

Short Report of the Thur Language

Corey Havlicek and Bernadette Mitterhofer

I. Introduction

In the time from the 22nd to the 25th of May 2013, a team from SIL-UTB travelled to Abim District and the neighboring districts of Lira and Pader in Uganda to conduct a sociolinguistic survey of the Thur language.

The purpose of this survey was to answer the following research questions:

1. What sociolinguistic factors might influence the accessibility of existing literature in the neighboring languages Acholi and Lango?
2. Do the speakers of Thur adequately comprehend Lango or Acholi?
3. To what degree does Thur differ linguistically (phonologically, grammatically) from Lango and Acholi?

The team wishes to thank the government officials in Abim District for their gracious help and advice. We are also grateful to the government officials and elders in all the villages visited for taking the time to further this research with their help.

II. Methodology and Approach

To collect linguistic and sociolinguistic data about the Thur language, the team first visited a Lango speaking town and an Acholi speaking village to gather information to compare with the Thur data, before visiting two villages in the Thur area.

In each of the Thur villages, we interviewed a group of villagers who were brought together by the village leadership. Questions ranged from general information about the Thur area and people group to questions about neighboring languages, peoples' opinions of how well they understand these languages, previous language development and other sociolinguistic issues.

In each village, we asked for a group of four or five people to help interpret a phrase list. These lists were used to compare the different speech patterns of each village.

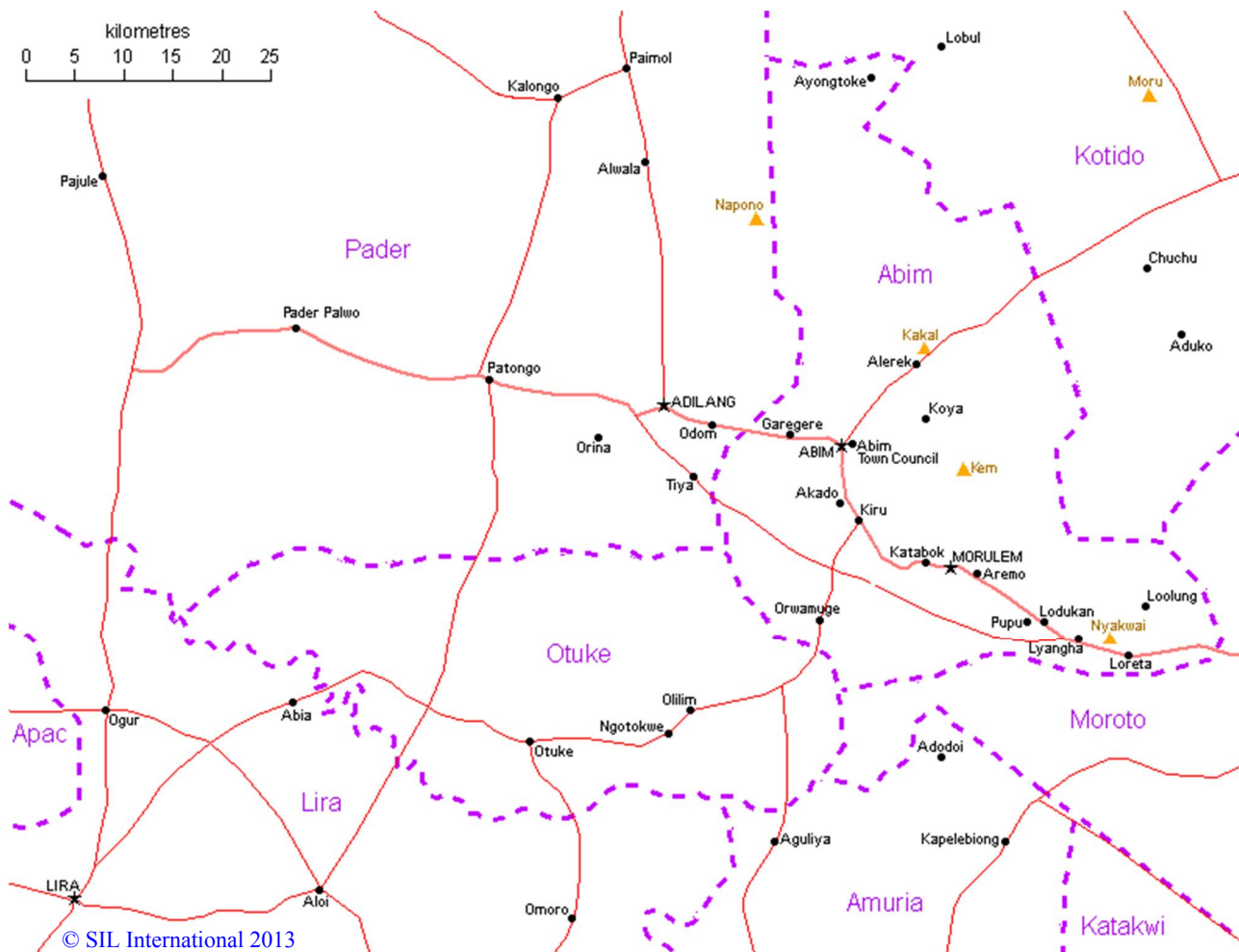
A bigger group was asked to listen to stories. First, we asked them to listen to a story in Acholi and then another in Lango. After each story, we asked questions about the story to see how much they understood. This helped the team to see if the Thur speakers understood these two languages and to gauge their level of comprehension.

