

THE STATUS OF THE LANGUAGES OF CENTRAL NIGERIA

Paper presented at the Round Table on Language Death in Africa

WOCAL, Leipzig, July 29th, 1997

and now published as;

R.M. Blench 1998. The status of the languages of Central Nigeria. In: Brenzinger, M. ed. *Endangered languages in Africa*. 187-206. Köln: Köppe Verlag.

Roger Blench
Mallam Dendo
8, Guest Road
Cambridge CB1 2AL
United Kingdom
Voice/Answerphone/Fax. 0044-(0)1223-560687
E-mail R.Blench@odi.org.uk
http://homepage.ntlworld.com/roger_blench/RBOP.htm

Cambridge, 14 September, 2003

1. Introduction

1.1 The Linguistic Geography of the Nigerian Middle Belt

Nigeria is the most complex country in Africa, linguistically, and one of the most complex in the world. Crozier & Blench (1992) and the accompanying map has improved our knowledge of the geography of its languages but also reveals that much remains to be done. Confusion about status and nomenclature remains rife and the inaccessibility of many minority languages is an obstacle to research.

The first attempts to place the languages of Nigeria into related groups took place in the nineteenth century. Of these, the most important was Koelle (1854), whose extensive wordlists permitted him to recognise the unity of the language groups today called Nupoid, Jukunoid and Edoid among others. Blench (1987) gives a brief history of the development of language classification in relation to Nigeria.

Within Nigeria, the area of greatest diversity is the 'Middle Belt', the band of territory stretching across the country between the large language blocs of the semi-arid north and the humid forest along the coast. According to how broadly the region is defined it includes between 250 and 400 distinct languages and peoples. Diversity is not confined to this zone; the Cross River also has a highly fragmented language picture. Nonetheless, the situation is broadly similar in neighbouring Cameroun (where, however, diversity is even more extreme than Nigeria in terms of overall human population). This paper¹ analyses the genetic affiliation of Middle Belt languages, their overall size and status in terms of number of speakers and estimates the threat to individual languages using a simplified set of criteria. It makes some proposals as to the causes of language retreat, some of which are specific to the Nigerian situation, some of which are examples of processes well known from other regions of Africa.

The reasons for this diversity must remain a matter of speculation. However, it is clear that a crucial factor has been the interaction of major language phyla; three of Africa's four language phyla meet in the Middle Belt of Nigeria and there has been a consequent interlocking and overlapping of populations. This has had intriguing sociolinguistic consequences; there are frequent dissonances between the culture and language of particular groups.

Very little is known about the prehistory of the Middle Belt, since there are almost no written records earlier than the nineteenth century and very little oral historical material has a time-depth greater than two hundred years. Similarly, archaeology has yet to contribute substantially to our knowledge of the peopling of the region. In view of these lacunae, linguistic geography has often seemed a useful guide to the overall pattern of population. The last author to look at this with specific relation to the Nigerian

¹ I am grateful to Matthias Brenzinger for inviting me to the Round Table in Leipzig, and to those attending the presentation who made valuable comments from the floor. I would like to thank Bruce Connell and Kay Williamson who made specific comments on the text.

Middle Belt was Ballard (1971), but a number of individual studies (e.g. Isichei 1982) have dealt with the ethnohistory of particular regions.

A revised version of the 'Index of Nigerian Languages' (Crozier and Blench 1992) is available in electronic form and has been used as the database for the analyses that follow.

2. Affiliation and distribution of Middle Belt Languages

2.1 Definition of the Nigerian Middle Belt

The main characteristics of the Middle Belt as defined here linguistically are that;

- a) it includes all the minority language spoken north of the Niger-Benue
- b) it excludes the languages of the Cross River area, both Cross River and Ekoid languages
- c) it excludes the large languages of the South, such as Yoruba, Igbo, Eḍo and whatever minority languages are spoken in the same regions
- d) it includes, however, the minority languages of the Confluence region, such as Akokoid, Okoid and Ayere-Ahan.

