

**Community Desire and Potential for Language Development among the Runga
Community of Chad**

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Abstract

This paper examines the sociolinguistic situation of the Runga people group in Chad and the potential for language development in the vernacular language. Sociolinguistic situation refers to how elements such as region, class, or other languages affect the use of Runga. Language development refers to activities such as creating an orthography, reading materials, and incorporating the language into education or other activities to promote its use. This paper affirms the importance of vernacular language development as well as showing that Runga is still a vital language used by many of the members of the community. Based on a survey conducted by the author during her master's research, the expressed desires and opinions of the Runga community are considered and used to come to conclusions about the viability of language development, specifically that orthography development is desired by the community, as well as incorporating Runga into the educational system. The state of literacy and education in the Runga community is considered, as well as examples of other language development projects among other vernacular languages in Chad that have met with success, such as among the Daza people.

Key Words: Orthography development, vernacular education, stable multilingualism.

Introduction

The focus of this article is an examination of the potential for language development among the Runga people, a minority group of southeastern Chad. They speak a vernacular language also called Runga, and this article aims to particularly take into consideration the Runga's sociolinguistic context, which includes the presence of Chadian Arabic and other languages in the region which provide many linguistic alternatives for vernacular speakers of Runga as they move about in society.

Language development is the process of engaging in activities to sustain the use of a language in its community of speakers. While there are different levels of what language development projects hope to achieve in different communities, examples would be developing an orthography (writing system) and teaching members of the community to read in their vernacular language (Lewis & Simons, 2016).

Vernacular languages are important components of group and individual identity, and their preservation is something that has become highly valued in minority communities around the world. However, the need for development of these languages is a vital component of preservation, since the language must be seen as useful and valuable to the community which uses the language as a whole (Cahill & Rice, 2014). There are many instances where languages have fallen out of use because a more powerful or widely-used language has been seen as necessary or more valuable in helping speakers to advance or engage in personal development. Therefore, listening to their desires in regard to questions of language development is of utmost importance (Cahill & Rice, 2014).

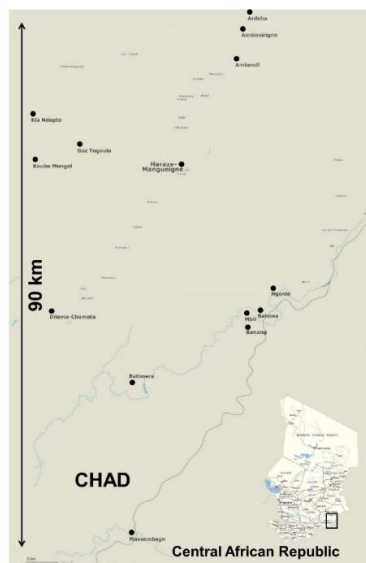
Language development necessitates resources and materials that will aid the community in the development of their language. Historically, one of the major components of language development has been the creation of an orthography for a given language. Runga does not currently have an orthography. In the development of orthographies, it became clear over the years and by experience that the presence of other languages

interacting with the given language influenced what decisions needed to be made in regards to that orthography (Cahill & Rice, 2014, p.18). For example, the orthography of a national language should be considered to facilitate transfer (learning to read in that other language as well) for the readers of the new orthography. While this is only one component of language development, this underlines the important point that languages do not exist in a vacuum, and the greater sociolinguistic context of individual languages has a great impact on how languages are used, viewed, and what types of language development are desired, or even possible, for any given community.

The author was able to survey thirteen Runga villages in 2022, and determined that there is community desire for language development and an orthography if possible. While many of the Runga population who participated in the survey have not had opportunities to learn to read in any language, the idea of an orthography existing in Runga was appealing to participants.

Figure 1

Map of Runga Speaking Villages Surveyed by the Author



Note. Taken from King, 2023, p. 22.

Language development must also take into account the linguistic situation of Runga. Almost all of the languages in Chad fall into one of three language families: Afro-Asiatic, Niger-Congo, or Nilo-Saharan, and Runga is no exception, belonging to the Nilo-Saharan family (Eberhard, 2022, ethnologue.com). Interestingly, Runga speakers refer to their own language as Aiki, but the name Runga is used by outsiders to refer to the language. The term is also used to refer to the people, and not only the language, of this ethnic group. The name Runga was given to the people by the Chadian Arabs, and it is an example of the influence of Chadian Arabic on the Runga language. Runga is one of more than 100 languages spoken in Chad, and while there is no official data on the population's size, rough estimates would put the population at under 100,000. The two national languages of Chad are French and Chadian Arabic, with some of the more powerful minority languages being Daza and Teda in the northern regions and Ngambay and Sara Kebba in the southern regions of Chad. Gula is another example of a widely used language in the south of the Salamat province, which is where the Runga are located. There are three languages, Kibet, Daggal, and Mourro that have a good number of similarities to Runga and which are, according to vernacular speakers, mutually intelligible—that is to say, that the speakers can understand each other even when speaking their different languages (Bombay et al., 2006, p. 8).

