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Busy intersections: A framework for revitalization¹

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Abstract

This paper reports on the applicability of a pedagogical model for use in West Africa drawn from adult literacy practices in the United States. It proposes bridging the gap between linguists, teachers, and community organizers, and building on the ethnographic skills of language documenters. One increasingly important goal of language documentation has been “creating and mobilizing documentation in support of pedagogy” (Nathan and Fang 2009:132) or even as a “social movement” (Dobrin and Berson 2011). A documentary perspective is here synthesized with an adult literacy one, fitted to the context of West Africa, to offer some guidelines for revitalization efforts.

1 Introduction

Several research projects described here have generated the output typical of a major documentation project: data collection and analysis, archiving, developing local capacities, promoting sustainability, etc. What was missing, however, was an evaluation of the role of literacy practices in those projects.

Community-based goals have been given some attention by Africanists but primarily with reference to Western models, the legacy of colonial ideologies which are explored in Storch 2013. Moreover, Africanists have not been terribly interested in the whole enterprise of revitalization (see Dimmendaal Forthcoming). For example, a recent volume (Jones and Ogilvie 2013) dedicated to “documentation, pedagogy, and revitalization”, dealt only with languages from Europe, the Americas, and Australia – none from Africa (cf. Henderson and Rohloff To appear and other papers in the same volume).² Clearly African practices need some discussion.

¹ Work on Mani has been supported by grants from: the National Science Foundation (DEL 0652137); the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme, SOAS, University of London (MDP 0085); the Bremer Stiftung für Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie, Bremen, Germany; a Fulbright Lecturer/Researcher Award; and the Endangered Language Fund, New Haven, CT. Helpful comments have come from audiences at the 3rd ICLDC (2013) at the University of Hawai’i and ACAL 45 at the University of Kansas (2014); my thanks to Russ Schuh for some details of his own efforts at language revitalization.

² Similarly, none of the papers in Mihas *et al.* 2013 focus on African languages. A reviewer pointed out that an exception to this generalization is Biesele, Pratchett and Moon 2012, which deals with community-based language projects among the Jul’hoan and #X’ao-ll’aen in Namibia..

A possible direction is to assess emergent literacy practices, comparable to what has been done in and for immigrant communities, building on existing or nascent capacities. This paper introduces the two frameworks of adult education in such communities from Reder Forthcoming: the program-centric “Parking Lot” and the learner-centric “Busy Intersection”. The Busy Intersection corresponds roughly to an African market, a much friendlier place than a busy intersection. The Parking Lot corresponds to the (typically) government- or NGO-driven educational practices that usually follow Western models informed by Western ideologies. The framework is applied post facto to one project as an assessment tool; this paper reports on that evaluation, a revealing (and disheartening) enterprise. The paper evaluates a revitalization effort’s successes and failures in terms of the parking-lot / busy-intersection dichotomy. It is found that those components following the latter model turned out to be the most successful.

