

## HELPING COMMUNITIES EXAMINE THEIR LANGUAGE VITALITY USING A PRACTICAL GUIDE

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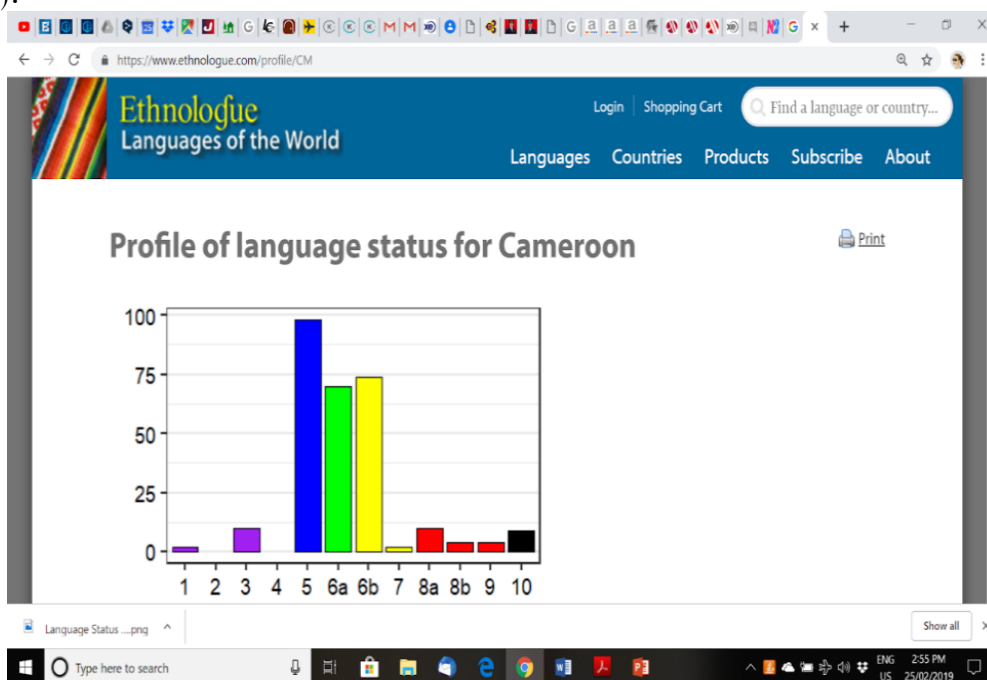
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**Abstract:** Cameroon is home to a wealth of languages: 283 according to *Ethnologue* (Eberhart, Simons and Fennig 2019). Until now, the vast majority have enjoyed healthy vitality, considering that 274 are still living languages and only nine are considered extinct. Of the living languages, 270 of them are indigenous languages, so, on the surface, that sounds like a robust palette of African languages being used in Cameroon. However, could language vitality be an issue in Cameroon? This author has become convinced over the last three years that many Cameroonian languages ARE becoming less vital – that is, they are losing speakers or richness or functions, often all of these together.

**Keywords:** Cameroon, communities, indigenous languages, language vitality, practical guide

### Introduction

Since 2014, *Ethnologue* has used an Extended Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) estimate (Lewis and Simons 2010) to report a vitality level for every language. The EGIDS builds on Joshua Fishman's GIDS (Fishman 1991). The EGIDS has 13 levels of language vitality on the scale, from International Use at Level 0 to Extinct at Level 10. Here is the EGIDS breakdown for Cameroon (Eberhart, Simons and Fennig 2019, viewed 26 Feb 2019):



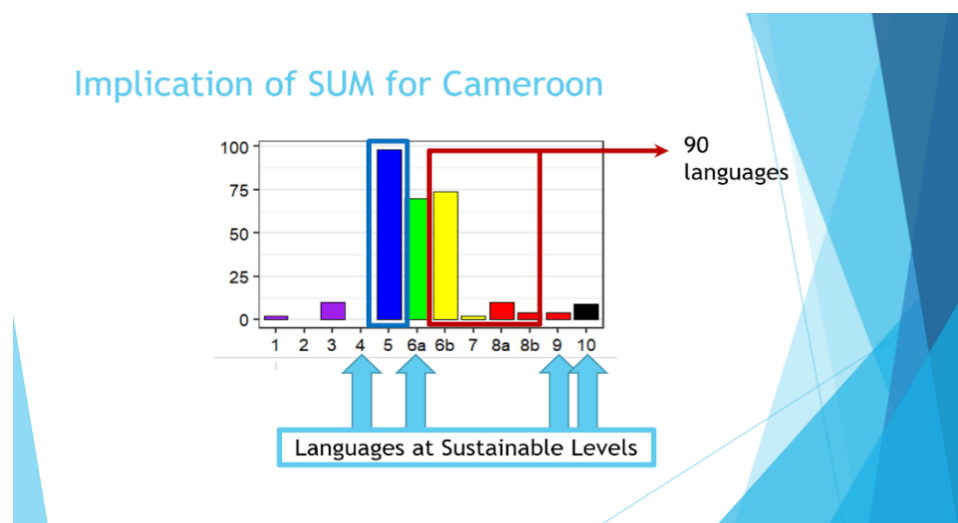
We can see the nine extinct Cameroonian languages represented at Level 10. The ones we are interested in, which are losing language vitality, are those at Levels 6b to 9,