Before beginning language development work in the Runga speech community, it is important to understand where the language fits in what Lewis and Simons call the “language ecology” (2016, p. 92). In a linguistic system where there are multiple languages, one needs to understand which languages are used in which contexts and what place they have in the overarching network of language use. Even in multilingual situations, there can be a stability that exists between several languages which are used for clearly understood differing functions, a phenomenon which was first termed “diglossia” by Ferguson (Meyerhoff, 2018). In this way, the languages do not compete with each other but are able to coexist, whereas in

situations where several languages are used for the same purpose, a struggle for dominance by one language or the other will usually ensue. Both types of situations exist, although it does seem that there is more often competition between languages in linguistic ecosystems than multilingual stability (Meyerhoff, 2018).

French is the official educational language of Chad, and it is the standard language of use in the Runga schools, although there are also some schools that conduct their classes in Chadian Arabic. Despite being one of the two official languages in Chad, in the Runga community French does not seem to have any other function or be widely spoken or used outside of school. With one noted exception in the village of Babona, where one Runga teacher uses Runga informally along with French to aid the students in comprehension, Runga does not have a function in education. However, it remains the primary (and sometimes sole) language used by the children in the majority of the rural villages. This could be the result of both an established and stable multilingualism than the product of a weak education system that does not have much of an overall impact on the speech community in general.

Another new development that could have effects on the language ecology of Runga is climate change and the ongoing reception of Central African Republic refugees in the region. A park ranger interviewed by the author explained that recently there are more non-Runga villages appearing in the region due to these factors, and this will increase the number of other languages that are functioning in the language ecology (King, 2023). This phenomenon could either become potential competitors for certain roles or which could increase the push for using Chadian Arabic as the vehicular language in more and more contexts, leading to an imbalance in the established domains in which Runga is typically used (Lewis & Simons, 2016).

One phenomenon common among minority language speakers is that they feel pressure to start using more powerful languages and begin to abandon their vernacular languages (Maja, 2007, p. 2). Sometimes this is against their will, but the speakers may not realize the potential they have for developing and using their own language. In the case of Runga speakers, if they genuinely have no interest in producing their own orthography, literature, or having access to vernacular education and translated texts, the need for introducing such projects in their community would not be necessary or useful. If, on the other hand, they do desire to preserve their language and introduce Runga literacy, then starting such projects would be a way to help the community advance and gain access to education and knowledge while still preserving their unique culture and ethnic identity.

The Case for Language Development among the Runga

There is little to no language development or education that exists in Runga at the time of the writing of this article. Generally speaking, the educational system in Chad exists primarily in French, which is rooted in government policy. The literacy rate in Chad overall is quite low, measured at 27% percent of all adults in 2022 (World Bank Group, 2024). There is also a discrepancy between boys and girls in how far they progress in education, with the percentage of girls decreasing as they level of school increases (MICS-EAGLE, 2022, p. 31). Common reasons that Chadians do not send their children to school, or that they stop after a short time, are the costs of school fees and the agricultural calendar, which often necessitates their children working with them in their fields instead of being in school. Those who do attend school do not have many advantages over those who do not, as evidenced by the many anecdotal stories about classes who do not have teachers, teachers who do not come to work, and class sizes that are so large that maintaining discipline is difficult.

As noted above, literacy is a primary factor in the discussion because developing literacy is one of the primary ways that minority languages can continue to thrive in the

presence of other written languages such as Chadian Arabic and French. Therefore, it is clear that the challenges of basic education and the fact that the majority of Runga do not read French creates additional challenges in Runga language development should the community choose that route. However, similar development is taking place in many parts of Chad, with varying levels of success. Languages such as Ngambay and Nancere are just two examples of languages that now have orthographies and literature available (Eberhard, 2022; ethnologue.com).

