

LANGUAGE ECOLOGY AND LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT: AN INSTANCE FROM THE NIGERIA-CAMEROON BORDERLAND*

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Recognition of the need to preserve linguistic diversity has begun to take a foothold among linguists. Current work on language endangerment has focussed primarily on the need to document languages under threat of extinction as a means of at least preserving a record of the world's linguistic heritage. In order to truly safeguard linguistic diversity, however, steps must be taken to ensure the actual survival of spoken languages in their cultural context. This suggests a need for a deeper understanding of the processes and factors involved in language endangerment, before steps can be taken to stabilize a threatened language. In this paper I examine the situation of Sombɔ, a small language in the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland, from the point of view of its linguistic ecology. Sombɔ is on the verge of extinction; it is now spoken by fewer than five elderly people, though it was once the language spoken by the blacksmiths of the region. This ecological perspective reveals various factors which combined to bring about the demise of Sombɔ. While it may now be too late to revitalize this language, an understanding of its situation nevertheless provides insights as to the importance the ecology of a language plays in determining its fortunes.

La nécessité que revêt la préservation de la diversité linguistique est maintenant reconnue parmi les linguistes. Jusqu'à présent, les recherches sur les langues en voie de disparition ont surtout mis l'accent sur la documentation de ces langues dans le but, important mais d'une certaine manière limité, de sauvegarder le patrimoine linguistique mondial. Or pour que la diversité linguistique soit véritablement préservée, il est nécessaire qu'on œuvre à la survie effective des langues menacées dans leur contexte culturel. Le travail de « stabilisation » que ceci implique passe par une analyse en profondeur des processus et des facteurs qui contribuent à la disparition d'une langue. La présente communication porte sur la situation où se trouve le sombɔ, langue parlée sur le plateau Mambila à la frontière nigéro-camerounaise, du point de vue de son écologie linguistique. Le sombɔ, qui était autrefois parlé par les forgerons de la région, ne l'est plus aujourd'hui que par moins de cinq personnes âgées. On peut, en adoptant une perspective écologique, mettre au jour les différents facteurs qui, en se conjuguant, ont déterminé et accéléré le processus de disparition de la langue. Il est sans doute trop tard désormais pour revitaliser le sombɔ, mais on peut du moins essayer de comprendre comment, dans un cas concret comme celui-ci, le destin d'une langue est façonné par son écologie.

0. INTRODUCTION

There is increased recognition among linguists, anthropologists, and others of the importance of linguistic diversity, and the threat posed by the current accelerated rate of

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language loss. Work on language endangerment has tended to be directed primarily at the documentation of endangered languages, as a means of preserving their uniqueness, ‘beyond the grave’. A concurrent strand of research is focussed on issues involved in language maintenance and development and, with respect to language documentation, its importance in providing the materials necessary for language revitalization programs. A third strand of research is concerned with the processes involved in language attrition and death, principally from a structuralist standpoint, and with the causes of language endangerment. And, although much has perhaps been pronounced on the issue, relatively little research has been undertaken to achieve an understanding of the causes of language endangerment, yet this understanding would seem necessary in developing adequate revitalization programs. Maffi (2002: 387) characterizes these efforts in similar terms:

The responses to the linguistic diversity crisis developed by scholars during the 1990s and into the twenty-first century have [...] tended to fall into two categories: those aiming to document and preserve a record of the language in grammars, dictionaries, and texts, and those aiming to support and promote linguistic diversity as such, as a key component of the diversity of life.

In this paper, in an effort to contribute to the more general discussion on causes of language death, I provide a description of the language ecology of Sombə, as a means of understanding the factors and circumstances that have brought this language to the brink of extinction. The most commonly cited cause of language endangerment globally is the (increasing) dominance of a colonial or imperial language: witness, for example, the demise of languages indigenous to the Americas and Australia. The situation in Africa is often claimed to be different, that the threat here is more from national languages or regional lingua francas that are themselves African languages, rather than from colonial languages (Batibo 2005, Brenzinger et al 1991, Connell 1998, 2000a, Mous 2003, Vigouroux & Mufwene 2008). Languages such as Hausa in northern Nigeria, Swahili in East Africa, particularly Tanzania, Wolof in Senegal and Fulfulde in northern Cameroon are examples of this. Sombə, however, like a number of other languages in its immediate vicinity, has given way not to a colonial language, nor have its speakers adopted a regional lingua franca as their primary language. Rather, the local variety of Mambila, known as Maberem, has taken on this role.¹ The study of the dynamics of language shift in the case of Sombə adds yet another layer of complexity to our knowledge of the factors involved in language endangerment and loss. The paper first explains the concept of language ecology and its relevance for the study of endangered languages. It then turns to the specifics of the ecology of Sombə; Sombə is disappearing due to the effects of not a single factor, but a combination of several, which can best be described as changes to its ecology. The paper concludes with a more general perspective on understanding the causes of language endangerment.