where oral transmission is being lost between parents and children. The *Ethnologue* lists 76 languages as “in trouble”, corresponding to Levels 6b and 7, and 18 languages as “dying”, that is, at Levels 8a, 8b and 9. That’s 94 Cameroonian languages that may be losing vitality ... about one third of Cameroon’s languages! Paul Lewis and Gary Simons, sociolinguistic experts in SIL International, have recently developed a theory about language use, called The Sustainable Use Model (or SUM). They expound this theory in depth in their book, *Sustaining Language Use* (Lewis and Simons 2016).

The Sustainable Use Model also makes use of the EGIDS. One of the main points of the theory is that there are only four sustainable levels of use of a language:

- Sustainable Literacy, EGIDS level 4
- Sustainable Orality, EGIDS level 6a
- Sustainable Identity, EGIDS level 9
- Sustainable History, EGIDS level 10, which concerns adequate documentation of a language.

The implication is that languages at six other levels of the scale at least are not necessarily going to be able to sustain the use of their language at that level, and, in a multilingual environment with dominant languages, they are going to gradually fall down the scale. If the Sustainable Use Model is true and *Ethnologue* is accurate, then the way in which people are using the Cameroonian languages at levels 10, 9 and 6a is sustainable (see chart below with arrows pointing to the four “sustainable levels”). That is only 83 languages (Level 10: 9, Level 9: 4 and Level 6a: 70) at a currently sustainable level...and remember that the Level 10 languages are extinct, so the only aspect in which they are sustainable is that there is documentation to ensure they are in the annals of history! The biggest column shows the many languages at Level 5, which are “developing” (a written form). Although there are 92 of them, they have not reached the level of Sustainable Literacy at Level 4 (as that concerns institutional literacy), but one hopes that they do in fact have the bases of Sustainable Orality of 6a and will continue to be spoken. Importantly, however, the written use of those languages is not yet sustainable. That means that for the other 90 Cameroonian languages at the other levels (6b to 8b), their use at that level may not continue because it is not at a sustainable level.



Basic EGIDS table for Cameroon from *Ethnologue* (<https://www.ethnologue.com/profile/CM>, viewed 8<sup>th</sup> March 2019); analysis my own

Lewis and Simons are not just academics concerned with theory; they have worked in, and consulted for, many language communities and they want this information to be available to language communities. They and others have developed a practical guide, *A Guide for Planning the Future of Our Language* (Hanawalt, Varenkamp, Lahn and Eberhard 2016). It uses participatory methods for the community to discover the current use of their traditional language and become aware of the likely future of their language if nothing is done. The *Guide* (Hanawalt, Varenkamp, Lahn and Eberhard 2016:13) has five parts, which are supposed to be done progressively with the community:

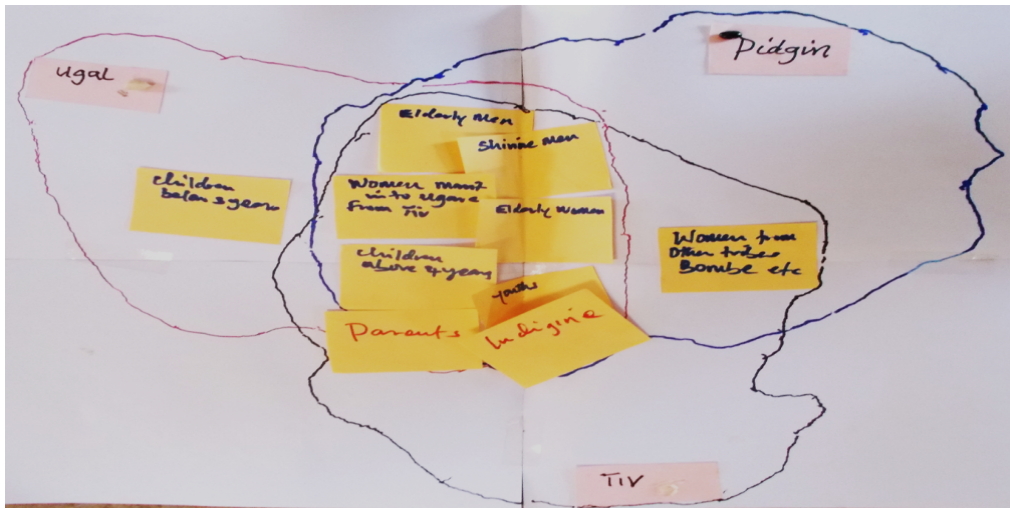
1. “Identify all the languages we use, who uses them and how they are used
2. Analyse how we are using our traditional language now
3. Make an Initial Assessment of where the language is at and what that means for its future
4. Assess the documentation of the language thus far
5. Plan what action we want to take for the future of our language.”

