

Development of Nggwaba Orthography: Syllabic, Phonemic and Tones Patterns

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ABSTRACT

Nggwaba has been described as an Afro-asiatic language. Further classification situates it in the Chadic group precisely Biu-Mandara. The language is spoken in Gombi and Hong Local Government Areas of Adamawa State, North-east, Nigeria. It has been noticed that the language has largely been under-documented and under-investigated. The estimated number of people who speak the language is less than 1000. This paper presents the orthography and a preliminary analysis of a few aspects of the phonology of the language for the early primary education level. It became necessary to study, develop and document the orthography of Nggwaba language in order to prevent it from going into extinction. The study adopted a mixed-method sampling technique, cross-sectional design as well as a descriptive analysis. The paper is divided into three main sections. While the first section deals with background of the study, the second section looks at the literature review. The third section focuses on the methodology through which the study was carried out, and the fourth section discusses the framework, and finally the fifth section focuses on the result of the study. This is the first description of the phonological features of Nggwaba language. The by-product of this study has added knowledge to literature especially the area of areal linguistics.

INTRODUCTION

Nggwabba (also known as Gombi, Goba) is an Afro-Asiatic language spoken in Nigeria in Gombi and Hong Local Government Areas of Adamawa State. Blench (2006) classified Nggwaba under “Central” Family branch coming under “Tera” subgroup. The language is listed in the 18th edition of Ethnologue (2015).

The language is tonal, a characteristic common to languages spoken in Africa South of Sahara. A tone language is one which uses different pitches to distinguish individual words which in other ways sound the same. According to Yakubu (2021) the word Nggwaba literally means “oneness” or togetherness. The Nggwabas were said to have come to settle in their present location after travelling through the Mandara mountains down to Muvi (Mubi). They claimed that Gude, Fali and Nzanyi to be their descendants who were left behind in Muvi. A myth presented by Yakubu (2021) further adduced that from Gombi, the Nggwaba dispersed to other locations like Song, Fufore, Girei, Yola and other areas where they metamorphosed into Gudu, Bata, Kofa, Holma and some other dialects.

Based on Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS), its language vitality is currently estimated at 6b (threatened) (Lewis, 2010), meaning that it is not being learned by the vast majority of children within the community.

There are no known dialect differences. It is hoped that with encouragement (i.e. development of orthography, written literatures, awareness and empowerment) Nggwaba will transit to a higher level of sustainability (EGIDS level 6a which corresponds to sustainable orality) if active language development is occurring and FAMED

conditions are met (Lewis & Simons, 2010). Based on UNESCO (2003) “Nine Factors” scale, languages are termed severely endangered if they are used mostly by the grandparental generation and up. So, for a language like Nggwaba to receive a “safe” grade, the language must be used by all ages and transmitted from one generation to the next. This is because the more transmission occurs the stronger the language.

A random survey of parents and teachers who are Nggwaba was conducted by these authors to ascertain the vitality of the language at home, in school and the community. The results revealed that 100% of the teachers do not use Nggwaba language as a medium of instruction in schools since 80% of the teachers could not read and write in Nggwaba. But one hundred percent of the respondents would like the orthography of the language to be developed. With respect to parents’ responses on the level of Nggwaba usage, 80% of the parents do not use Nggwaba language to communicate with their families at home, and 100% of the parents do not use Nggwaba language to preach in their worship places.

Indigenous Languages and the National Policy of Education

Section 2 subsection 16 (j) of the NPE (2013: 6) states that for the Early Childhood/Pre-Primary Education, government shall; ensure that the medium of instruction is principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community; and to this end will:

- i. Develop the orthography of many more Nigerian languages, and
- ii. Produce textbooks in Nigerian languages.

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And where there are orthographies, the NPE (2013) further states that the language of the immediate environment shall be taught as L1 where it has orthography and literature. Where it does not have, it shall be taught with emphasis on oracy as L2.

Unfortunately, many languages in Adamawa State do not have orthographies. As some are at the verge of going extinct, such as Nggwaba which has a few native speakers in Gombi Local Government Area is severely threatened. If urgent actions are not taken to prevent the disappearing of our mother-tongues and their non-usage in the early primary education level, our mother-tongues' epilogue will be summarized in the following words:

One hundred years or slightly more ago, the Native American people were still speaking their own languages. They did not choose to shift to English. Their children were forced to go to government boarding schools where their hair was shaved and they were beaten if they were caught talking in their mother tongue. So, many lost their own language. There was nothing natural or voluntary about it. - Tom Eoeddes, Literary Translator (BBC News Magazine, 2010).

Even, as far back as 1996, Crawford had observed the above problem associated with language loss with regard to the Native American people where he said the "the problem is even more acute". He further noticed that:

Since their (Native American people) languages are indigenous to this continent, there are no reinforcements coming in from elsewhere. For native peoples, language loss is forever. Moreover, I would argue that this

phenomenon — while harmful to any community — is especially devastating to indigenous cultures, which rely heavily on oral traditions (Crawford, 1996).

The focus of this study is to develop the orthography of Nggwaba language to preserve cultures and traditions of the people.

