

SUDANESE LANGUAGES IN AUSTRALIA: LINGUISTIC DEMOGRAPHY AND LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE

Full presentation

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The Sudanese community in Australia is still quite small, but has grown very rapidly over the past decade. The major language groups of this community - Arabic, English, Dinka - are recognised in the Australian community and middle-sized languages such as Nuer and Acholi have also achieved some recognition, with, for example, interpreter services sometimes available in these languages. The focus of our research, however, is Sudanese languages with small speaker populations in the homeland and correspondingly very small populations in Melbourne. Previous work (Borland and Mphande 2006) has recognised that discovery techniques based on census data or other government records almost inevitably miss such groups and include them in 'other' categories. Our work is directed to finding speakers of languages which are endangered in the homeland, with a view to conducting documentation activities here in Australia. The first phase of our research, which we describe here, involves a more detailed mapping of the linguistic demography of the Sudanese community in Melbourne.

Our initial contacts have been with speakers from two linguistically diverse regions: the Equatoria region, where speakers identify at least 20 languages with a population in Melbourne, and the Nuba mountains, with at least 10 languages represented in Melbourne. We discuss here issues related to the relative invisibility of such speaker groups, the extent to which it is possible to separate languages and dialects of languages (especially in the case of varieties of Bari found in the Equatorial community), and what possibilities exist for documentation and language maintenance in this diasporic community..

References:

Borland, Helen and Charles Mphande. 2006. The number of speakers of African languages emerging in Victoria. (Report to Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs, Department for Victorian Communities) Melbourne: Victoria University.

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