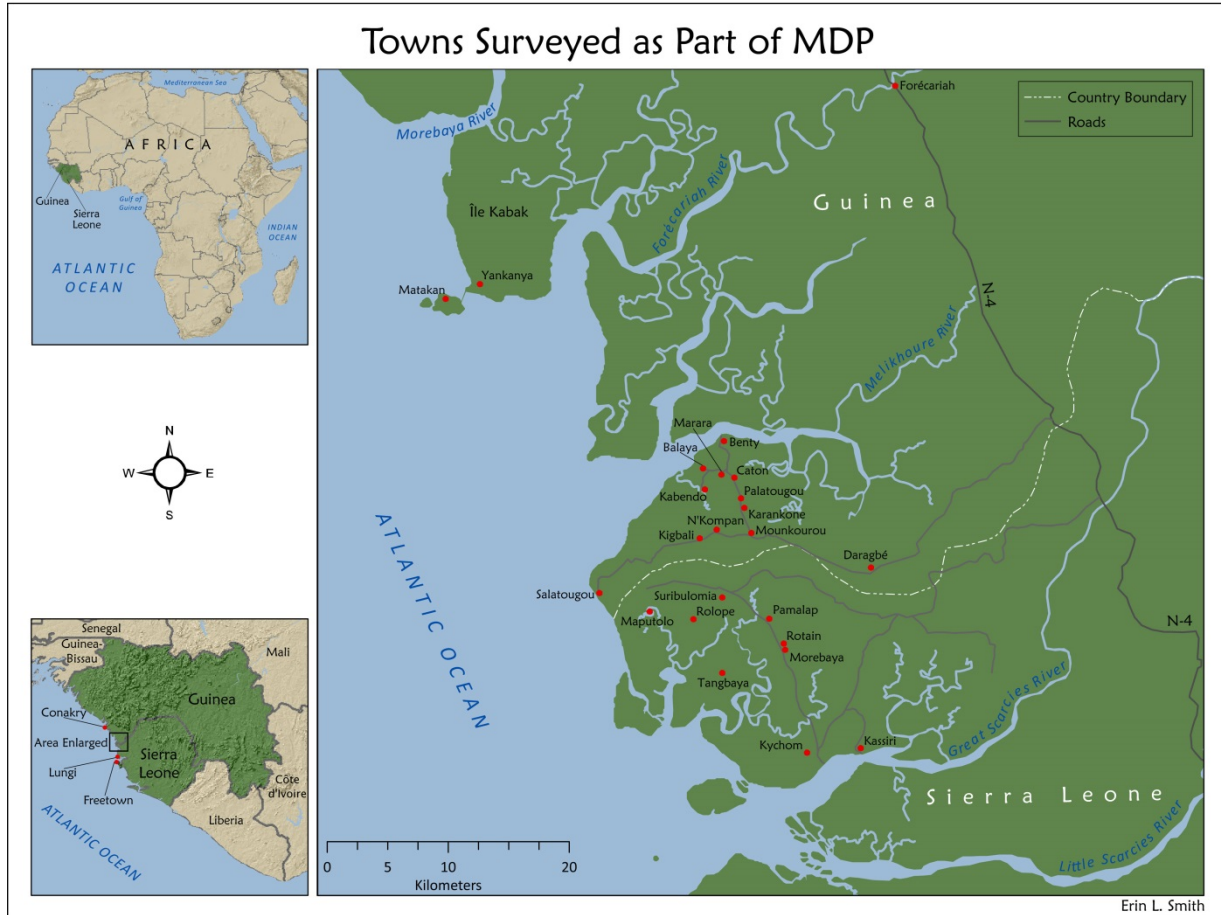
The final part of the paper characterizes how the model will be used to provide guidelines for an upcoming project for another endangered language.³ With this framework the general expectations of revitalization goals (Lüpke and Storch 2013a) are adapted to localized and achievable ones emerging from the community, *for* and *with* rather than simply *on* the community (Cameron *et al.* 1992).

2 Background

The experience brought to bear on issues in language revitalization comes from research on both endangered and vital languages, primarily in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea. A succession of research projects generated all of the typical output of a major documentation project: data collection and analysis, archiving, training junior researchers, developing local capacities, etc., the traditional benchmarks of a documentation project. There has also been some attention devoted to sustainability. What has been missing, however, is an evaluation of community-based goals and creating activities based on those goals: the focus has been on traditional program-based practices rather than learner-centric frameworks. The resolution of the antinomy points towards the latter as a more appropriate solution.

The Samu (French spelling “Samou”) region of Sierra Leone and Guinea represents a relatively inhospitable region of low-lying sand banks and mangrove swamps abutting the Atlantic Ocean. The area had been uninhabited until relatively recently, though slaving had once made the area important for intermediaries. There were some French banana plantations on the Guinea side but nothing comparable in Sierra Leone. Although no important *entrepôts* existed in the Mani area, smaller storage pens still exist on the island of Matakan and near the Port of Benty in Guinea (see Map 1 below). Slaving was a profitable occupation. Coupled with this pressure from slavers on the Atlantic Ocean side was the increasingly militant Mande Expansion (Brooks 1993, Murdock 1959, Ki-Zerbo and Niane 1997 and/or *mandinguisation* (Arcin 1911)), which has impinged on traditional Mani areas.

³ The undertaking at this point remains a plan since implementation has been delayed by the Ebola crisis. Despite its devastating effect, Ebola and the need for long-distance communication may have provided a new context for literacy (see section 6 below).



Map 1 The Mani-speaking area

The challenge of revitalizing a language such as Mani is partly the obvious one entailed by the morbidity of the language (Childs 2012). This challenge includes simply documenting the language, of course, but also identifying the political will and energy among a people dispirited and with low self-esteem after years of peripheralization and even abuse (Childs 2011). A further challenge arises from the low level of literacy in the culture. This co-exists with a respect and a desire for education in the Western sense, likely proceeding from a colonial ideology. Learning the Koran is a relatively new phenomenon, primarily on the Guinean side of the border. This seeming paradox is directly attributable to the overwhelming lack of local resources, but may also be a substratal or underlying resistance to the West. Some encouragement, however, can be taken from the desire for modernity, especially cell phones and videos on the part of the young, an energy that could be tapped.