¹ One might legitimately ask about the basis of the distinction made here between ‘regional’ and ‘local’ languages, and whether Maberem, for example might be considered a regional language. In effect, the distinction hinges in part geographical spread (a locality being smaller than a region, though obviously there can be no unassailable demarcation line between the two on this basis) and in part on whether a language is used as a language of wider communication.

1. LANGUAGE ENDANGERMENT AND LANGUAGE ECOLOGY

An ecology can be defined as a network of relationships among organisms and their environment. In this sense, the term is widely used in biology, and is well known among the general public. That languages are part of an ecology is much less considered, even among linguists, than its biological counterpart, and so a brief explanation is to its meaning within linguistics may be useful. The notion that languages, like biological systems, exist in an ecology is due to Haugen (1972), and has been explored and developed by linguists such as Mackey (1980), Mufwene (2004), and Mühlhäusler (1996).

The ecology of a language is the network of relationships that a language (i.e. its speakers) has with other languages it comes in contact with, together with other aspects of its environment that might exert an influence on it. A succinct definition is provided by Raith (1984: 6)²:

“... the totality of relations that obtain between language and environment, i.e. between the factors and conditions which make language possible or which affect or influence language.”

In examining the ecology of a language, then, one takes into account such factors as the following (cf Mühlhäusler 1996): the classification of the language (i.e. its relatedness to other languages); the demography of its speakers; internal variation (regional and social); its domains of use; other languages used; degree of bi- or multilingualism; degree of development; whether there is institutional support; the attitudes of users; as well as non-linguistic aspects of the social environment and of the natural environment. (This list is not meant to be all-inclusive; it might also be usefully added that one might consider the language ecology of a region, rather than that of a specific language.)

Changes in the cultural or social setting of a language – or other aspects of a language’s ecology – parallel the effect of environmental changes on biological species. The eventual effects of such changes cannot be predicted at their outset. The possibility of drastic consequences on a language is summed up by Mackey (1980: 36–37):

“...the interrelated sequences of causes and effects producing changes in the traditional language behaviour of one group under the influence of another, results in a switch in the language of one of the groups. [...] The causes and the process of such language shifts are worthy of study [...] because they are intimately related to the life and death of languages.”

In short, the fate of a language can be influenced by a multitude of factors, and it is misleading to assume it can be attributed simply to any one of these. In the next two sections of the paper I take up Mackey’s challenge that these are worthy of study, and examine the situation of Sombə, in an effort to shed some light on the causes of its failing fortunes. The final section of the paper moves beyond the specifics of Sombə, and returns to more general issues.

2. SOMBƏ

The Mambila Plateau is situated in Taraba State, and is probably best known to Nigerians as a proposed high altitude training ground, several years ago, for Nigeria’s Olympians. It is, however, also home to substantial linguistic diversity: several small

² It would seem by Raith’s definition that, along with the types of factors generally recognized by (socio-) linguists as forming part of the ecology of a language, even such factors as topography, vegetation and mode of transport may merit consideration as influences on language.

languages and a multitude of varieties of Mambila, the language which has lent its name to the genetic grouping that includes these languages. The distribution of the Mambiloid languages is shown in Figure 1. Several of these languages are very small, having only a few hundred speakers at most. Some of them are much smaller than even that; Sombə, the subject of this study, is now known to be spoken for certain by just three elderly people, though when I first encountered this language a dozen or so years ago there were approximately 20 speakers. The language is variously known in the literature or locally as ‘Kila’, ‘Kilayen’, ‘Kila Yang’, ‘Somyev’, or ‘Fur’. The first two of these are the Fulfulde words for ‘blacksmith’, singular and plural; the last is the Sombə own word for ‘person’. I have elsewhere referred to the language by its Mambila name, Somyev, however, the speakers’ own name for themselves and their language is ‘Sombə’, and it is this term that I adopt in the present report. I refer to its speakers as Somyev, in order to disambiguate ethnonym from glossonym. Sombə is of interest not just for its endangered status, but also because of its unique linguistic and cultural status in the area: it is a language which apparently was only ever used by the blacksmiths of the region and their families. It is in part because of this uniqueness together with its severely endangered status, that we have chosen to focus on this language.

