. The point was made that if mothers stopped raising their children as speakers of Uncunwee, no amount of textbook development could stop the obsolescence process. To this end, we suggested developing a public awareness advertising campaign aimed at combating locally held negative beliefs about raising children as bilingual Uncunwee-Arabic speakers and concomitant negative attitudes about the status of Uncunwee versus that of Arabic and English. Such a campaign would target girls in primary and secondary school in an effort to reverse the now wide-spread practice of raising children as unilingual speakers of Arabic.

4. OBLIGATION, ASSISTANCE & POLITICS

The members of the UDP recognize a great debt to the Uncu people, for without them we would not have a documentation project, nor would we be able to carry out descriptive linguistic scholarship. From the beginning of our work with Uncunwee speakers in Cairo, and later in Khartoum and in the Nuba Mountains, the Uncu have generously and cheerfully shared their language and culture with us. Their pride in their language, the great value they place on it and their deep attachment to it are evident to all who encounter Uncu people.

While as linguists our primary professional obligation is to descriptive and documentary linguistics, we recognize and gladly embrace an ethical obligation to give back to the Uncu by assisting them in their efforts to maintain the vitality of Uncu language and culture and its centrality to Uncu life. In order for this to be successful, it is important to understand the nature and complexities of the linguist's participation in the conservation process, which has been the primary focus of this paper. A few principles have already become clear to us. First, linguists who carry out descriptive and/or documentary work with a language community have an obligation to assist that community, if asked, in language conservation. Second, while we as linguists can provide expertise and training that is essential to the conservation process, the language

conservation process itself must be driven, led, and carried out by the speech community. Finally, to the maximum possible extent, the participation of linguists in language conservation should be politically neutral, especially with respect to any intra-group division, such as clans or political parties.

It is clear to us that, while we have begun cooperative language conservation work with the Uncu, we will need to continually assess and make adjustments to the UDP/Uncu partnership in order to ensure the maximum effectiveness of the documentation and conservation projects.