Examples that show the success of similar language development projects are developments among the northern language groups of Teda, Daza, and Kanembu. These three languages are closely related to each other, and the vernacular literacy and educational projects taking place among them have seen positive results. These include several primary schools that teach Daza literacy classes to their students, as well as an annual writing competition that encourages students to produce written materials in their own language. In 2022, the results of the advanced level of the Daza section of the competition were compiled to be published in a book, creating original literature in the Daza language.

These examples of development for other minority languages in Chad are important to consider when looking at Runga language development, because they provide a framework for possible projects. They also show that the culture of Chad is conducive to and accepting of such work. The fact that other languages have seen success in language development could also be a determining factor in Runga attitudes as they consider the advantages and disadvantages of engaging in such projects.

While basic literacy is a major problem for Runga language development, the social factors that come with having a large number of spoken languages in Chad create problems as well. This is often because of the power dynamics that arise between languages. Unofficial languages, such as Runga, which are only spoken by farmers in the far regions of the country,

offer much less prestige and influence than Chadian Arabic, or even the languages of more widespread and populous groups such as the Ngambay, Daza, or Zaghawa. These are sociolinguistic factors that could easily affect the vitality of Runga, among other languages.

Religion is another important aspect of the Runga sociolinguistic situation. Islam is the predominant religion among the Runga, and Arabic's status as the sacred language of their religion could influence their perception of Arabic and their desire to use it, potentially outside of religious domains as well.

SIL International, an organization dedicated to studying and documenting languages around the world, and which is active in Chad, conducted a language survey on Runga in a few villages in 2006 and published a report on its findings (Bombay et al., 2006). This survey looked at languages with similar linguistic features: the Kibet, Daggal, and Mouro. In the explanation of their methodology, the surveyors explain that although they tried to diversify the villages that they visited (4), they were still limited by travel constraints to villages on the main road, and thus a higher probability of increased exposure to Chadian Arabic since there is more interaction with other language groups on the main roads due to commerce. There are concerns among the missionaries that live in the region that their conclusion was not a fully accurate picture of the continued vitality of Runga. However, the continued vitality of Runga in rural villages was affirmed by the survey (Bombay et al., 2006, p. 5-6).

Sociolinguistic Theories Pertinent to the Runga

The field of sociolinguistics examines the phenomena of multilingualism, linguistic power, and speaker attitudes and perceptions. Multilingualism, individuals or even community groups who use multiple languages, is especially interesting in regard to the Runga's sociolinguistic context. Fasold (1999) discusses many of the linguistic questions that arise in multilingual settings and why people talk the way they do. Holmes (2013) has a discussion on language choice in multilingual settings. Diglossia is the term used for

communities that speak two languages. Her discussion on communities that have a respect for a standard, fixed code that might be less comprehensible to them over changing, unwritten codes (Holmes, 2013, p. 29-30) is interesting in respect to the Runga. The influence of the standardized French and Chadian Arabic languages could cause the Runga to have a lower opinion of their vernacular language. Additionally, individuals in communities that have diglossia but who are not themselves bilingual could find themselves excluded from formal settings. This can be seen in Runga communities where Runga speakers who do not speak French or Chadian Arabic are thus excluded from official or educational settings.

After regarding the use of Runga, who speaks it and in which situations, and the existing educational structures and what languages are seen as viable for establishing education among the Runga speech community, it is important to consider what role the Runga see their language having in their linguistic ecosystem, and the status that they give to it as opposed to the other languages that are present. It is also important to establish at what point the other languages are either functioning in unique ways in the Runga linguistic ecosystem or are competing with Runga to “replace” its function in the speech community.

The following table shows the results found detailing who speaks Runga and in which situations.

Table 1

Runga Speech Community Language Domains

Village	Home	Market	Outsiders	School
Mbil	Runga	---	Chadian Arabic	French
Banang	Runga	Runga	Chadian Arabic	French
Babona	Runga	Chadian Arabic	Chadian Arabic	French, Runga
Ngoide	Runga	Runga, Chadian Arabic	Chadian Arabic	French
Massebagn 1, 2, and 3	Runga	Chadian Arabic	Chadian Arabic	French
Batimera	Runga	Runga, Chadian Arabic	Chadian Arabic	French
Dilema-Chamata	Runga	Runga, Chadian Arabic	Chadian Arabic	---

Ambendi	Runga	Chadian Arabic	Chadian Arabic	---
Ambissirigne	Runga, Chadian Arabic	Chadian Arabic	Chadian Arabic	---
Kia Ndopto	Runga	Runga, Chadian Arabic	Chadian Arabic	French
Koubo Mongoi	Runga	Runga	Chadian Arabic	---
Goz Togoula	Runga	Chadian Arabic	Chadian Arabic	---

Note. Taken from King, 2023, p. 57.