2.1 West African literacy practices

African literacy practices, particularly West African ones, have been well described in Lüpke and Storch 2013b (see also Lüpke 2011).⁴ For example, in Chapter 1 Lüpke characterizes the “ecology of writing” in Senegal. Senegal’s history, of course, features a much more extensive and intimate relationship with France as well as with Islam and even Christianity. Although four major Senegalese languages were codified in 2007 (Wolof, Pulaar, Seereer, and Mandinka), little use is made of the written form of these languages (Lüpke 2013:50). Nonetheless, literacy plays a role in Senegal, particularly in the government and in commerce. Literacy, however, is unevenly distributed elsewhere on the continent, much of it the product of colonial practices or of religious proselytizing. Neither force has had much effect in the Samu.

2.2 Literacy in the Samu

The Samu is not unusual in being visited by both Christian and Muslim proselytizers. On the Guinea side of the Samu, Islam has been more successful; on the Sierra Leone side it has been something of a tossup between the two religions. Two significant towns in the Sierra Leone Samu (Morebaya and Tangbaya) are roughly as much Muslim as they were Christian; a sizeable proportion of the population, however, bore no great affinity with either religion. The proportion of people admitting a religious preference increases as the age of the respondents went down. The old people tend to follow traditional practices. Religious training (Islam, Christianity) often has a literacy component but with little beyond reading or reciting religious tracts. Nonetheless, there are some literacy practices on which one could build a revitalization effort.

2.3 The schools

The public education system on both sides of the border receives little support from either the national government or local leaders. The school in Tangbaya, the focus of this discussion, is typical. The building was designed and constructed as a three-bedroom house and never achieved the dignity of any “plastering”; the skin of cement that coats the mud bricks on the outside had never been applied. The mud bricks lay exposed to the elements and eventually gave way. On a later visit I found that the school had collapsed and there had been no effort made to repair it. The school was situated at some distance from town with a water source nearby and no latrines. A dusty soccer field lay in front of the school.

As one observed the classes (six grades divided into three rooms), it is striking that as the students get bigger, the classes are numerically smaller and with fewer females, an inverse correlation that does not bode well for producing an educated populace, especially one featuring input from females. Another inverse correlation is relevant: The older the children are, the more useful they are to the village economy. Thus class size is reduced when there is work in the fields or in the kitchen. Girls are also likely to get pregnant as they mature.

In other places where I have worked on endangered languages, there have been no standing schools. Where the Bom-Kim people were concentrated, for example, in the town of Nyandehun, there was no school. A school that had been built for the twin towns of Nyandehun -Tamuke was burned down by “the Rebels” during the Sierra Leone civil war (1991-2002). The school had originally been built by missionaries but all that was left in 2010 was a set of high stone walls.

⁴ A review can be found in an upcoming issue of *Language Documentation and Conservation* (Childs To appear).

2.4 Cultural practices

One encouraging sign of cultural vitality are the still vibrant cultures of song and dance. The Mani are widely renowned for their dancing; several, for example, have gone on to perform nationally and internationally as part of the Guinean troupe, *Les Ballets Africains*. A well-established practice throughout the Samu is for small performance groups to travel from village to village as well as to compete against each other. Story-telling, typically folk tales and the like, is a popular form of entertainment, as was featured at a Mani cultural festival we sponsored and filmed in 2005 (featured in the vlog [Lost Voices 4](#) The children; see Appendix A: Links to video blogs (“vlogs”). Building on such vibrant cultural practices remains a possible avenue for developing literacy.

2.5 Busy Intersections

Community-based goals have been given some attention by Africanists, but primarily with reference to parking lots due to (post-)colonial ideologies. What needs to be done is assess (emergent) literacy practices, comparable to what Reder and his colleagues have proposed for immigrant communities (Reder Forthcoming). These communities contain LESLLA learners (Low Educated Second Language and Literacy Acquisition), much like what is found in West Africa. The questions they ask are,

- How do new literacy practices emerge and expand as cultures come into contact?
- How do individuals with little formal education and/or literacy engage in these emergent literacy practices?
- How do learners draw on available cultural, linguistic and literacy resources as they engage with emergent literacy practices?

Moreover, the questions these researchers ask (slightly adapted) are relevant to the Mani situation. Reder’s keynote address delivered at the 2013 LESLLA conference suggested ways to support such learners by means of the *busy intersection model* and *practice engagement theory*. As introduced above, busy intersections contrast with parking lots in that they relocate the focus of literacy in the community.