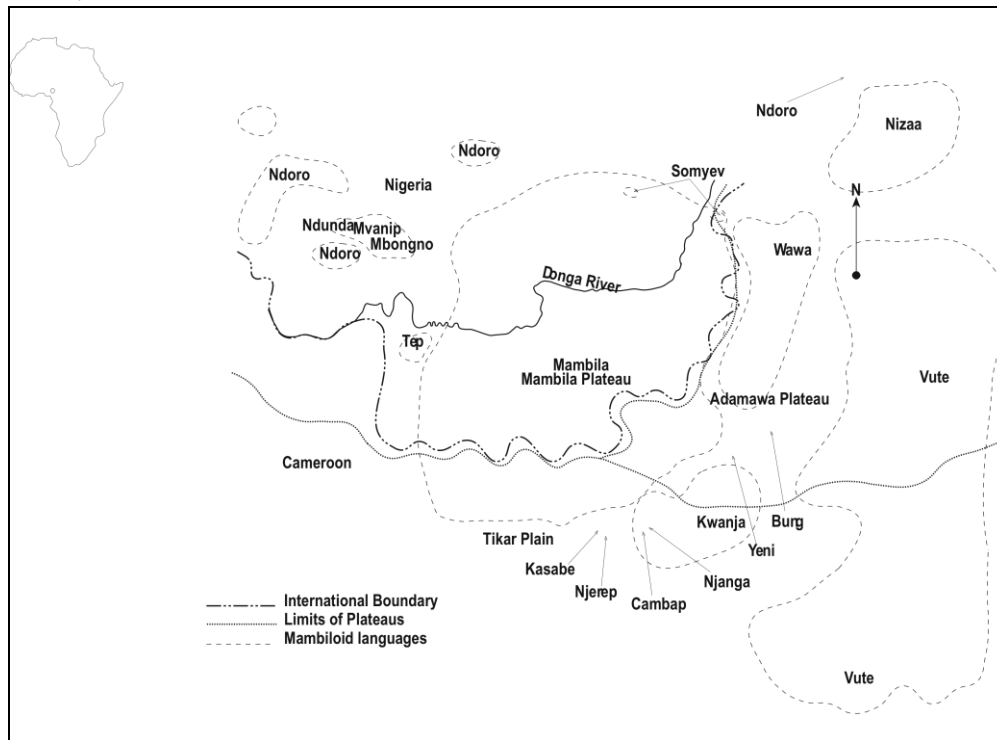


Figure 1: Map of the Mambila area, showing the distribution of the Mambiloid languages on the Mambila Plateau and in the adjoining area. The locations of Sombə (here labelled Somyev) are shown, with Kila Yang enclaved by Mambila, and Hore Taram Torbi adjacent to Wawa on the Cameroon side of the international boundary.

Sombə is classified as a Mambiloid language (Blench 1993, Connell 2000b, 2001), though within Mambiloid its affiliations are as yet unresolved. Blench names the language as Somyəwə. The Mambiloid grouping is part of Bantoid, and these languages are not far from where is now generally agreed to be the homeland of Bantu. It is a reasonable assumption that the progenitors of the Somyev have been in this region for several thousand years.

Sombə is the language of a blacksmith group. It is not a trade jargon or sociolect, but is (or rather, was) the primary language of daily use for the smiths and their families, both in the home and outside. The traditional blacksmithing trade has now vanished, bringing substantial change to the lifestyle of this group. Sombə was first discussed in terms of its endangered status in Connell (1998), where it was suggested a probable reason for its demise was the disappearance of the blacksmith trade.

3. THE CHANGING ECOLOGY OF SOMBƏ

Several, indeed most if not all, aspects of the language ecology of Sombə have undergone change over a period of perhaps four or five generations, with the most dramatic of these changes occurring in the last two or three. I begin this section with a description of some basic characteristics of its ecology

3.1 THE TRADITIONAL AND HISTORICAL ECOLOGICAL NICHE OF SOMBƏ

The traditional ecological niche of Sombə can be described in terms of what is known or has been asserted, or can be deduced; while this description is about the language, much is necessarily expressed in terms of people, its speakers.