This data illustrates that stable multilingualism could be a viable option for Runga speakers, with Runga being used in home and some market contexts but Chadian Arabic and French being used with speakers of other languages and in the national educational structure. It is also important to consider what role the Runga see their language having in their linguistic ecosystem, and the status that they give to it as opposed to the other languages that are present. Furthermore, it is necessary to establish at what point the other languages are either functioning in unique ways in the Runga linguistic ecosystem or are competing with Runga to “replace” its function in the speech community.

The language that appears to be competing with Runga the most is Chadian Arabic. As the most widespread trade language of the Salamat region, in addition to being an official national language in the country, there are a number of Runga towns and villages that are already becoming predominantly Chadian Arabic-speaking. In the capital of the Runga region, Haraze Manguéine, Chadian Arabic is already functioning as the default language among the town’s citizens. In fact, the phenomena that we see taking place in Haraze Manguéine corresponds with common sociolinguistic phenomena that concern large towns and population shift (Mesthrie, 2011, p. 271). Many of the Runga families that live in Haraze Manguéine speak Chadian Arabic even at home. When I went to the market, I was able to personally observe that the majority of the vendors selling fresh produce were either from completely different ethnic groups or had backgrounds of mixed Runga/other ethnicities. The presence of so many different ethnic groups is tied to the fact that Haraze Manguéine is the

largest town in the region and the center of commercial, governmental, and NGO activity. It is also situated on a main road that connects the north of Chad with the Central African Republic and which sees considerable traffic pass between Chad and Sudan (although this is sometimes affected during periods of war and unrest, as is the case during the writing of this paper). Haraze Manguéine is also situated on a common nomadic route that is used by Chadian Arabic nomad groups. All of these factors contribute to a multilingual composition in the city that tends to default to the most spoken language among them all, which in this case is Chadian Arabic.

In the 2022 survey, the Runga participants expressed that they felt ignored and excluded by the government (King, 2022, p.51). Given their position at the border of the country, in an area that is known as a potential seat of rebel activity, it is not hard to imagine that the government is not terribly interested in investing in the development of the rural and remote villages in the region. The fact that the few teachers who are available are consistently assigned to the larger towns does not help this impression that the Runga community has, which may be one of their incentives to invest in community schools—they do not believe that any other options are going to become available to them.

In the Runga communities, apart from Haraze Manguéine itself, there was very little access to school and this access was limited to the first two primary school levels. The lack of schools demonstrates neglect by the government, which claims that providing education to its citizens is a value. The educational curriculum was also taught in French. This demonstrated that the Runga must send their children away if they want them to receive any form of education, unless they go to Quranic schools, which are in Arabic. The willingness of the Runga to send their children to these schools indicates an affiliation with Islam that could have an impact on language attitudes as well, given the status of Arabic in Islam.

One practical consideration that is relevant to this discussion is the fact that much of the professional world in Chad functions in French or in Chadian Arabic, and thus a knowledge of these languages is important for those who would like to use their education outside of their traditional occupations of farming or working in the village. The official languages of the country cannot be ignored, even if a vernacular educational system does emerge as the preferred mode of instruction for the Runga. Some possible options in light of this question would be to continue teaching these languages as subjects in school, even if they are not the primary language of instruction, or to begin the first year or two with Runga instruction, introducing French, and then switching to the national curriculum in order to ensure that the students are receiving the standard content that they will need in order to pass the established tests (King, 2023, p. 54).

Despite the usefulness of being able to work in French and/or Chadian Arabic, almost all the interviewees that I spoke with expressed that the children in their villages had at least some difficulty learning in French. They affirmed that the students were still able to learn, but there did seem to be an acknowledgement that certain information was lost because of the language barrier between the students and the language of instruction. There are certainly examples of students who continued their education and were able to finish their journey of education in other towns in Chad and join the professional world, but this group remains a small minority in regard to the total number of Runga students and children more broadly speaking, including those who do not go to school at all. Another consideration is that, as traditional ways of life change and become more mobile, such as the students who go to Haraze Manguéine or other towns to study, traditional ways of life begin to change, affecting the strength of the languages that are the most closely connected to these ways of life, such as Runga (Edwards, 2023, p. 173).