When this author was trained in using this *Guide* in Nigeria in 2016, she wanted to immediately try it out in the languages she and her husband work with. They are four Tivoid languages in Akwaya, in the South West Region: Iceve (aka Iceve-Maci), Ipulo (aka Assumbo), Ugal (aka Mesaka) and Iyive.

This author organised 2.5-day workshops to go through Part A of the Guide with each language group. The language groups had to supply pairs of mother-tongue facilitators for each village or quarter they wanted to expose these concepts to. Part A of the Guide consists of four participatory activities to help a group of the language community to identify all the languages they use, who uses them and how they are used. We shall see here the results of each of the four activities to understand what they talk about: The first activity (Activity A1) is a Community Map, where the group draws all the places they spend time each week and then indicate with coloured papers or other objects which languages they use in those places. Below is one of the Iyive maps:



We can see that, in the terminology of the Sustainable Use Model, this Iyive “speech community” has six languages in their “language repertoire.” Unfortunately, the coloured papers they use in the exercise to indicate which language(s) they speak where are not distinguishable on this black and white document, but we can see that the only place they use their own language, Iyive, exclusively, is at the shrine, pictured in the middle of their map. Everywhere else, they have multilingual language use. These are the kinds of things language groups realise from doing this exercise. The second activity of Part A of the Guide (A2) is a type of Venn diagram of who uses each language well. Below, we see that three of the languages the Ugal speak are Ugal, Pidgin and Tiv:



We can see that there is only one group of Ugal who ONLY speak Ugal: children below three years of age. This tool made this group see how multilingual their population is, even the elderly. The third activity (A3) is called “what our community knows and does.” It is a wonderful activity for discovering important domains in the culture, as well as what languages people are using for passing on concepts to their children. Here we see an Iceve chart of what domains of knowledge they possess and transmit:

Enale iye se cil		ne asseyele	
Eyalana	Esiana	Itigigh	Etele
-Igbelena ofenda I	-evolana eggol K	-alufu itigigh I	-vasoma I
-Elona igelegi I	-esaggana K	-ekusana I	-evolana etele I
-Elona asala I	-skmlana osiana K	-efolana itigigh I	-etunena epa I
-Elona ilisi I	-evolana isegh I	-egpha itigigh I	-ivelena I
-Esendena ilisi I	-iyelena eggol I	-ecasona I	-eyelana ontl ke etel / etigh K
-Ezifena asala I	-etane spans K	-ekamana itigigh I	-esaggana stels K
-Ewana apogga K	-ici iye isegh K	-eyumena ibi K	-acsla aye oggwie K
-Epavena apogga K	-eyavelana eggol K	-Ewana ezol K	-etemana stels I
-Eyanana igileg I		-Ewana agambta K	-eyelena ontl ke etigh I
-Ewunolena esoms I		-eyeghena itindi iye itig K	
-Ekafena eyansgh K		-iyenena awogga I	
-Ewana ogmla I			

