

Documentation of Waata (ssn): Prospects for a Sustainable Partnership with the Community

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There has been more awareness of the rapid pace of language endangerment and death. This has led to many new initiatives to document and revitalize endangered languages. However, linguists often embark on such documentation projects based on their perceptions and needs. As a result, the projects often do not reflect the needs and aspirations of the speech community. This presentation, however, presents new experiences and prospects of a new partnership between academics at Pwani University and Waata community in Kilifi county, on the coast of Kenya.

Waata is an endangered Cushitic language spoken by an estimated 20,100 speakers (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2021). In October 2019, Waata elders approached the Department of Languages, Linguistics, and Literature to express concerns about their language and seek a partnership to document and revitalize the language. Their language is in danger of dying because of marginalization of the community, lack of interest among the youth in acquiring and using the language, ambivalent attitudes to the language, and pressure from more prominent neighboring languages.

Since then, we have had meetings with the community to plan a language documentation project involving the community, linguists, literary scholars, anthropologists, and other scholars. The community sought the support of the university in getting government recognition. Since then, they have been invited to the university to showcase their arts and culture and impress upon the university community on the need to preserve and revitalize the language.

As linguists, we are writing proposals seeking support for the project that will document the language and address the community's concerns. The speakers will provide the data and participate in joint activities with the university to create more awareness and promote interest among the youth. It is crucial that the community own the bigger picture of the project rather than be driven by purely academic interests. We believe such a vision can make the entire revitalization a sustainable partnership since the community is the driving force behind the efforts.

References

Eberhard, D. M., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (2021). Ethnologue: Languages of the World. Retrieved April 20, 2020, from Ethnologue: <http://www.ethnologue.com>