

A report on language vitality of Thuok ë Rëël [atu], South Sudan.

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Thuok ë Rëël (lit. ‘the language of the Reel/Atuot people’) is a West Nilotic language of the Dinka-Nuer subgroup which was first recognized as a separate language by Burton (1987). The subgroup comprises of three languages: Dinka, Nuer and Thuok ë Rëël (Reid 2010). Thuok ë Rëël speakers/Reel people, are a relative minority group with approximate population of 50,000 people, thought to be a Nuer section which migrated into the Dinka territory some 500 years ago (Burton 1987, Reid 2010). Reel are the inhabitants of Yirol West County of Lakes State in the Central part of South Sudan, 75 miles east of Rumbek, the Capital City of Lakes State. Since 2015, five books were developed in Thuok ë Rëël by the SIL South Sudan language workshop program. They include: Reel Alphabet Book, Reel Vowel & Consonant Book, Reel Grammar Book and Reel - English Dictionary. The Bible Translation in Reel language has only completed the Book of Genesis.

According to Ethnologue (22nd edition 2019), Thuok ë Rëël is among the 15 languages of the Republic of South Sudan ranked 6a (Vigorous) meaning stable language, not endangered. Thuok ë Rëël’s stability as well as vitality is demonstrated by the fact that all generations of the Reel people speak it in the community and the children automatically start to learn and use it as their first language. Though Ethnologue ranked it as one of the stable languages, I will argue that, there are clear signs indicating that Thuok ë Rëël is on the verge of becoming an endangered language. This is largely due to the following facts: 1) the absence of a mother tongue education in Thuok ë Rëël, and 2) due to the demographic and socio-political shift in the region. To elaborate: Thuoŋjäŋ, which is the language of the neighboring Jiëëŋ/Dinka people, has engulfed and dominated Thuok ë Rëël in many ways. First, Thuoŋjäŋ is the official language of the Lakes State. Second, the scripture in the church (the Bible) is in Thuoŋjäŋ. Third, it is taught as part of the mother tongue education in schools in the Reel territories. Fourth, Thuoŋjäŋ is the language of commerce which the foreign traders learn and use in market places in the Reel territories. Fifth, the local (Reel) artists compose and record their music mostly in Thuoŋjäŋ. Sixth, the mass media (local FM radio stations in Yirol and in the entire Lakes State) broadcast their programs mostly in Thuoŋjäŋ. And lastly, the rural-urban migration is affecting Reel families as many children are being born outside of Reel territories and use Thuoŋjäŋ as their first (and only) language.

In this presentation, I highlight an overview of the dynamic status of Thuok ë Rëël. I recommend some urgent steps required for language development, like capacity building for local Thuok ë Rëël developers/writers, funding of Thuok ë Rëël literacy materials, launching a mother tongue education program in Thuok ë Rëël in the territories of the Reel people and completion of Bible translation in Thuok ë Rëël. I humbly appeal to linguistics institutions, church-based charities and other donors to intervene with sponsorship for the development and promotion of Reel language in order to maintain its vitality.

References:

- Burton, John W. (1987). *A Nilotic World: The Atuot-Speaking Peoples of the Southern Sudan*.
- Ethnologue: <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/atu>
- Reid, T. (2010). *Aspects of phonetics, phonology and morphophonology of Thok Reel*. MScR dissertation. University of Edinburgh.