2.2 Genetic affiliation of Middle Belt languages

Even by African standards, the Nigerian Middle Belt represents a region of extreme complexity. Table 1 presents a broad outline of the phyla and language families present in the Middle Belt, with examples of specific languages;

Table 1. Genetic Classification of the languages of the Nigerian Middle Belt

Phylum	Family	Examples
NIGER-CONGO	Mande	Busa
	West Atlantic	Fulfulde
	Gur	Bariba
	Adamawa	Chamba, Mumuye, Waja, Yungur, Longuda
	Ubangian	Gbaya
	Benue-Congo W.	Yoruba, Nupe, Igbo, Idoma, Bini
	Benue-Congo E.	Kamberi, Tyap, Birom, Jukun, Efik
	Bantoid N.	Mambila, Samba Daka
	Bantoid S.	Tivoid, Beboid
Bantu	Jarawan	
AFROASIATIC	W. Chadic	Hausa, Angas, Mwaghavul,
	Central Chadic	Bacama, Huba
	Semitic	Shuwa Arabic
	Berber	Tamachek
NILO-SAHARAN	Saharan	Kanuri, Teda
	Songhai	Zarma,
UNCLASSIFIED		Jalaa

However, two families, Benue-Congo and Chadic, dominate the region with almost all other groups contributing only small numbers of languages. Table 2 and Figure 1 show the distribution of Middle Belt languages between these groups.

Table 2. Genetic affiliation of Middle Belt languages

Language Family	Number	n=394
Benue-Congo	218	
Afroasiatic	115	
Adamawa-Ubangian	45	
Unclassified	6	
Nilo-Saharan	4	
Mande	4	
Gur	1	
Atlantic	1	

Afroasiatic consists almost entirely of Chadic languages, including only Arabic and Tamachek. The unclassified languages consist of one unclassifiable language, Jalaa, for which data exists, and five others

for which there is no data, but which are assumed to be members of the surrounding group on geographical grounds. Map 1 shows the approximate location of the language groupings in Table 2;

Map 1. Principal Language Groups referred to in text.