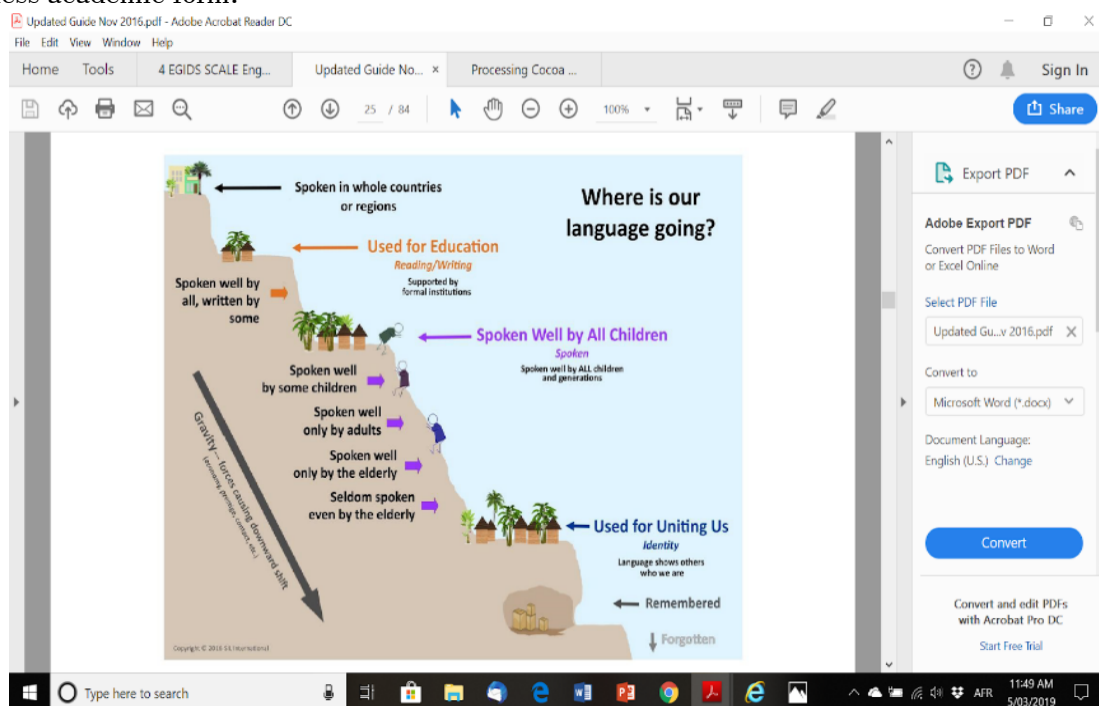
Iceve

Pidgin

ENGLISH

The group has chosen four domains to examine: Eyalana – farming; Esiana – trading; Itijigh – medicine; and Etete - communication. Under each domain of knowledge, they have come up with specific skills or knowledge an Iceve person needs in that domain. For example, the third line in the farming column “elona asala” – planting cassava, or, the sixth line under trading, “etanε opanε” - paying taxes. They also think about whether the knowledge comes from inside their culture – here, marked with the red letter I, or from outside their culture, here, marked with the red letter K. Then they note which language or languages they use to talk about that area of knowledge or to perform that skill. You can see the languages marked here with a groundnut or peanut for Iceve, a corn kernel for English and another larger black seed for Pidgin language. So, they have noted that they just use Iceve for planting cassava, but all three languages for talking about or paying taxes.

The fourth activity of Part A of the Guide (A4) is not so much an activity as an analogy. The way we use languages is compared to climbing a mountain. We teach the mother-tongue facilitators to explain this mountain to their own people and give them practice in doing it in their own language. There are four flat places, where a language can stay for a long time: Used for Education, Spoken Well by All Children, Used for Uniting Us and Remembered. Of course, these are the sustainable levels of language use, but presented in a less academic form:



(“Language Mountain” from Hanawalt, Varenkamp, Lahn and Eberhard 2016:25)

The way this author ran these four activities of Part A of *A Guide for Planning the Future of Our Language* was over a 2.5-day workshop. She trained people in the four activities during the day on Days 2 and 3. That included time for them to practise leading the activities in class. Then in the evenings of Days 2 and 3, they went and led the activities with a group of people in their quarter or village and reported back the following day. This training schedule is outlined below:

Day	1:	2:	3:
Morning		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do Activity 1 (Community Map) as the Facilitators lead you</li> <li>- Practise YOU leading Activity 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tell us how the community meeting went!</li> <li>- Do Activity 3 (What We Know) as the Facilitators lead you</li> <li>- Practise YOU leading Activity 3</li> </ul>
Afternoon	Listen and learn about why we want to run these community meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do Activity 2 (People speaking Languages) as the Facilitators lead you</li> <li>- Practise YOU leading Activity 2</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Do Activity 4 (Language Mountain) as the Facilitators lead you</li> <li>- Practise YOU leading Activity 4</li> </ul>
Evening	Visit people you want to be at your community meeting the next two nights to remind them! (Elders, youth, women, elites) Who:	Community meeting: YOU lead Activities 1 and 2 to have a community discussion about language use	Community meeting: YOU lead Activities 3 and 4 to have a community discussion about the future of your language  Next morning: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tell us how the community meeting went and whether they want to continue</li> </ul>