(1) Practice Engagement Theory: Bringing literacy into people’s lives (Reder 2013)

- bring learners’ lives into the classroom and use the learner’s life as curriculum
- bring literacy programs into learners’ lives
- give away literacy: design programs that bring literacy support to people in life contexts (e.g., in health care) rather than bringing people to free-standing literacy programs

Practice Engagement Theory relates the structure of emergent literacy practices to the socio-historical contexts of literacy contact, especially the economic ones. Reder bases his model and theory on his experiences in several parts of the world, the first being Africa interestingly enough, among the Vai of Liberia. The Vai are relevant to such issues because they have an indigenous writing system that is part of the culture. This writing system (a syllabary) was traditionally used for sending notes, and as its use expanded, so does its form. Literacy built itself on extant cultural practices such as public speaking and songs.

(2) Emergent Literacy Practices in an L1 Low-Education Context (the Vai)

- Literacy practices emerged as writing was added to existing social practices (e.g., sending notes)
- Over time, the emergent literacy practices evolve new distinctive features (e.g., deixis)
- Multiple social roles and collaboration are often involved in the performance of a literacy practice and are linked to its expansion (e.g., impact of literacy on speech)
- The teaching and learning of literacy is itself an emergent literacy practice (e.g., use of songs)

Other research sites where Reder developed his model are not quite so relevant to the Mani situation (referred to by their pseudonyms) but are mentioned to show the model's universality:

(3) Emergent literacies in other contexts

- “Seal Bay”, an Inuit fishing village in Alaska
- “Newton”, a Hmong community in a western US city
- “Pleasantville”, a migrant Hispanic community in US

as well as a longitudinal study of adult learning in Portland, Oregon. They are included here to show the varied contexts in which the approach emerged and was developed.

One obvious difference between the situations Reder describes and those with which I am familiar is the importance and value of literacy. In the case of Reder's contexts, except for the Vai, there is a general ambience of literacy. No such environment exists among the Mani, the Bom, or the Kim. The only literacy practices are those of religious proselytizers, and in those contexts, literacy remains the provenance of men. The only times that literacy is of value is when there are hut taxes to be paid or fines for fish nets of an overly small bore.

The goals of “literacy”, then, as might be conceived by speakers from the endangered language areas where I have been working, are unclear. They must, however, emerge from immediate needs, for the communities are very much subsistence societies. People don't know what they will be eating in the evening or sometimes even if they will be eating in the evening. In the next section I evaluate one intervention in the Mani-speaking village of Tangbaya, using the *busy intersection model* and *practice engagement theory* to frame the discussion.

3 What we did and why

The goals of the revitalization component were rather lofty and general, if not inchoate. The team wanted to resuscitate the Mani language and culture. We felt this could be done by valorizing the language beyond what we had already done by writing a grammar, producing a dictionary, and developing a general reader. The original goal had been documentation, e.g., Himmelmann 1998. In addition to changes in my own thinking since the inception of the project (1999), however, there had been concomitant changes in how the field approached language documentation, for example, expanding the tasks to include community-driven goals, e.g., Rice 2011. But what had changed at the field site was even more significant: the discovery of the remote village of Tangbaya on an island of the same name, where children actually grew up

speaking the language (see Map 1). No where else were children speaking the language as part of a regular community. Revitalization, including the development of Mani literacy, became what I felt at the time to be an attainable goal, especially in that local politicians and village elders welcomed the project.

What we could do, however, was constrained by a number of factors, many of which are relevant to any revitalization / literacy effort, especially with the marginalized communities speaking threatened languages.

(4) Constraints on Mani literacy / revitalization

- extreme poverty (Sierra Leone always near the bottom in any world ranking)
- the ravages of a violent, bloody, and pervasive civil war (1991-2002)
- the absence of responsible governance beyond the village
- a moribund educational setup with no resources, work outside school more important
- a devalued language and culture, only useful in talking to the dogs and *les fétiches* (Childs 2006)
- time and distance, e.g., the isolation of Tangbaya⁵
- traditional values and ideologies, e.g., school not highly valued, Mani considered a worthless language

These factors, even including the last, were vital in directing the focus and energy of revitalization onto the speakers themselves, a lesson absorbed more thoroughly post facto. Although we discussed what we were doing with the elders and local politicians, it was rare that their enthusiasm and support extended beyond listening and granting assent and that they were active in the decision-making process. Somewhat naively on our part, it was assumed that revitalization of the sort we were advocated was what the community wanted.

I begin by discussing one initiative that depended on the community itself, specifically on the children and their resourcefulness. This component concentrated on computer literacy in addition to standard literacy, both of which we saw as instrumental to the revitalization effort.