- Until approximately 125 years ago (or perhaps as long ago as the 18th C) the Somyev lived in the vicinity of what is now Gandua on the Adamawa Plateau in what is now Cameroon, neighbouring the Wawa and also relatively near to the Vute and other, perhaps now dispersed or extinct, groups. A visit to the village of Hore Taram Torbi in this region in 1996, revealed at least one family still living there who confirmed a connection the smiths at Kila Yang, and that they (the Somyev) had moved from the Adamawa Plateau to their present location in Nigeria.
- During this time, they were blacksmiths to the region. Some reports (Percival 1938, Gausset, pers. com.) say the neighbouring Wawa were their smelters, though the Somyev claim they did their own smelting. Much of their work would have consisted in making hoes, knives and tips for arrows and spears. Perhaps of particular importance to their trade was the local custom that as many as ten hoes be presented to the parents of a young woman by her prospective husband as part of her brideprice.
- Blacksmiths in this part of Africa were traditionally outsiders, and lived apart from others. This status, one often shared with potters and carvers, was due in large measure to their ability to transform materials into utilitarian objects (e.g. van Beek 1991, Boyer 1983), often seen as a mystical power bordering on witchcraft.
- The Somyev had their own language, which served as their language of primary use, inside the home and outside. In order to carry on their trade, with respect to language, three possibilities may be considered: either others learned their

language, or they learned others' languages, or there was a regional lingua franca. There is no evidence for the first of these, and it is considered unlikely.

- If there was a regional lingua franca at that time, we don't know what it was, and there is no present evidence for one; Fulfulde serves that purpose now, but 125 years ago the Fulbe were only recent – and unwelcome – arrivals, so it is only relatively recently that Fulfulde has come to prominence as a lingua franca.
- The Somyev presumably also spoke Wawa. Within Mambiloid their language is perhaps closest to Wawa and Vute, and also Mbungno, Mvanip and Tep; the latter three are spoken at the western end of the Mambila Plateau. Ongoing comparative linguistic research will provide clues as to the extent of relationship among these languages and, it is hoped insight into the nature of contact between Sombə and Wawa.
- They were presumably always a relatively small community, and their population would to some degree have been controlled by the extent of their trade.
- All male children born to either male or female Somyev had to become blacksmiths. Their marriage customs, therefore, permitted daughters to marry outside the group only under certain circumstances, i.e. through a purchase system by which children would then belong to them (Meek 1931).
- This practice would have introduced into the community, or at least additionally familiarized them with, other local languages.

Summary: As a result of their status as outsiders, their own language developed as a distinct variety; this presumably identified them, both to themselves and to the wider community; in all likelihood they were multilingual, which not only helped, but may have been essential to them in conducting their trade. This does not preclude the possibility of a regional lingua franca which predated Fulfulde, and which they would also have had at their disposal but, as mentioned, there is at present no evidence for one.

3.2 THE PRESENT DAY ECOLOGY OF SOMBƏ

While much of what can be said about the traditional ecological niche of Sombə must be deduced or surmised, characterization of its present day ecology is based for the most part on observation and firsthand reports.

- As mentioned, approximately 125 years ago (or perhaps as early as the 18th C) the Somyev migrated from the Adamawa Plateau to their present location. Their oral traditions assert this was in search of better farmland, since they also practise farming, and it may be noted that the soil at their present locale is indeed more fertile. It is not impossible, though, that pressure from invading Chamba Leeko (18C) or Fulbe (19th-20thC) played a role in their move. Indeed, oral traditions collected at Hore Taram Torbi are explicit in claiming that invading Fulbe uprooted local peoples, including the Somyev, causing them to seek refuge elsewhere.
- Blacksmithing is today no longer their livelihood, though it is still practiced and is to a limited extent learned by younger people, though not as a trade. The growth in imported iron products, combined with a change in local customs, for example change in brideprice requirements, has made their work redundant.
- To the extent that blacksmithing is done, e.g. to make knives, spear tips, or hoes, scrap iron from discarded imported goods is used; smelting is no longer practiced.