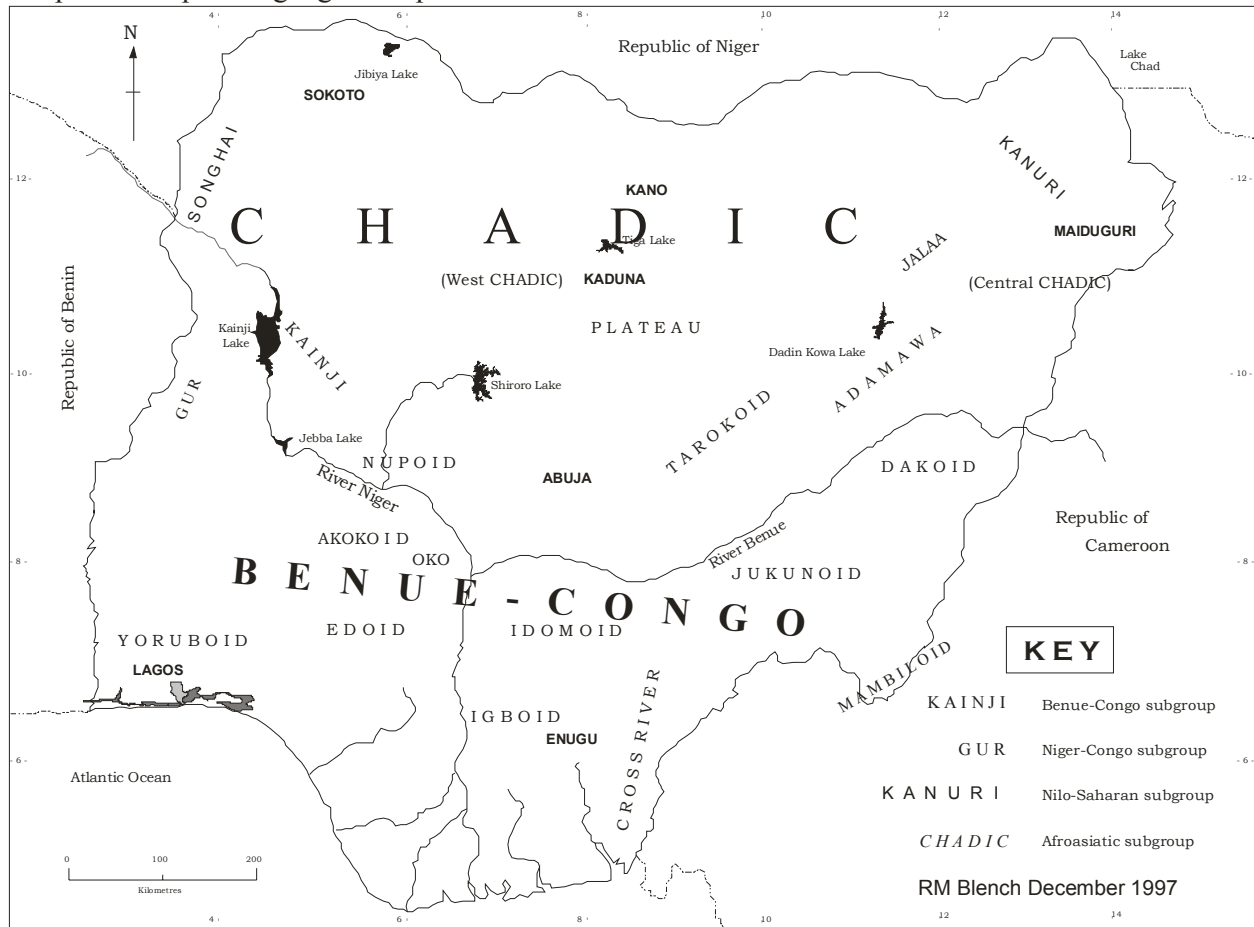
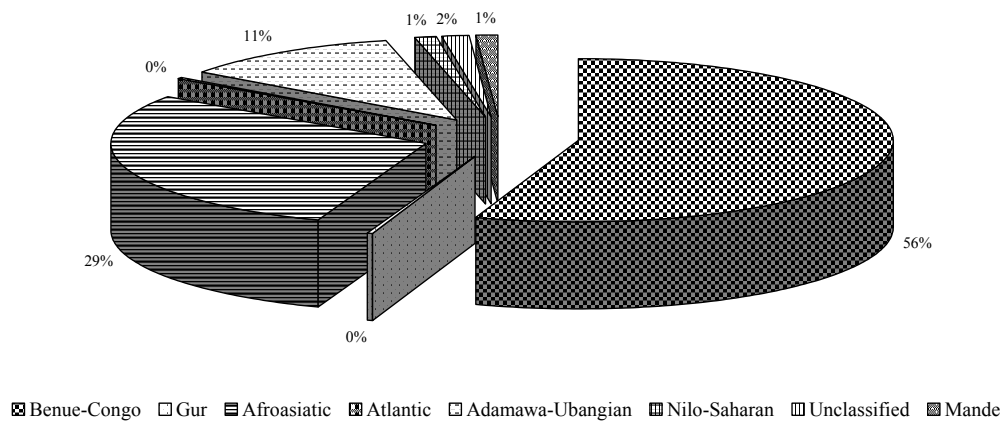


Figure 1. Distribution of genetic affiliation of Nigerian Middle Belt Languages

Genetic Classification of Middle Belt languages

n=394



2.3 How many speakers do Middle Belt Languages have?

All types of sociolinguistic work in Nigeria are hampered by the absence of any reliable census data. The figures usually quoted are either unsupported guesswork or are extrapolated from much earlier censuses where ethnolinguistic affiliation was recorded. The problems with this method are threefold;

- a) Language and ethnic group may not coincide
- b) The status attached to major languages which may lead speakers of minority languages to declare affiliation to a major language
- c) The relationship between the size of an ethnolinguistic group and the drawing of administrative boundaries and thus the allocation of Central Government funds

To give some idea of the distribution of language with their numbers of speakers, all the languages have been assigned size classes, either on the basis of recent population estimates or on the basis of the known number of villages they inhabit. Information is so weak that for some 27 languages it proved impossible even make a guess, although they can be assumed to be small. Table 3 and Figure 2 show the numbers and percentages assigned to each size class;