3.1 The Hole-in-the-Wall initiative

One source of inspiration for the implementation of the literacy initiative was based on the Hole-in-the-Wall initiative of Sugata Mitra in India, which documented how kids learn on their own, just as had been found by the OLPC (the One-laptop-per-child initiative (Dec 2007) of the MIT Media Lab. Although the OLPC did not offer us any computers, project funds were enough to buy six very basic computers. Here is a statement from Mitra as to how and why the computers were to be made available to the children.

Today's children need not only basic education, but also the ability to deal with an increasingly complex and connected world. We need to create inclusive educational solutions that address all sections of society and help transform

⁵ As an indication of how remote Tangbaya is, UNESCO distributed school materials to local Sierra Leone schools while I was there in 2012. The UN representatives, however, never reached Tangbaya.

them. Now, more than ever before, it is critical to look at solutions that complement the framework of traditional schooling. Minimally Invasive Education™ is one such solution – a solution that uses the power of collaboration and the natural curiosity of children to catalyze learning. (<http://www.hole-in-the-wall.com/>)

What Mitra and his co-workers did was make a computer (the keyboard) available to children and allow them to view a secure screen. With minimal instruction provided to a few individuals, the children were able to make rapid progress in using the computer. The experiment was conducted in Khalkaji and a number of other venues.

Alternative Education (the Khalkaji experiment and others): Young kids in this project figured out how to use a PC on their own — and then taught other kids. He asks, what else can children teach themselves?
(http://www.ted.com/talks/sugata_mitra_shows_how_kids_teach_themselves)

Mitra stressed how it had to be done in groups, with the children becoming computer literate in six months. Some were as young as eight years old and tended to learn faster than the elder children who taught them. He viewed the process as something of a “self-organizing system”.

The advantages to this approach are several. It allows students to learn on their own without the presence of an instructor, it accords responsibility for the instruction to the students, and it empowers the students to learn on their own. It also makes fewer demands on resources – computers can be shared – as was not the case in OLPC. In addition, such practices are in accord with traditional education where there is no explicit instruction, typically in a sort of observant apprenticeship.

3.2 Piloting literacy materials (2012)

This section briefly describes further details of the piloting of the Mani revitalization program and is followed by a section evaluating that effort using the Busy Intersections and Emergent Practices models. The thinking behind what we did was to concentrate on young people (we picked the oldest in the school since we assumed they would be the most literate), schoolchildren being the most accessible (and controllable), and provide them with the resources and instruction necessary to learn how to read. The equipment that was provided the students consisted of the following: six small (laptop) computers, ten small cameras, audio recording equipment, and various writing materials.

The instruction took place in two ways. Parallel streams of literacy training existed, both of which favored the most advanced class in the elementary school. The first stream formed part of the regular school curriculum. A research assistant or I spent an hour each day teaching students how to read or write Mani with a secondary emphasis on computer and camera literacy.

As part of the classroom-literacy campaign, students were asked to put together a letter to an American counterpart along with some pictures illustrating their lives. Each multimedia “letter” was prescribed by me to consist of at least a photo e.g., Figure 2 in Appendix 2 (virtually all students scowled when posing for a photograph), a recording of each student describing himself

in Mani, e.g., Figure 3 in Appendix 2, and a transcription of that description, e.g., Figure 4 in Appendix 2. The thought was that these letters could start up a pen-pal correspondence with students in the States, an activity I had successfully launched as a Peace Corps volunteer. It is notable that no one student was able to complete all three of these tasks.

The second major component was an open computer lab in the afternoon with minimal supervision, adopting the Hole-in-the-Wall approach to instruction. A similar procedure was followed with regard to the cameras. The afternoon session was also the time when students would turn in their cameras and download their pictures. Sixth-grade students enrolled in the school had first priority, but the sessions were open to all until we ran out of space (chairs and benches, always shared). These open sessions proved to be quite popular and were attended by teachers and other townspeople, as well as by students.

To carry on the project after we left and to maintain links with Tangbaya, we attempted to set up a pioneering stand-alone wifi station developed by graduate students at the University of Michigan. Unfortunately we could never get it to work. The plan was to have an internet connection piggy-backing on the mobile telephone system. Besides simply not being able to pick up a signal, we had other major problems: parts were delayed, an instruction manual was not sent, and we simply ran out of time – a disaster!

The instruction we piloted lasted for only four weeks, but all of the materials were turned over to the School Head Alie Sesay, who took part in all activities and wrote me a touching note in Mani on my departure. We also left the solar power system that powered all our equipment and recharged every cell phone in town, as well as the non-operant wifi system.