- The Somyev now intermarry freely, and indeed the marriage restriction referred to above as reported in Meek (1931) is forgotten.³
- Sombə is spoken/used by at most three old people in the village of Kila Yang; the Somyev here number as much as 1,500, perhaps the largest their population has ever been; there are at least two others, semi-speakers, still living at Hore Taram Torbi, brother and sister to the one whom I met in 1996, and who has since died).
- The language is no longer used on a daily basis, in any domain.
- Younger people don't know the language, though some middle-aged people have a passive knowledge.
- The current oldest generation of blacksmiths were the first Somyev to learn Maberem (the local variety of Mambila); indeed some of them still did not speak it. This generation would have been young some 70-90 years ago, i.e. approximately in the 1920-30s. As such, they would have been the first or second generation to grow up living together amongst the Mambila, assuming the discussion and chronology in Hurault (1998), described below, is accurate.
- Today, everyone in the village speaks Maberem and Fulfulde; to a lesser extent people also speak Hausa (perhaps increasingly a lingua franca, though it is soon to tell whether Hausa will replace Fulfulde). Many people speak or at least have some familiarity with Tungba (the variety of Mambila spoken at Gembu the largest urban centre on the Mambila Plateau), and many, especially the young and those who have been to school, also speak English.

Summary: Sombə remains a part of the heritage of the Somyev, but it is no longer a viable language. It has been replaced in all its normal daily functions in the home and in the village by Maberem Mambila. Fulfulde serves as a language of wider communication. English, normally the language of official business (governmental, legal, etc) in Nigeria is not spoken by any of the remaining speakers of Sombə.

3.3 INTERVENING INFLUENCES

What, then, brought about the decline of Sombə? The two sketch views of the ecology of Sombə given above reveal a number of substantial differences, changes that have occurred from one period to the next: a language which was once the primary language of daily use for the Somyev is now reduced to its last handful of speakers, despite an apparent substantial increase in numbers of the Somyev, and is no longer a language of daily use. (Indeed, the increase in population is almost certainly a result of the some of the same factors that led to marginalization of the language.) And, a livelihood and its associated culture which must be assumed to have been vibrant over a prolonged period, quite possibly several centuries or longer, has now virtually disappeared. What these two sketches don't reveal very clearly are the events that precipitated these changes. These events can be summarized as follows.

The first is the migration of the Somyev from the Adamawa Plateau to their present location and whatever precipitated this movement, whether a search for better farmland or other, perhaps more malign, influence. Some time after the Somyev migrated to their present location, a series of dramatic upheavals took place in the region. The first of these

³ If it in fact did exist. Percival (1938), visiting the region only a few years after Meek, reports different findings with respect to marriage customs among some Mambila groups than those reported by Meek, though the Somyev are not discussed in this context.

was the arrival of the Fulbe; the devastating effect they had on the region is amply described in Hurault (1986, 1998) and elsewhere. In brief, indigenous peoples were scattered, taking refuge in valleys and forests and in the mountain with others; where old groupings were broken up, new ones were formed. People who resisted were either killed or taken as slaves. The possibility that the arrival of the Fulbe precipitated the Somyev move, as claimed at Hore Taram Torbi, cannot be ruled out. The Fulbe arrived in the Banyo region prior to reaching the Mambila Plateau, and the one location in Taram today where Somyev are still known to live is in a small mountain-top village where there are also Wawa and Mambila inhabitants. This is precisely the sort of situation that arose as local peoples scattered and sought refuge from the Fulbe. The Somyev may have fled from their original home, some to Hore Taram Torbi and others to the Mambila Plateau, only for the Fulbe to reach the Plateau a few years later. The fact that their village bears a Fulfulde name, (Kila is the Fulfulde term for blacksmith), suggests that the Somyev were at least on the Mambila Plateau before the Fulbe arrived there. The Fulbe arrival on and conquest of the Plateau was followed in quick succession by the arrival of the colonial powers, first the Germans and then, at the end of the first world war, the British. At the same time the French replaced the Germans in the adjoining part of Cameroon. The arrival of the colonial powers changed the shape and structure of daily life on the Plateau. Peoples who were formerly very de-centralized were now gathered in villages, with chiefs, and a regional administrative structure which included taxation (Percival 1938). It is not clear how immediate the effects of these changes were on the daily lives of the Somyev and their use of Sombə; while the area was slowly opened up to outside influences, the Mambila Plateau remained extremely remote even up until the 1980s. Nevertheless, imported products were gradually introduced, and came to replace many or most of the items produced by Somyev; together with this came changing customs among the neighbouring peoples, reducing the demand for local iron products. With the disappearance of their livelihood went many aspects of their culture; as mentioned, the marriage restrictions recorded by Meek (1931) are now forgotten, as are other aspects of traditional Somyev culture not discussed here. The combination of these factors, perhaps most notably the decline of their traditional industry and increased intermarriage with other linguistic groups (viz, the Maberem Mambila), ultimately brought about the demise of Sombə as it was not passed on to younger generations. In 1996, I met with some 15-20 fluent speakers of the language, all of whom used it on a daily basis, and some of whom had not, or only partially, adopted Maberem. All were elderly blacksmiths, the youngest being about 60. I was told at the time that they were the only remaining speakers. A few members of the next generation, i.e. some of the male children of this group, had acquired a passive knowledge of the language. A decade later, in 2006, only three speakers of Sombə were left in Kila Yang, one an elderly woman (said to be around 100), and with another in the neighbouring village of Kuma (both the woman and the Kuma resident have since died). In short, the decline of Sombə must be seen as the result of a constellation of factors, changes in the ecology of this language; there is no single cause that can be pinpointed as having brought about its demise.