Figure 2. Size classes of Nigerian Middle Belt Languages

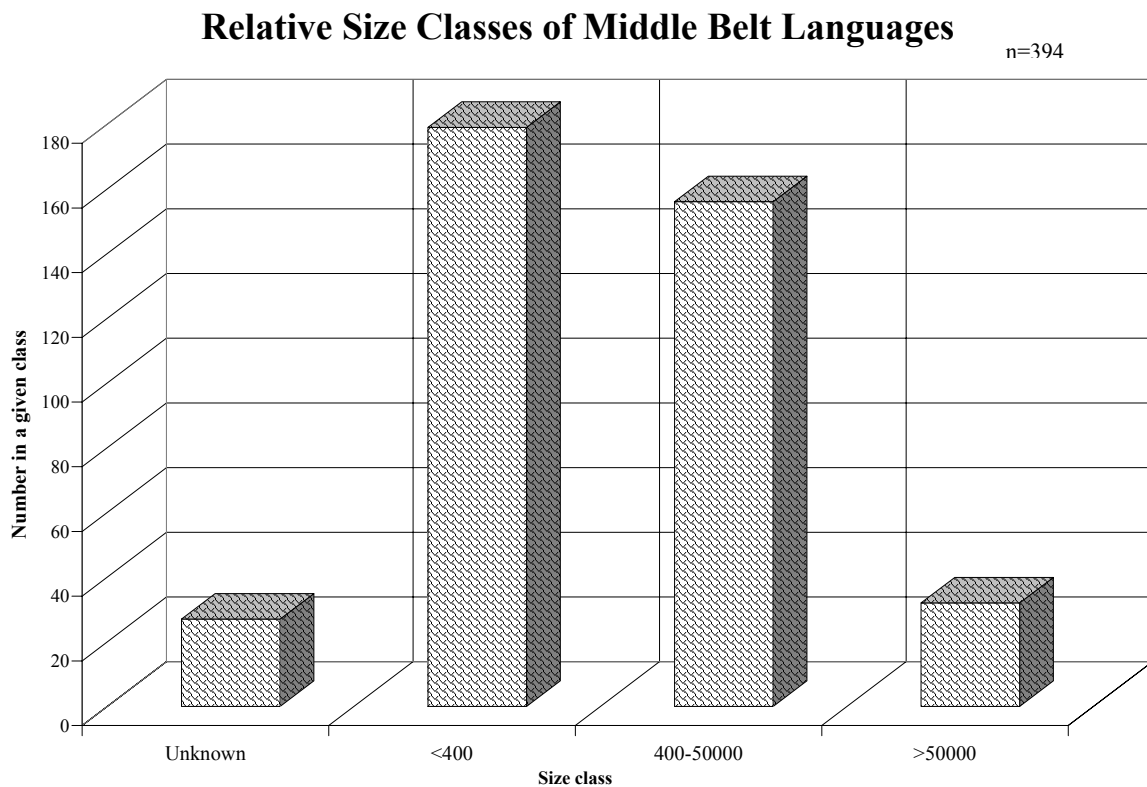


Table 3. Size classes of Middle Belt languages
n=394

Size Class	Number
Unknown	27
<400	179
400-50000	156
>50000	32

3. The Status of Middle Belt Languages

If census data is weak, then reliable sociolinguistic data on the health of individual languages is virtually non-existent. It can be assumed that very large languages like Hausa, Kanuri and Fulfulde are not threatened, although they may well be in retreat. It is certainly true that specific lects of these languages are threatened and may well disappear through merging into the central dialect.

