

“If you’ve got a mother tongue, please use it!”

Minority language development: the case of Rangi

Oliver Stegen

oliver@ling.ed.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

While the United Nations guarantee the right to use minority languages freely in private and in public, this right is in reality restricted by several circumstances, one of them being the fact that many minority languages do not have a body of written literature, or even an orthography, thus restricting language use to the oral medium. In this paper, the situation of one particular minority language is presented: Rangi of Northern Central Tanzania. After sketching the brief history of the Rangi language development project which started in 1996, the focus rests on the key factors of language vitality, language attitude, and project ownership. For the first two, a positive development is observed, and consequently, Kutsch Lojenga’s (1996) participatory research approach is recommended as suitable project approach. The paper ends with an outlook on avenues for further research and possible future action, suggesting an increase in sociolinguistic investigation as well as an in-depth discourse analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper originates from my personal involvement with the Rangi language since 1996. As a member of SIL, an international organization which, among other things, is concerned with minority language development, I was given the task of coordinating the development of the Rangi language of Tanzania. Thus, the chosen title “If you’ve got a mother tongue, please use it!” is meant to reflect the dichotomy between initiatives from outside versus inside the language community. This can also be expressed by the two questions which presented itself at various turns in the progress of the project: What is the basis for me as an outsider to come into Rangi society in order to develop their language? And what are the conditions for successful minority language development?

As one basis for minority language development, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious or Linguistic Minorities can be taken (United Nations 1993). In Article 2, §1, it declares that persons belonging to such minorities “have the right to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, and to use their own language, in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination”. Even more pertinent to our topic, Article 4, §3 declares that “States should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue”. As one of the states having signed this declaration, the Republic of the Federation of Tanzania has issued a policy on culture and language which basically recognizes the value of vernaculars and encourages their development (Wizara ya Elimu na Utamaduni 1997).

Before launching into the particulars of project rationale and planning, a brief introduction to the Rangi people and their language will have to be given. Also, the history of Rangi language development will be sketched.

With approximately 350,000 speakers, Rangi is the main language spoken in the Kondoa District of Northern Central Tanzania. It is a Bantu language almost exclusively surrounded by non-Bantu neighbours. Cushitic languages are spoken by the Burunge to the South, the Alagwa to the North-West, and the Gorowa to the North; the Khoisan Sandawe live to the South-West; the Maasai in the East, and the Datooga in the West speak Nilotic languages. Rangi exhibits seven vowels, phonemic vowel length, and both lexical and grammatical tone; it is an SVO language with regular Bantu morphology (Stegen 2002), yet Cushitic influences in its lexis and discourse features.

1.1 Historical Sketch of Rangi Language Development

The formative period of the Rangi as a language group goes back several centuries, with estimates ranging from the 1500's according to Kesby (1981:19-20) back to 300 AD according to Ehret (1998:197). Of course, no contemporary written record tells us about early Rangi language history, the earliest available ones dating from the late 1800's, e.g. (Seidel 1898).

In 1949, the Warangi Union was founded, a political party striving for independence whose members exclusively were Rangi (Kesby 1982:252); this initiative occurred five years prior to the founding of Nyerere's TANU, now Chama cha Mapinduzi, the governing party of Tanzania, and can be taken as evidence of both the cohesion of the Rangi as a group and of their determination at innovative progress.

After independence in 1961, more and more Tanzanians attained positions of responsibility in government services, among them a growing number of Rangi. By 1970, a Rangi newspaper had been launched by school teachers under the leadership of Hasan Modu as main editor. However, due to the absence of an orthographic standard for the Rangi language, most articles in this newspaper were written in Swahili, Tanzania's national language, and by 1982, the newspaper was discontinued due to lack of funding, according to Modu (conversation with the author in June 1998).

In 1990 and 1995, two sociolinguistic surveys were conducted by SIL at the invitation of the Diocese of Central Tanganyika of the Anglican church of Tanzania (Bergman *et al* 1996). This led to the launch of the Rangi language development and Bible translation project in 1996. Initial cooperation with primary school teachers resulted in an orthography conference in October 1998 at which a basic writing system for the Rangi language was agreed upon (Stegen 1998). A first primer was ordered privately by Rangi government officials and subsequently printed in 1999 (SIL 1999). In 2002, the writing system was revised and improved by a small group of Rangi Christians from different denominations (SIL to appear).

Of course, the main aims of minority language development projects can be different in scope. For example, Legère (2002:163) only plans for a linguistic description plus a vocabulary list, whereas Tadadjeu (1999) includes a linguistic description, establishing an orthography, and publishing a dictionary, two different kinds of primers, and reading material of general interest. Considering the motivation and involvement of several Rangi speakers, a project scope comparable to Tadadjeu's seems to be preferred.

2. KEY FACTORS

While there are many factors bearing on a minority language development project, I want to concentrate on three only: language vitality which can be taken to indicate the probability of a language's survival, language attitude which focusses on the motivation of mother tongue speakers to develop their own language, and project ownership which looks at the question where project resources like finances and personnel are coming from.

2.1 Language Vitality

The 1957 census of Tanzania gives the number of Rangi speakers as 110,292 (Polomé 1980:4). Almost half a century later, their number has almost tripled to approximately 310,000 (Grimes 2000). This quick look at the growing numbers seems to indicate that Rangi is not an endangered language. Rangi continues to be spoken by all generations in several domains of life, and strategies to promote the use of the Rangi language at least for the oral medium have been observed (Stegen 2003).