In the Thur area we also spoke to government officials and conducted more specific interviews with religious leaders and teachers which centered on patterns of language use in churches and schools.

The research locations, along with their sub-county, district, language spoken, and date visited are listed in the table below. A map of the area is also included, where the places visited are capitalized and marked with stars.

Villages visited	Sub-County	District	Language	Date
Lira	LIRA	Lira	Lango	22 May 2013

Lalal East	ADILANG	Pader	Acholi	23 May 2013
Aremo Central	MORULEM	Abim	Thur	24 May 2013
Abim New Corner East	ABIM	Abim	Thur	25 May 2013



III. Results

The Thur people live mainly in the Abim district of Uganda. They are bordered to the north and to the east by the Karamajong people. The Teso people are to the south. In the southwest are the Lango people, and the Acholi people are in the east. The Thur people say they originated in a place called Bahr-el-Ghazal in Sudan (now part of South Sudan), with all other Luo speakers, before migrating to Uganda.

The villages interviewed were primarily composed of Thur people. Besides this majority of Thur people, there are also Acholi, Lango, Sabiiny, Teso, and Karamajong peoples, as well as people from Kenya, Congo, Sudan, Tanzania, and whites in the Thur area. The people of Aremo Central frequently marry Teso, Baganda, Lango, Karamajong, and Acholi peoples. Those in Abim report rarely marrying people from other tribes, but when they do, it's Lango, Acholi, Karamajong, Teso, Congolese, and Sudanese people. All of this helps us understand how they relate sociolinguistically to their neighbors. Generally, they get along with their neighbors, though in some of the interviews, people mentioned that there was tension between the people groups, particularly with the Karamajong, who periodically raid villages in the Thur area.

The heartland of the Thur area is Abim sub-county. We gathered that there are at least two varieties of Thur, which are distinguished by location and borrowing linguistically from neighbors. When asked about where to go to learn good Thur, we were told a variety of places across Thur land: Abim, Morulem, Koya (in Alerek), and Awilela. We were told the Thur of these places would be good for translating the Bible, specifically saying that Morulem is less mixed.

Thur is used by the Thur people in all facets of life. They use it for nearly everything in their day to day lives, with the exception of the situations noted below. Even religious leaders report using it for various aspects of their ministry.

When they begin their school careers, the vast majority of Thur children speak only Thur. Some have the luxury of going to a preschool, where they learn English. Otherwise, since 2007, P1¹ and P2 are in Thur, and P3-P7 are in English, and English is largely confined to school. Learning to read and write Thur is important for expressing feelings and for local political campaigns². One village leader interviewed added that there was a benefit to reading and writing Thur, saying that it is their language, that they would take great pride in their language being written, and that it would help prevent children from switching to another language.

When we asked about materials written in Thur, we were told there are storybooks, Catholic prayer books³, the Gospel of Luke, song books, and adult literacy materials. They are easily understandable, but Aremo Central said there are spelling errors, that it was almost as if the printer was not a native Thur speaker. They say the materials are difficult to get, and usually not intended to be sold to individuals, but they know they are available.