4 Evaluation

Applying the busy intersection model and practice engagement theory to our activities yields the following report card. After each skill or activity and its mark, I include in parentheses the framework within which each activity would fall and a brief indication of why the activity received the mark it did. The report card is followed by some details of how each activity was evaluated.

(5) A report card

1. Mani literacy as it occurred in the classroom: F (parking lot) – students all “failed”, tests not even marked
2. Multimedia letter creation: D (parking lot) – no complete packages were produced
3. Computer literacy: C (Hole-in-the-Wall, busy intersection, literacy engagement), games
4. Photography literacy: B (Hole-in-the-Wall, busy intersection) – video capabilities “discovered”
5. Documentation skills (audio recordings): C (Hole-in-the-Wall, busy intersection)
6. Sustainability, maintaining contact: F (parking lot) (failed (overly ambitious) technology)

1. Developing Mani literacy in the classroom was an abject failure, especially as measured on a final exam. Students were asked to transcribe twenty words and a sentence using each word, as pronounced by the School Head, a native Mani speaker. As can be seen on the unmarked test

itself (see Figure 1 in Appendix), the student (the best in the class!) was unsure of his answers and wrote very few sentences.

2. Creating letters was also hardly successful. No student put together the whole package and very few completed the written part. This activity was more or less imposed by me because of its previous success with virtually no consultation albeit with some discussion with the School Head.

3. Computer literacy definitely made some progress. Students learned how to turn the computers on and off, how to launch several programs (including a word processor), and how to charge the computers after the batteries ran down. On their own they learned how to play the games already installed on the computers. Although I was present at the afternoon sessions, when students used / played with the computers, I was consulted only minimally.

4. With regard to photography literacy, the students made solid progress, even discovering how to use the video utility (and how limited it was) on their own. They learned how to download their pictures on to a computer and how to charge the cameras at the end of the day.

5. “Documentation skills” refers to making recordings of whatever they wanted and downloading those recordings onto a computer. Although the students made recordings of relevant conversations, the recordings were not of a quality high enough to be useful.

6. “Sustainability” earns a failing mark because we unsuccessfully tried to set up a local wifi station.

In summary, the scorecard indicates that when the busy-intersection and engagement models or the Hole-in-the-Wall approach could be construed as characterizing the activity, there was at least a chance of success. Undoubtedly if given more time discussing activities with the community and being allowed to adapt the models, higher marks could have been earned. A question that still remains is how to involve the community more in determining these activities, or even if they should be undertaken.

5 Discussion and future directions

It is felt by some that the circumstances of Africa are “special” or “different” (see Dimmendaal Forthcoming), due to the extensive multilingualism in Africa (Childs, Good and Mitchell 2014) and the related language ideologies found on the continent (Grinevald 2006). It has recently been found that African languages are not disappearing so rapidly as elsewhere in the world.

Our finding is that at one extreme more than 75% of the languages that were in use in 1950 are now extinct or moribund in Australia, Canada, and the United States, but at the other extreme less than 10% of languages are extinct or moribund in sub-Saharan Africa. Overall we find that 19% of the world’s living languages are no longer being learned by children. We hypothesize that these radically different language endangerment outcomes in different parts of the world are explained by Mufwene’s observations concerning the effects of settlement colonization versus exploitation colonization on language ecologies (Mufwene 2002). We also speculate that urbanization may have effects like

settlement colonization and may thus pose the next great threat to minority languages (Simons and Lewis 2013:3).

Although I have not found this generalization valid for the small set of languages (South Atlantic) that I have been studying and documenting, it is generally true that the tolerance for multilingualism and the practice of multilingualism may make Africa more tolerant and accepting of multiglossic situations, though the degree of tolerance varies greatly across Africa, as do language ideologies in general. Answers to revitalization questions will thus have to take those special factors into consideration in evaluating the educational system, religious practices, and communication practices, as well as established African literacy practices (Lüpke and Storch 2013b).

At a recent workshop devoted to the sociolinguistic documentation of endangered languages,⁶ one general theme emerged, particularly in comments from African participants. It centered on the question of how best to apply linguistic research to real-world problems, particularly in the area of education. In terms of methodology the consensus was to base the research in ethnographic methods (Childs et al. 2014). That is the approach advocated here in line with the busy-intersections model and determining emergent literacies.

At another venue, however, a prominent field-working linguist offered a caveat in underscoring our limited talents; his point was that we are often expected to do more than we are trained or qualified to do (Newman 2013). It is suggested here that by downscaling the task a reconciliation can be achieved; others have suggested we need to upscale our skills (Lise Dobrin 2014 p.c.). The goals and expectations should be changed to more localized and manageable ones emerging from the community itself after close study of that community. Models such as ones proposed in Henderson, Rohloff and Henderson 2014 are inadequate in the cases described here, for there are not enough speakers and language shift has already taken place. The goal, then, would be to adopt an approach that begins by better assessing what a community wants; the next step is to focus our linguistic talents and adapt them to those goals, to the extent that it is feasible.