There were some benefits and also challenges from this experience of using *A Guide for Planning the Future of Our Language*. Four benefits that emerged were:

- The four Part A participatory activities definitely **gave some of the population insight into their language use and vitality**. For example, one Ugal man remarked upon seeing the Venn diagram outcome of the Activity A2, “Tiv is eating our language up!”
- Some people were better able to **see the importance of speaking the language as much as possible and took steps to change language use**. For example, the Chairman of one Ugal traditional council now requires Ugal people to speak only in Ugal at traditional council meetings.
- The Guide activities in the initial model were to be **done by speakers with speakers, in their own language**. This reduces the “observer’s paradox” and increases understanding and acceptance of the concepts.
- Two communities were **keen to continue** with parts B-E of The Guide.

One young Iyive man, Jude, put it in these words, “This training has helped me see that our language may be in danger. We need to keep speaking it and using it to talk about many things, otherwise, bigger languages around us like English, Pidgin and Tiv will dominate.” Although awareness of language vitality was therefore raised, there were, however, many challenges in using this Guide. This author identifies three here.

First, it was difficult to find mother-tongue facilitators to come to the 2.5-day workshop to be trained. For example, the author works with four languages in Akwaya but has only

managed to do this first part of the Guide training with three of them. The other one, Ipulo, postponed three times and couldn't find two people from each of the five quarters they wanted to participate. While this is understandable, as we are trying to raise interest in something – language vitality - that people are currently unaware of, it can be frustrating. Since transport is on foot in Akwaya, we trekked four hours on several occasions to the Ipulo area with all the materials needed, only to wait and wait and then return home a few days later, not having done a single activity!

Secondly, it was difficult for some people to grasp how to facilitate a participatory activity. Sometimes they were inclined just to copy what we had done in class, rather than help their own group generate their own ideas. In particular, activity A2 (the Venn diagram of who speaks which language) was complicated to try to separate out specific groups in the community who do or do not master the other languages. In the end, two of the languages did not do it with their community groups. The community map (Activity A1) was most easily mastered, followed by the Language Mountain (A4). What We Know and Do (A3) often did not result in a very deep analysis of the chosen domains.

Thirdly, the civil unrest in the NW/SW of Cameroon came along and so, even with the groups who wanted to continue with Parts B-E, we have been unable to do so up until now. The Guide has been used in many other parts of the world. There too, they have encountered challenges, which have led them to modify how it should be used (Eberhard 2017). For example, they have realised that there is not a big impact if community leaders are not involved from the outset. They are suggesting now to use some of the Guide activities, and other participatory activities, with a group of leaders over a three-phase set of discussions: Awareness, Assessment and Planning. They are calling this the “Language and Identity Journey” and we have also begun trialling this method in SIL Cameroon. Leaders in the methodology are also now including discussions of identity and not just language, because they see some communities no longer use their language, but rather need to reinforce the level of Sustainable Identity. Also, they now suggest that rather than making plans as per Part E of the Guide, language communities have their own ways of planning which should be respected and used.

This author, in her own use of the Guide in Akwaya in the future, has made two modifications: doing Activity A2 (the Venn diagram) WITH mother-tongue facilitators, but not trying to train them to do it with their own community, and hoping to do the planning stage of Part E with existent structures who are working in favour of the language in the area, like Language Committees or churches, so that the plans are integrated into the current work.

Three future uses this author hopes to see of *A Guide for Planning the Future of Our Language* is that many people will be trained in it, try it – as it is or modified - with Cameroonian language communities, and that one day she will be able to follow up the further parts of it with the Akwaya communities.

Firstly, she hopes that interested people such as those reading this presentation would read up on the theory, get trained, and go and facilitate individual activities with community leaders of languages they know or are trying to help. Anyone can download The Guide in English, French or Spanish from the website and read through it. SIL International offers a six-week on-line course called Introduction to Language Development, which guides participants through the Sustaining Language Use book and the theory. SIL Cameroon has also offered training in the Sustainable Use Model and the Guide and would probably do so again if there is enough interest.

Secondly, despite the focus now on community leaders, this author still sees a place for mother-tongue facilitators to be trained in the Guide to raise awareness in their communities, as she did in Akwaya and has done elsewhere.

Thirdly, she would like to see Parts B-E of The Guide in action! Therefore, when she gets to go back to Akwaya, she hopes to follow it through to the end with at least one of the communities if they want it.

May this tool of *A Guide for Planning the Future of our Language* and the new version of the Language and Identity Journey be well-used in Cameroon to help many language communities examine their language use, make informed decisions and secure the use they want to make of their language in the future.

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