Nearly all the Thur people in the areas interviewed are Christian. Likewise, nearly all the members of the local churches are Thur people. It seems that many churches offer an English service and a Thur service. For the English service, the English Bible is used. For the Thur service, the PAG in Orwamuge use the Lango Bible (they are close to the border of the Lango area), and the Anglicans and Catholics use Acholi. The PAG and Anglicans will often interpret Scripture into Thur on the fly for their service. They do this, because, even though the Thur may have some understanding of these two languages, understanding theological concepts in Acholi or another language other than Thur might be beyond their grasp. There is also the Gospel of Luke in Thur which is being translated with SIL and Seed Company assistance, and the Catholic Book of Readings. It seems that few Catholic families have a Bible at home. However, it is reported that most of the PAG and Anglican families have a Bible, either in Acholi or in Lango, one of the neighbouring local languages, depending on the area. All religious leaders agreed that the Thur people would best be served by a Bible translated into Thur. We see from all of this that the Thur speaking community has a strong motivation for scripture translation in their language.

Aside from Thur (which they use among themselves), the Thur people speak English with outsiders and sometimes among the educated in their own people group. In general, within the country of Uganda, English is very important as the official language and a language of

¹ P1 means Primary one, the first grade in primary school, P2 is primary two, the second grade in primary school, etc.

² However, there are some problems teaching Thur due to the lack of good school materials in Thur, and also due to children who started pre-school in English or those who are not Thur people and therefore do not speak the language.

³ People probably meant the Catholic Mass Lectionary (Book of Readings) as the Catholic priest we interviewed said that only this was actually in Thur.

wider communication. 'Swahili is also recognized as an official language in Uganda but is mostly used among the military and police forces. According to the LC1 of Aremo Central (Morulem), after Thur, the Thur people best understand Acholi. Other languages spoken in Thur-land are Acholi, Lango, and Ng'akarimojong, which are used when talking to these peoples by the Thur who have travelled and learned those languages. Lango and Acholi are considered to be fairly similar to Thur, intelligible to children by around the ages of 6 to 10. Of the two languages, the villagers in Abim New Corner East say that Acholi is easier to understand than Lango. Some of the differences mentioned between Thur and Acholi, besides some different vocabulary, are certain "added sounds" in Acholi that give some words slightly different pronunciations (e.g. "athin" in Thur becomes "latin" in Acholi). The villagers said that the Teso and Ng'akarimojong languages are very different from Thur, and they have to resort to English when talking with those peoples. The Thur do, however, borrow some words from Teso, as well as from Lango and other languages near the borders of Thur-land.

The analysis of the phrase lists collected in each of the research locations shows that there is a slight dialectal difference between the two Thur research locations. The linguistic data from Abim New Corner East shows that the Thur spoken there is closer to Acholi than to Lango. However, the data from Aremo Central shows that their Thur is equally different from Acholi and Lango. Since Aremo Central (Morulem) is located farther south than Abim New Corner East (Abim) and closer to the Lango area, it is not surprising that their Thur is more similar to Lango than the Thur of Abim. Overall Acholi is a little more similar to Thur than Lango, but Thur is different enough from both languages that Thur speakers do not understand these two neighboring languages without some exposure to them.

The Lango story was not well understood by the people of Aremo Central, and the people of Abim New Corner East, who said they could understand half, did only a little better in retelling the story. Both groups said that the difference between Lango and Thur was in words, and Aremo Central said there was some difference in pronunciation as well. It should be noted that when we tested the Lango story with the Lango people, we were told that it sounded like a Lango speaker reading from a paper or even a speaker of another language reading the story, so that could skew the results of the comparison.

When it came to the Acholi story, Aremo Central indicated a significantly higher ability to understand the story, while Abim New Corner East said they understood little. Despite this, both groups answered most of the comprehension questions correctly, demonstrating quite a high level of understanding.

IV. Conclusion and next steps

The Thur people are very proud of their language and culture. They adamantly assert that they have a distinct cultural identity and language that is different from their neighbours, though there is a degree of intelligibility of the Acholi language. Thur is used in all aspects of life, and they would strongly prefer having the Bible in their own language compared to using another language. It is the opinion of the survey team that they will continue translation of scripture, with or without outside help. Therefore, we recommend continuing to assist the Thur people in translating scripture in their language to enable them to produce the highest quality scripture possible.