

Experiences in Kakuma and Melbourne with developing literacy resources in Nilotic languages

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This paper reports on the experiences of a group of linguists helping South Sudanese diaspora communities to develop literacy materials in their languages for use by primary school aged children. Some of this activity is part of a larger project run by the Research Unit for Multilingualism and Cross-Cultural Communication (RUMACCC) at the University of Melbourne to develop early literacy materials for lesser used languages around the world. Many of these languages have only a limited written tradition; thus literacy is not necessarily an established feature, and access to materials is difficult.

Our work on South Sudanese languages has involved collaboration with speakers of several Nilotic languages, including Dinka, Otuho and Lopit. The speakers live in Melbourne and the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. In the case of Melbourne, we worked with small community language schools which need books for their students. In Kakuma we worked with community groups. Activities were wide-ranging and included writing down traditional stories, translating texts, orthography testing as well as electronic and physical publishing of stories.

We have found that working with a team of native speakers leads to good involvement and ownership. However, there are of course many challenges in the process of developing literacy materials. Transcribing and printing traditional stories present challenges in achieving acceptance of the final document, both from a content and an orthographic perspective. A story can be told differently by different speakers, even those from the same village, and it can take some time to get consensus. Similar, as well as additional, issues arose with translation of readers from both African Storybook and the RUMACCC readers which are designed to be particularly easy to translate and prepare for community use.

A key issue is, of course, the extent to which the reading material is used, particularly when community-based literacy activities are often being undertaken outside of other work and educational commitments on the part of community members, with little formal or financial support for the activities. In Kakuma, we assisted communities in setting up community libraries, and while there was significant community enthusiasm for this, and good use of the library materials, there were operational challenges. For some of the language communities in Melbourne, use of the readers has been successfully integrated into existing community schools. It is clear that there is substantial community interest in developing materials to assist language maintenance in diaspora contexts, but also a need for greater support of these efforts.