4. THE BROADER PICTURE

In the preceding account of Sombə, I have tried to show the importance of understanding the ecology of a language – and how a given language may respond to its changing and evolving environment – if we are to come to grips with the pressures that threaten and ultimately bring about the demise of languages. Mackey (1980), quoted in the

Introduction to this paper, pointed to the causes and processes of language shift as being related to the death of languages. Despite the sketchiness of our knowledge of the past with respect to Sombə, it is apparent that the demise of this language cannot be attributed to one single cause. Rather, through a combination of a number of different factors, the ecology of this language changed so drastically that it is no longer a viable language; these changes in its ecology included, of course, changes in the traditional culture of the Somyev. Not only has the language been adversely affected, but important aspects of a traditional way of life and our access to African history have gone with it.

Adopting an ecological approach to understanding language endangerment makes it clear that there is seldom a simple, single cause such as the dominant influence of a colonial language (or indeed, national, or regional language), or modernization or globalization. The situation may be very different for different languages and there is no reason to assume otherwise, even in instances where there is a *prima facie* case for saying that there is a simple, similar cause; often the perception of a single cause is a mirage brought about by focussing on that reason at the expense of other complicating factors. This not to say that an underlying cause for the overall trend towards the loss of linguistic diversity cannot be identified; almost certainly it would be accurate to identify the present threat to linguistic diversity with ‘modernization’ (which is not necessarily synonymous with ‘globalization’). However, making this identification doesn’t really help in understanding the factors that combine to bring about the demise of individual languages, nor does it necessarily lead to an understanding of what needs to be done in order to counteract and reverse either an individual situation of language endangerment, or the more general threat to linguistic and cultural diversity.

An important – and indeed key – step in safeguarding linguistic diversity, is understanding the threat in the first instance. Armed with this knowledge, one can begin to implement measures to reverse the situation. Mühlhäusler (1991) argues for the importance of protecting or strengthening language ecologies in stabilizing and developing languages, and this would appear to be an appropriate strategy, given what we now know about language endangerment. The safeguarding of linguistic diversity is important, perhaps in ways that we are just beginning to recognize and acknowledge. I close with a quote from a later publication of Mühlhäusler (2003: 199) as a reminder – as if one were needed – as to why this is important in the first place: “... diversity of languages or diversity of dialects generates diversity of perspectives, and helps sustain the diversity of life”.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, in this paper I have examined the linguistic ecology of Sombə, an endangered language of the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland, in an effort to understand what brought about the demise of this language. Sombə was formerly spoken by blacksmiths and their families; an initial hypothesis, mooted in Connell (1998), suggested that its downfall could be attributed to the loss of their blacksmithing trade. The view presented here reveals that in addition to this several other factors bear mention, among them the migration of the Somyev from a homeland which ultimately brought them into contact with other languages, and in particular Maberem which has now become the replacive language. So, while the loss of their trade was no doubt a key factor in its decline, to arrive at a deeper understanding of why this language has apparently come to its last days a broader perspective is important.

The story of the decline and demise of Sombə was presented as illustrative of the need to take into account linguistic ecology in understanding the varying fortunes of languages. The situation of each language is unique, making it difficult, even misleading, to generalize down to a single overarching cause for language death. Understanding the roots of any problem is key to finding a solution to that problem; if preserving linguistic diversity is important, as an increasing number of linguists and anthropologists, including myself, now affirm, then understanding the causes of language endangerment is essential to the preservation of linguistic diversity.

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