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[Sabbatical Report]

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Report on Sabbatical Progress of Elizabeth Winkler

Project: Kpelle Dictionary Project

Background:

I published the English-Kpelle dictionary in 1997, which was written as a theoretical linguistic study, documentation of an unwritten language. Kpelle is the most commonly spoken first and second language in Liberia. It is also spoken in the Ivory Coast and Guinea.

In the late 1990s, I met with Dr. Marcus Dahn, who was later to become the Deputy Minister of Education in Liberia and later still the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. He indicated that there was interest in making Kpelle the co-national language with English. To do this, many projects would need to be accomplished including creating an orthography for the currently unwritten language and expanding the dictionary. Many pedagogical materials would need to be created to teach the new writing system. In 2009, I was contacted to start this work anew by Peter Curran, a Kpelle native-speaker living in the USA. I am working with him and a group of Liberians in developing a dictionary database for use in the electronic world as well as various paper dictionaries to be published and used primarily in Liberia.

Product:

This website (electronic dictionary) will be used by native and nonnative speakers in the US and elsewhere who are learning Kpelle as a second language. Kpelle is taught as an international language in universities including Michigan State. In addition, Liberians in the US who want to teach their US-born children their heritage language have bought copies of the existing dictionary. This online dictionary is not very useful in Liberia as most of the country is not electrified, let alone set up with Internet access.

Most of the paper versions of the dictionary will be published in Liberia. There are a number of reasons for this. By relinquishing publishing rights to locals, any profits made will remain local, and the dictionaries will be priced so that locals may buy them. Publishing in the US and shipping to Liberia would drive the costs up to the point that they would not be accessible to the local population. I am currently looking at the Episcopal Church in Liberia as a possible publisher as it already publishes educational materials. This will also mean that future expansion, and revisions of the dictionary will be in African hands. A goal I learned in Peace Corp was that my best job is to work myself out of a job. Our intent is to have several paper products: a primary school dictionary, a more advanced secondary school dictionary and the full dictionary.

Sabbatical Work and Challenges:

During my sabbatical, I input over 2200 entries into a database. This is time-consuming, incredibly tedious work because the entries are in the International Phonetic Alphabet. Entries include information about pronunciation, meaning, grammar, spelling, etymology and related words (I will attach a screen shot of an entry to the email containing this report). This database will be uploaded to the website as well as formatted for paper publication of the dictionaries.

I have also met with Liberians in Nashville and Kansas City and have begun working out the protocol for determining the symboling system for the orthography. I also consulted two professors of African linguistics at Indiana University (one of whom wrote a dictionary of Hausa) about challenges of this project and how other African languages have dealt with turning oral languages into written ones. This task is more complex than it seems for a number of reasons. First, as a linguist, I understand the complex phonetic system of this language. Kpelle has consonants not found in English, and the vowel system includes regular vowels, nasal vowels and double vowels, which are all contrastive. To add to the fun, this language has two tones. We want to create a spelling system that is learnable. The best systems have a one-to-one correspondence between sound and symbol (unlike English which has arguably the worst spelling system on the planet). On the other hand, the only way to do this would be to use symbols that are not in the alphabet and/or use diacritics. This is actually a bad idea for a number of reasons: 1) it makes typing on a typewriter impossible, and on a computer, quite time consuming because you must access a keyboard that has special symbols; 2) it makes it hard to learn which is against our main goal which is to increase literacy; finally, in this country, the people who are literate, and are the educators who will be teaching the new system are literate in English, so using as much of the English system as possible will win over this group as well as make it easier for Kpelle speakers to acquire English. I spent many hours in Kansas City, teaching Peter Curran, my Liberian counterpart, about the phonetics of his language and discussion possible solutions.

What makes this project difficult is that key aspects are completely out of my hands, which is necessary though frustrating at times. I am not the person to make the final decision about two key issues: what symbols we use for sounds and which of the at least two major dialects we choose for the written version of the language. The Liberians must make these decisions. When they have not, it has been problematic. For example, there are two competing orthographies for Haitian Creole, one of which was created by a Scottish minister who is roundly cursed to this day for making it like French and not tailoring it to the creole. The choice of dialect is much more problematic. It is a political choice as well as an arbitrary one. As we well know from English, we all talk like we want to, but the written form is relatively the same. My job is to

help the Liberians understand these complex topics because they will need to be able to convince their own peoples that we are not trying to wipeout varieties, but simply have a written version that everyone shares. To deal with this, Peter Curran has put together a committee of native speakers. He is also handling the taping of speakers for all the dictionary entries.

Mr. Curran has gotten this database set up, and a limited number of sample entries (the numbers) can be viewed at: <http://www.kpelle.org>. We are setting up protocols for the native speaker group to approve entries for publication, which include a sound component as well. Mr. Curran is a computer specialist and has spent many months developing a system in which individual entries will be uploaded to a temporary file and an email will automatically be sent to committee member for comments and additions. When a consensus is reached, the entry will be permanently posted. I expect it will take another year at least, depending on the speed of the committee members, before a sizeable number of entries will be approved and posted.

Future Work and Goals:

I have been working with a Gatton Academy student on computer issues, and an English major with extensive linguistic background on data entry and evaluation. I will continue to make use of their skills. The linguistics student is quite skilled at catching anomalies. Over the next couple of years, I will complete the following tasks: 1) continue to research and input entries; 2) confirm entries with native speakers; and 3) create the various paper versions of the dictionary. I also intend to produce two linguistic publications from this project. A version of the dictionary will be published in the US, most likely by its current publisher at Indiana. I have spoken with the current editor, and he was amenable to this. It is a nonprofit, print-on-demand publisher, so the price for the volume is quite reasonable. When the project is near completion, I would also like to write a journal article about the process and all of the political ramifications.

Despite the obvious frustrations and lack of control over key aspects of the project, the Kpelle project has been quite satisfying. All of my professional life, I have made use of native speakers in various countries to provide me the content for my research. They have done so with grace and generosity. One important aspect of WKU's mission is our international reach. This time, I feel that, for once, I can hand something back with that reach. First, having a local African language available as a medium of education and commerce is an important marker of local identity for this culture. Second, studies also show that literacy is greatly improved in communities that first teach literacy in their children's native tongue. Literacy is abysmally low in Liberia, and because most education is in English, children do not go to school because they do not have the literacy skills needed, let alone for a second language.