2.2 Language Attitude

This second factor is definitely more difficult to assess than the first one. While Rangi attitude to their mother tongue is positive at the oral level, they may not have enough motivation to invest heavily into the development of a written literature. Three different groups have been identified who, for various reasons, are interested in publishing written material in the Rangi language: a) educated members of the older generation who are afraid that their knowledge and experience will be lost, and who therefore advocate the publication of traditional material of cultural value, b) Rangi Christians who intend to promote and distribute religious material mostly to be translated from Swahili, and c) Rangi businessmen developing marketable products like posters or calendars featuring the Rangi language.

With regard to language preference, especially the younger generation is eager to learn English, both for economic benefit and for international communication purposes. The majority of Rangi speakers probably does not even consider it a possibility that their mother tongue can be read and written. For most of those who are actually aware of the option, the observation is valid that "literacy in a 'small' vernacular often seems to its speakers to be an economic dead end, however much it might be demonstrably a route to faster learning in an international language" (Le Page 1997:65), and that "[a]s long as all the people with the best jobs in the government and in large corporations expect to operate in English, aspiring parents will want to have an English-medium education for their children and it may well be difficult to convince them that the best route to that is through a vernacular-medium primary school" (idem:68). While English is not an immediate threat to the survival of the Rangi language, it could well have negative impacts on Rangi speakers' attitude towards their own language.

2.3 Project Ownership

Given the heterogenous language attitude, it may not come as a surprise that the Rangi haven not initiated a project themselves. The financial implications of carrying out a large scale project, like literacy efforts for a people group of 350,000 would be, might be a further deterrent. Hence, most of the project components like personnel, leadership, administration, resources, and funding come from outside, that is, through SIL on donation basis. Unless the Rangi themselves take responsibility for their language project, language development will not attain the level of sustainability necessary for continued progress.

3. PROJECT APPROACH RECOMMENDATION

Given these key factors, a particular approach has to be found to facilitate the kind of language development which serves the Rangi people best. A first question involves the issue of prescription versus description. However, according to Cameron (1995:8) “‘description’ and ‘prescription’ turn out to be aspects of a single (and normative) activity: a struggle to control language by defining its nature”. Consequently, it will be necessary to use an approach which gives control to the Rangi themselves, regardless of whether they approach the development of their language descriptively or prescriptively.

As Rangi language development has not yet attained a high level of either structure or status, large scale language planning may not fit the project at this stage. Rather an approach which concentrates more on the grassroots level seems to be called for. The participatory research approach as described by Kutsch Lojenga (1996) has been considered appropriate. From it, six aspects have been identified which are deemed applicable to the Rangi language project situation:

- Work with educated mother tongue speakers as it will be easier to involve them in the steps of language development than comparatively uneducated Rangi.
- Work in groups, thus turning language meetings into a social event. In doing so, it will be important to bring different interests together, for example to include representatives from all interest groups, namely traditional, religious, and economic (cf §2.2).
- Share with them the process, the goal and the reason of language research. In order to enhance their ownership of the project, they not only need to know these but also, Rangi decision making processes should be taken into account.
- Raise their awareness of linguistic features. One way of doing this would be to offer seminars on various linguistic topics, on how to develop a good writing style, on components of establishing a literature etc.
- Let them discuss and refine hypotheses about their language. “When people are involved and participate, they understand what the goal of the activities is. They will make remarks and give their input and insights. This will not only speed up the analysis but also contribute to its quality” (Kutsch Lojenga 1996:15).
- In data gathering, let them do the transcribing. This will enhance their confidence in being able to write their language, and their mistakes in writing will actually point to potential difficulties in the orthography or highlight areas which need further training.

Some of these aspects are in the initial stages of implementation. For example, a seminar of four evenings on reading, writing, dictionary making, and translation was offered and well attended. In the process of identifying and prioritizing the intentions and perceived needs of Rangi mother tongue speakers themselves with regard to language development, it was discovered that technical and advisory support will have to be continued for at least two to three years in order for the project to function properly.

4. OUTLOOK INTO THE FUTURE

The participatory research approach is more like the guiding philosophy behind project activities. So, in conclusion, I will turn to specific activities which should be undertaken next in the Rangi language development project. With regard to further research, more attention has to be given to sociolinguistic aspects like the situatedness of writing in Rangi society. A first step in this direction could be an investigation of Rangi writing habits, for example by way of a questionnaire including questions like ‘What would you want to write?’, ‘What have you tried to write down so far?’, ‘What have you wished to write down but could not?’ etc.

In consultation with Rangi mother tongue speakers, the following three activities are considered to be of the highest priority for moving the Rangi language project forward:

- Publish an orthography reference manual (SIL to appear) and distribute it widely. In the question of standardization versus variation, room should be left for the expression of dialectal differences.
- Publish a trilingual dictionary Rangi-Swahili-English in order to cater for Rangi speakers’ perceived need of learning English.
- Conduct an in-depth discourse analysis to discover Rangi specific styles, with a view to inform prospective Rangi authors in creative writing seminars.

It is my hope that this short paper will not only be beneficial to the Rangi language development project but also inspire other minority language projects in similar situations.

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