There is a desire among the Runga to develop their language. During her master's thesis research, the author encountered the recurring sentiment in regard to vernacular education that was overwhelmingly positive. The village of Ngoide provides a good example. In the community school operating there in 2022, there was a teacher who had begun using Runga as a language of instruction in the classroom in order to help his students understand, and this was lauded by the community (King, 2023, p. 31). It demonstrates that the use of Runga in primary education is a relevant question to the community and has already been acknowledged as necessary in at least some rural educational contexts. Additionally, one sees that the motivation for establishing education is already high, as evidenced by the existence of community schools in a large number of villages, and this motivation combined with the people's enthusiasm for developing their language would make vernacular schools a very viable option for any Runga-related language projects.

The findings of the survey were that the use of Runga as the primary language spoken in the home was nearly unanimous. The village of Ambissirigne was the sole exception to this generalization, where the interview participants said that their children were losing Runga. The other villages affirmed that, in their case, Runga continues to be used in the home, among families, and between the members of the community when there are not visitors from the outside with them. Even in specific domains where Chadian Arabic is the norm, usually public spaces like the market, there are members of the Runga speech community who are limited from fully participating in the language of wider communication and need to use interpreters if they do not want to struggle to interact (King, 2023, p. 62).

This data implies that the transfer of traditions and local information from elders to children takes place in Runga, and not in French or Chadian Arabic. Runga has the place of being the language that is the most personal and intimate in the Runga speech community, and except for two exceptions among the villages that the author has visited, including

Ambissirgne, this role does not seem to be in a position of major competition with other languages.

Two of the chiefs of the Runga people have both affirmed that there are villages that now function almost exclusively in Chadian Arabic. However, there are still villages in almost every direction branching out from Haraze Manguéine, excepting due North and due East, that the author has been able to observe and to conclude that the strength of the Runga language in these rural parts of the region is still established and vital.

Creating an avenue for community language development is very appealing to the Runga speech community. However, in education there is not necessarily an already existing push for Runga language literacy in the speech community. The desire for literacy is often directed more toward French or Arabic, which follows from the fact that these are the standard languages used for reading in the region and each already has an established orthography. For many of the participants in this survey, even the idea of being able to write and read their language is a new one that did not seem to have been much considered. Despite their verbal enthusiasm at the idea of Runga language literacy, it is advisable to consider these other factors and consider how language development could best meet their desire to preserve their language but also to develop education among their speech community in a way that would allow them to have access to the opportunities that they desire (King, 2023, p. 71).

There does not necessarily have to be a choice. While literacy can be offered in French or Arabic, if a Runga orthography is developed and offered on the side as a separate subject in school, or is used in the first years as a base for understanding the concept of reading before trying to understand reading in a second language where the student has a lower level of fluency, the student might be even better prepared for the transition to second-

language literacy. This is the process that was experimented with and worked successfully for the Daza language school project in the north of Chad.

The interviewees who participated in the author's survey also had a great interest in being able to record their stories, proverbs, and have a record of their traditional knowledge. These are personal domains that would clearly be able to be established as Runga in a context of multilingualism. Additionally, even if Runga language literacy, complete with an orthography and the creation of a corpus of literature, is determined to be impractical or too ambitious for the start of a language development project, there are ways to collect this information and record it orally, while also creating dictionaries and some printed materials to preserve the structure of the language for future generations.

It should also be noted that even members of the community who have already lost Runga as their vernacular language and speak Chadian Arabic instead are passionate supporters of the idea of Runga language development. They come from the northern villages or large towns that have more exposure to other ethnic groups, but still desire to see Runga developed, which shows that there is still a sense of community and identity that is tied to the language. It also confirms the feeling of loss which is generated as the members of the speech community consider the language's possible disappearance.

Conclusion

Given the linguistic context of the Runga speech community, it is apparent that establishing a language development project that aims for a stable multilingualism is the most feasible type of project and also that which would best meet the expressed needs and desires of the Runga people themselves that participated in this study. The majority of participants advocated for implementing multiple languages more effectively in their community, while maintaining their preference for Runga in the more intimate spheres of the home and village community. Clearly defining the roles of each language and being able to maintain the

distinctions that already exist between when Runga is appropriate and when other languages are called for, such as in market or in the educational system, could help keep the Runga language vital while also allowing the members of the speech community to have access to the opportunities that they are seeking for their children.

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