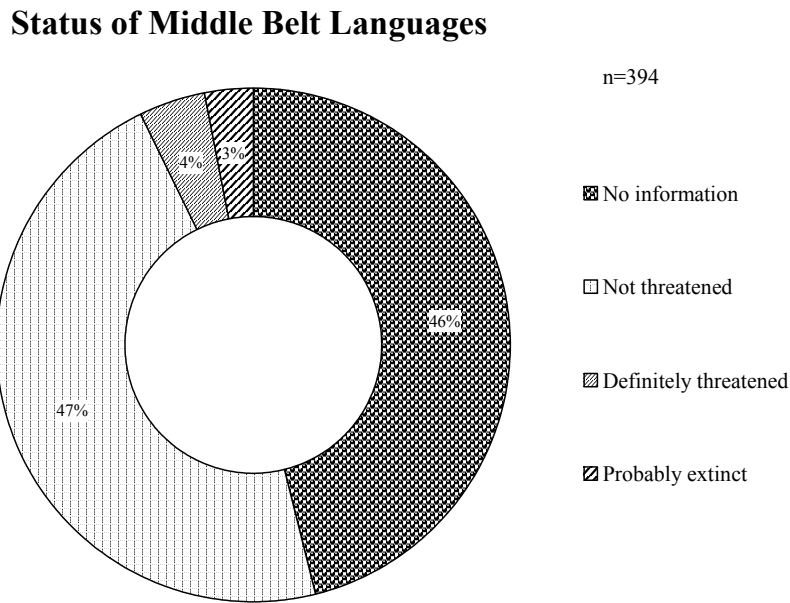
To gain a picture of the present situation, a code was assigned to each language based on the categories in Table 4. The categories of ‘Definitely threatened’ and ‘Probably extinct’ are based on unambiguous reports. ‘Not threatened’ is based either on my own observations over the period 1979-1997 or on reports from other researchers. Such estimates are clearly subjective and change over time. Even within that period, a language such as Kamuku, that appeared to be threatened by disinterest from speakers, has made a distinct comeback. Similarly, a visit to one settlement may give the impression that a language is dying, but more remote settlements may suggest that it is still flourishing. The results of assigning languages to these categories are shown in Table 4 and Figure 3. They should be seen in the light of the caveats mentioned above.

Table 4. Status of Middle Belt Languages

Status	Number
No information	182
Not threatened	184
Definitely threatened	16
Probably extinct	12

Perhaps the most depressing figure in this table is the large number of languages for which no reliable information is available. These are mostly small languages and therefore more likely to be threatened.

Figure 3. Status of Nigerian Middle Belt Languages



4. Processes of language death

4.1 Is language death normal?

Language death has certainly taken place in this century. Evidence from the wordlists of Gowers (1907) suggests the disappearance of a number of small languages around Bauchi. Recent work by Michael Broß on the Butu-Ningi group has witnessed the death of languages still spoken in the 1970s. I documented the speech of ‘rememberers’ of some residual Bassa-speaking groups recorded by Rowlands (1962). It is also true, however, that the death of many languages is announced prematurely, before a careful investigation has taken place. Many groups mentioned in Temple (1922), for example, have proved to be still in existence as the experience of Russell Schuh (1978) shows.

It is likely that language death has always been taking place. There is a great deal of evidence from linguistic geography that major expansions of languages have caused turmoil in the Middle Belt, and led to the disappearance of many languages through assimilation. The case of Hausa, Kanuri and Tiv can be cited as highly visible expansions. Often these processes can be observed in progress. For example, around south-east of Kaduna, there are villages of ‘Basawa’, peoples who were once Bassa-speaking but now speak only Hausa. The Hausa-speakers just North of the West Kainji languages, the Zamfarawa, share many cultural traits with their non-Chadic-speaking neighbours and it seems very likely that these populations once also spoke West Kainji languages.

The question then becomes; is language death accelerating in the present situation, or is it simply part of a normal process? There is no easy answer to this as we cannot census vanished languages. But it seems

likely that the growth of the nation state and the promotion of specific languages has had a powerful impact. Colonial policy in Nigeria was officially to promote a variety of Northern languages, and the seriousness of this policy is attested by the large number of readers published by NORLA, the educational body charged with promoting literacy in Northern Languages. However, there was a gradual shift to Hausa as a *lingua franca* throughout the North and a strong presumption in favour of Hausa literacy as a passport to success with the administration. This policy was continued after Independence and was also assisted by the extensive use of Hausa in churches, especially Catholic.

However, the growth of the nation-state also stimulates contrary processes;

- a) demographic growth has increased the likelihood of small languages surviving.
- b) oppression and neglect creates a situation where language maintenance becomes a tool of resistance.

Demographic growth in Nigeria is quite startling. The first census of Nigeria in 1911 recorded a population of around 5 million. The census of 1991 recorded 88.5 million. Even groups recorded as having a few hundred speakers in early intelligence reports now have several thousand speakers.