Community-based goals have been given some attention, but I think mostly in the grant-preparation and write-up stages rather than during the implementation. I also think the emphasis has been on parking-lots frameworks. Due to the constraints on time and resources, documentation projects have had to limit themselves to getting the facts down and analyzing them quickly to produce a grammar, dictionary, and texts. Projects I have been engaged in may have gone beyond this slightly in producing audio-visual materials as well as some pedagogical materials, etc., but even those products were insufficient to ensure sustainability.

Clearly the focus should not be on the traditional modes and domains of literacy as featured in the schools, i.e., in the parking lot mode, as was demonstrated by the scorecard in the previous section. Although they supply the young speakers necessary for revitalization (See Vlog 4 “The children”), the schools emphasize rote learning and memorization with little learning and less practical value. Yet possibilities and emergent literacies flourish even there, albeit in formats unfamiliar to Westerners. On the final exam in Mani on Tangbaya, there was a great deal of what Westerners would regard as cheating, students sharing answers and talking to each other during

⁶ The conference was sponsored by NSF grant 1160649 to Jeff Good and the author.

the test. “Cheating” in the Western conceptualization, however, is actually a much desired practice in the busy-intersection model and in the Hole-in-the-Wall approach. It is group work aimed at a common goal. A major problem, however, is that schools in areas with dying languages are vastly under-resourced, at least that has been the case in areas where I have worked.

Writing letters was not a productive undertaking, especially imposed as it was, rather than emerging organically from the community. As an extension of parking-lot thinking, corresponding with unknowns in the States, however multifaceted, had no great appeal and was a task utterly foreign to the students. I don’t think it was an activity well explained as it was executed; it certainly was not part of the students’ everyday experience. Thus, there was little consideration given to the students’ (and the community’s) needs, and the activity met with little success.

Computers and cameras, especially ones that produce videos, have great appeal, especially to the young, the target population for any revitalization effort, even one focusing on literacy. Both can be cheaply incorporated into a developing literacy program, especially with a reliable power source.

To predict where literacy is most likely emergent is, of course, impossible, but clearly cell phones and texting will play a role. Many have noted the ubiquity of cell phones in Africa and the possible role they could play in revitalization, e.g., Mous 2007, especially texting, which is cheaper and uses less battery power than speaking over the telephone.⁷ It has already become the preferred way of communicating among young urban Africans. Without the intervening step of literacy such a possibility seems remote.

The great success of the late Sonja Fagerberg-Diallo in Senegal also provides some instruction (under the aegis of Associates in Research and Education for Development (ARED)). The primary focus of this non-profit organization is adult literacy and non-formal education: the design, implementation, and evaluation of literacy projects along with the development of materials (basic literacy and post-literacy materials). The organization is today run solely by the Pulaar women of Senegal, publishing currently set short stories and novels written by its members. The activities of these women illustrate the importance of developing literacy in areas not usually the focus of Westerners. Typically governments and NGOs use literacy as a vehicle for such topics as AIDS and water-borne illnesses. Clearly this is an example of literacy and people meeting in the same place, as is advocated in Practice Engagement Theory.

Extending literacy to girls and women is also important and the success of ARED points out one possible avenue. More often it is women who speak these endangered languages and it is they who truly control the language for they speak it at home with their children. The men are more often involved in external communities of practice where more widely spoken languages reign. It is essential to involve women in any revitalization effort involving literacy.

⁷ McLaughlin 2014 illustrates how texting has been used by a Senegalese community. A reviewer points out Deumert and Lexander 2013 as a relevant resource in identifying the importance of texting in Africa as a literacy practice.

Below I list some possible trajectories for emerging literacies among these endangered groups, based on what has worked and what has been seen as central to Mani culture.

(6) Dimensions along which literacies may emerge

- cell phones and texting
- computers (the internet)
- photography
- folk tales, songs, history
- music and dance (videos)
- women's literature?

I have not recommended building on extant religious practices for they seem injurious or at least critical of traditional cultural practices. Islam is perhaps more pernicious than Christianity for it is more intolerant, at least as I saw it practiced. Its converts overtly ridicule traditional practices such as propitiating and talking to the ancestors (what the Muslims call "*les fétiches*"), all of which must (traditionally) be performed in Mani. Curiously, one of the strongest supporters of revitalization was Imam Musah Camara of N'kompan, Guinea, his sisters, and their friends, none of whom was younger than sixty-five (see Figure 5 in Appendix 2). The imam even would occasionally deliver his sermons in Mani! Thus, it may be possible to enlist the support of the Muslim community.