Oppression, especially in recent times, has also been an important factor in keeping languages alive. The Tyap people were reported to be switching to speaking Hausa when first consulted with a view to getting a Bible translation in motion. As a result of the imprisonment of their leaders on trumped-up charges following an anti-Hausa riot in 1993, there has been a strong trend back to speaking Tyap.

4.2 Why languages die

The major factors tending to cause language disappearance are;

- a) assimilation to larger more powerful groups nearby
 - b) assimilation to smaller but culturally dominant groups
 - c) assimilation to English, the national language
 - d) demographic crises caused by labour migration/urbanism
- a) occurs principally in relation to Hausa, although assimilation to Fulfulde and Kanuri are also known. South of the Niger, Yoruba is the dominant *lingua franca* and some of the small groups of the confluence are losing their language to Yoruba.
 - b) there are numerous examples of assimilation to nearby groups. Huba speakers are 'becoming Bura', migrant speakers of Dibo have lost their language to Gbari as a result of migrations, and the Fali language of the Fali Plateau has yielded to Ndoro, a language which is elsewhere in retreat.

- c) assimilation to English is relatively rare in the Middle Belt and only found in large urban communities such as Jos. However, it is common among minorities moving to towns in regions such as the Niger Delta.
- d) very small language groups can lose their language through migration to towns and simple proximity to trade routes. This appears to be the case with Ngwaba, a Chadic language near little Gombi, which seems only ever to have been spoken in two villages. The same fate has overtaken some of the South Bauchi languages closest to Bauchi town, whose settlements have been overwhelmed.

4.3 How languages persist

Factors responsible for language maintenance are;

- a) absence of adjacent culturally dominant groups
- b) endogamous marriage practices
- c) maintenance of traditional religion/cultural pride
- d) existence of an orthography
- e) government oppression and neglect
- f) remoteness
- g) access to media
- h) demography

It might seem that f) and g) are in conflict; access to media is not usually associated with remoteness. If an ethnolinguistic community inhabits a remote area, it will continue to speak its one language, in the absence of any strong pressure to switch to another. In cases where there is such a threat, if articulate individuals can gain access to radio or television, they often do a considerable amount to promote their language through these media.

Islam has had an ambivalent impact on language maintenance. In more recent times, with the expansion of Hausa, there has been a strong relationship between conversion to Islam and adoption of the Hausa language. However, earlier conversion to Islam, such as among the Songhay, Wandala, Kanembu and Afadā [Kotoko] seemed to have carried less cultural baggage. These people seemed to have converted the peoples on their immediate boundaries without necessarily causing cultural assimilation. The Lopa and Laru of Lake Kainji represent an intriguing example of this; despite their small numbers and fluency in Hausa, language maintenance is extremely good.

4.4 Pidginisation

Many languages are likely to survive in a heavily pidginised form. Old vocabulary and more elaborate syntax are giving way to forms of languages with numerous loanwords and grammar influenced by Hausa, English or other languages. This process is not new and may be part of language evolution, as the example of Tarok shows. Tarok must at one time have been heavily influenced by Angas, a neighbouring Chadic language, since it shows a large number of similar syntactic constructions, despite the different genetic affiliation of these languages.

Towns are often locales for high levels of code-switching; the urban Fulfulde of Adamawa exists within Yola and other locales in a very stripped-down form with considerable amounts of the morphology eroded. However, this can also occur in remote areas as the example of Basa-Makurdi shows; this language has a very full concord system in its home area near Dekina. However, fleeing slaves in the nineteenth century set up in villages in the bush area northwest of Makurdi and lost contact with their source population. When we² visited them in 1993, they turned out to have lost almost all the noun-class prefixes and concord of Basa-Benue, despite living in rural isolation.

5. Research perspectives

A highly prominent feature of the data summarised above is the knowledge gap; so little is known about the status of so many languages. Even published information is often found to be highly unreliable when checked in the field. An aspect of this that must be clearly acknowledged is the political; languages are politics, and historically, numbers of speakers tend to weigh heavily when deciding new administrative boundaries and thus financial allocations. Spectacularly hyperbolic claims for the size of ethnolinguistic groups are the common currency of local administration documents and prefaces to locally published pamphlets.

Although Nigeria has a large and varied university infrastructure and a number of departments of linguistics, there is little tradition of field linguistics and a low value is attached to descriptive or lexicographic work. Studies of syntax from various modern theoretical perspectives are the common output of these departments, usually in relation to larger and more well-known languages. The usual reason given is that there are no funds for fieldwork, but since even languages a few kilometres from large cities remain unresearched, cultural attitudes clearly play an important role. Indeed, the availability of funds for research on endangered languages from outside funding bodies has recently stimulated a most uncharacteristic enthusiasm for these languages.

² I made this visit with Paul Imoh, a native of Edenye, near the Niger-Benue confluence.

6. Government policy

Much has been written about what is or should be government policy towards minority languages in Nigeria. This can hardly disguise the true situation, which is that government, as in so many areas, has no effective policy at all. Declarations have been made about the promotion of minority languages, 'official' languages itemised and orthographies published. But in reality, those who have the motivation and resources to promote their language simply go ahead with their project regardless. There are supposed to be 'official' languages used in the media and these are to be developed. However, today the media are a Tower of Babel, with programmes presented in almost any language; the only prerequisite is the enthusiasm of individuals who make the programmes.

7. The future of Middle Belt Languages

The future situation of these languages is hard to second-guess, because much depends on the political evolution of Nigeria. The present evidence is that it is becoming increasingly unstable and that the infrastructure is breaking down in more remote areas. This, of course, has the paradoxical effect of promoting language maintenance since the impact of media, and of powerful adjacent groups such as the Hausa, are reduced. At the same time, the experience of neglect has acted to strengthen many nascent community development associations.

Nonetheless, other processes are likely to go to term. Communities with only a small number of speakers are likely to disappear soon. Descriptive studies on these languages are unlikely to be conducted before they disappear. Urban populations are likely to form consolidated blocks and large masses of population will speak either English or the urban *lingua franca*. The United States and Australia are the two nation states where minority languages are disappearing at greatest speed. These countries previously had oppressive and violent policies, whereas today they are relatively beneficent. However, Amerindian and Aboriginal languages are disappearing faster than before due to cultural assimilation.

8. Summary

The situation of minority languages in Central Nigeria can be summarised as follows;

- a) there are approximately 400 distinct speech-forms spoken in the Middle Belt of Nigeria
- b) of these, at least 180 have under 400 speakers
- c) the majority of these remain completely undescribed
- d) the remainder range between 200 and ca. one million
- e) there is no government policy towards these languages at all
- f) the fate of these languages depends largely on the future political history of Nigeria

References:

- Ballard, J.A. 1971. Historical inferences from the linguistic geography of the Nigerian Middle Belt. *Africa*, 41:294-305.
- Blench R.M. 1984. *Peoples and Languages of Southwestern Adamawa*. Unpublished paper given to the 9th African Languages Colloquium, Leiden.
- Blench, R.M. 1987. A revision of the Index of Nigerian Languages. *The Nigerian Field*, 52:77-84.
- Crozier, David and Roger M. Blench, 1992. *Index of Nigerian Languages (edition 2)*. Dallas: SIL.
- Hansford K., Bendor-Samuel, J. & Stanford, R. 1976. *An Index of Nigerian Languages*. Ghana: SIL.
- Isichei, Elizabeth 1982. ed. *Studies in the History of Plateau State, Nigeria*. London: Macmillan.
- Rowlands, E.C. 1962. Notes on some class languages of Northern Nigeria. *African Language Studies*, III:71-83.
- Schuh, R.G. 1978. *Bole-Tangale languages of the Bauchi area (Northern Nigeria)*. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer.
- Shimizu, K. 1983. Die Jarawan-Bantusprachen des Bundesstaates Bauchi, Nordnigeria. In *Sprache Geschichte und Kultur in Afrika*. R. Vossen & Claudi, U. (eds.) 291-301. Hamburg: Buske.
- Temple, O. 1922. *Notes on the tribes, provinces, emirates and states of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria*. Lagos: CMS Bookshop.