I summarize below the considerations that should be made by what any future project developing literacy as part of a revitalization project, building on Reder Forthcoming.

- Practice-engagement model: Ongoing braided interaction between proficiency and practice that comprises literacy development
- Expand engagement of community members, especially women, in literacy practices
- Enable more self-teaching and self-learning with appropriate support mechanisms
- Contextualize the setting and modality of instruction as well as its content, based on local conditions
- Engage community collaboration at the local level – offer concrete goals and rewards
- Prolonged engagement to ensure sustainability (and preparation for the withdrawal of external support)
- Set long-term goals

6 Conclusion

What I have tried to do in this paper is provide a rubric for evaluating and indeed for formulating a program of revitalization based on the needs of speakers. The techniques for determining those needs emerge from observation and questioning in the ethnographic mode. Implementing those techniques can be achieved only through discussion and negotiation, hopefully leading to community involvement, as advocated by the Busy Intersections Model and Practice Engagement Theory. Furthermore, if it isn't obvious by now, it has to be the children who must

be engaged. Moreover, there has to be a charismatic leader who will promote and carry on the project.⁸

Two questions that I have not posed nor have come close to answering may also serve as part of the discussion: 1) Is revitalization what we (as (documentary) linguists should do? and 2) Is literacy necessary? The answer to the first question would probably be “No” for many documenters, especially graduate students in the field for the first time or young researchers under tenure pressure. The answer to the second is less clear and highly problematic, especially when people are so poor as the ones that I have encountered in the communities described above.

The urgency of the task hardly needs to be emphasized, but recent events underscore the value of an expanded and locally grounded literacy. The outbreak of the Ebola virus in one of the areas where I have worked (Guékédou ([kpékédóó] in Kisi)), in the Forest Region of Guinea, a Kisi-speaking area) indicates the need for local communication and education. With a functional and meaningful literacy, inhabitants could have been quickly made aware of the nature of the virus and how to combat its spread. Perhaps the Ebola crisis will provide a new context for literacy, for communication was one of the great needs in combatting the disease.

A message that emerges from this discussion is that documentary linguists need to be sensitive to their primary constituency and listen to what the community says, both figuratively and literally. The era of parachute data mining is over. Time is needed to develop the necessary bonds and trust on which successful projects are built. Because of the vast power differential between the researcher and the researched, particularly in places where languages are endangered, close observation and communication, as featured in ethnographic approaches, and prolonged involvement are much to be desired though probably impossible to achieve.

⁸ Institutional engagement is also a desideratum: As one reviewer asked, perhaps rhetorically, Why isn't there more interest on the part of African institutions?

Appendix A: Links to video blogs (“vlogs”)

The sites of four video blogs or “vlogs” were daily emissions sent back to Voice of America during the visit of Senior Producer Bart Childs of Voice of America in 2012.⁹

[Lost Voices 1](#) Getting there

[Lost Voices 2](#) Dancing

[Lost Voices 3](#) Palm Oil

[Lost Voices 4](#) The children

⁹ The generous support of the Voice of America is here acknowledged as well as awards from the NSF (Grant No. 1065609) and the Hans Rausing ELDP (MDP 0167) supporting the documentation of Kim and Bom, two languages related to Mani.

Appendix B: Figures

At home than gaba
fawn

test in man La

1	ci	tok	
2	ti	poj	
3	ke	YOK	yalYOK kil
4	cin	RET	ce ma Kei

4 ~~teR~~
kon
wo
po
tin
din
pin
per
tin
Rom ce ya Be Rom ce
Pun
tom
det
Pal Ya Be Pal ce
Pal ce wi ton
sil ce wo ton
kak ce wond ya Be wi

Figure 1 A sample student test



Figure 2 Student picture

Recording of a student’s self-description

Figure 3 Student recording

A student’s transcription of self-description

Lemo!

Ya le Mamudu, ko Tgangbaya.

Do po kom mi.

Ya mara ple bol.

ba ya le skuL boy no bok ce O annu rai ce O yan won ca yan won CA WɔN PO WE

YANNA SAME MI NO

lakan po fo la gbankn

wɔno tok mo ajena ce kol

lo wɔ be lakan ce rai ce wɔ gbankn wɔ gbankn wɔ

Figure 4 Student transcription



Figure 5 Imam Musah, his sisters, etc., N'kompan, Guinea, 2004

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