Problem Statement/Justification

It was discovered that only few languages in Adamawa State have orthographies. Most of the other languages from our interaction with the Nigerian Bible Translation Trust (NBTT), Jos and interviews with our target focus groups reveals that though many languages have no orthographies, yet they are at the moment working on various stages of their languages. Linguists at the turn of the 21st Century warned that 10% of the 6,000 to 7,000 existing languages will not survive into the 22nd Century if nothing is done to prevent such an outcome (Isa & Grema 2014; Almurashi, 2017; Crystal, 2000). Every language, as postulated by UNESCO (2009), reflects a unique world-view with its own value systems, philosophy and particular cultural features. The extinction of a language results in the irrevocable loss of unique cultural knowledge embodied in it for centuries including historical, spiritual and ecological knowledge that may be essential for the survival of not only its speakers, but also countless others (Kumar Jha, 2018; Mekacha, 1993). Crystal (2000) has emphasised that, as each language dies, another precious source of data for philosophers, scientists, anthropologists, folklorists,

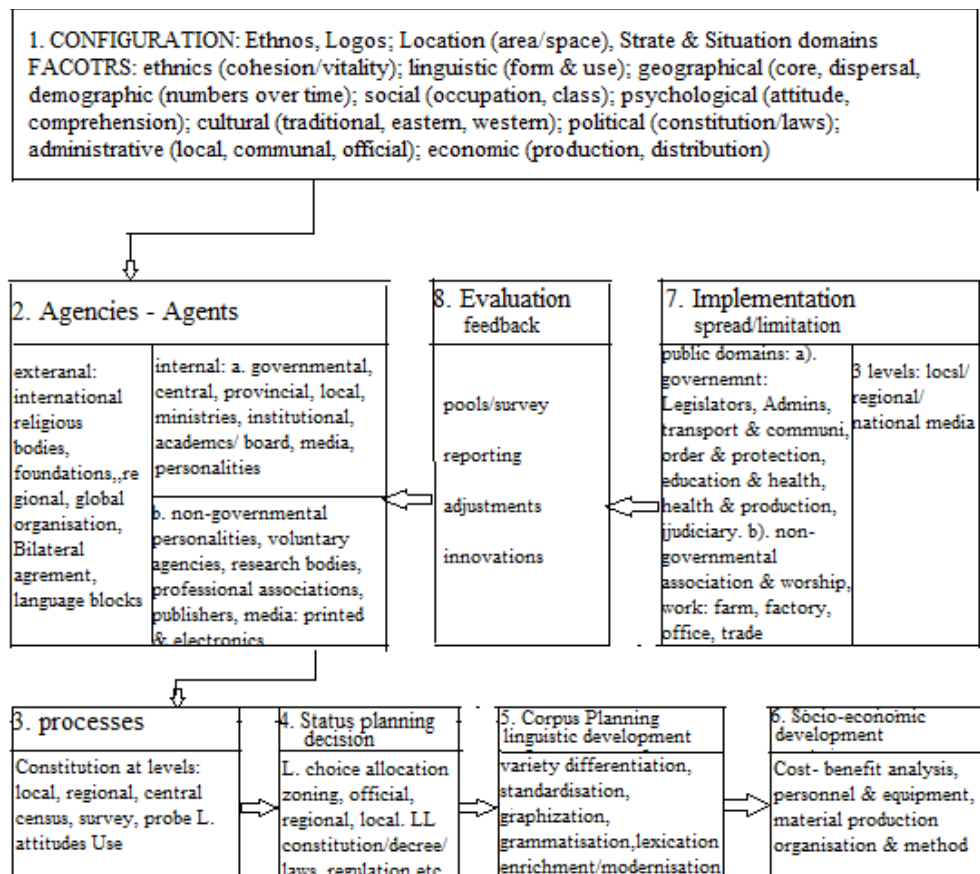


Figure 1: Brann (1976) Model Of Language Maintenance And Management

historians, psychologists, linguists, writers is lost. For speaker communities, languages are the creations and vectors of tradition that support cultural identity and are an essential part of a community's heritage. It may be so appalling that David Crystal calculates and predicts that a language dies every two weeks.

Ngwaba is facing a problem of survival. Presently, Hausa, Fulfulde and Kilba have acted as predator languages which have gradually consumed and swallowed Ngwaba and any other minority languages. The young mostly and often view the language having a low status in comparison with the languages mentioned above. Similarly, it is not recognised by the Adamawa State government and the community that speaks it. It has been observed that "Many languages in the world are yet to be reduced to writing – there is neither a written literature, nor grammar nor dictionaries" (Fakuade, 1999). In the same vein, literacy which is an important factor in long term maintenance of a language is lacking in Ngwaba. The development of orthographies of Ngwaba people will prevent their languages from going into extinction and safeguard their cultures and traditions.

For this work, we have adopted items number five (5) of Brann (1976)'s model of language maintenance and management which is: Corpus planning/linguistic development.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to develop the orthography Nggwaba for the early primary educational level in Adamawa State. In specific terms, the study will focus on the following objectives:

1. To identify the syllabic structure of Nggwaba language
2. To describe the phonemic patterns of Nggwaba
3. To examine the tones available in Nggwaba

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Shift

According to Blench (2010) most publications in general have focused on Niger-Congo languages. As has been indicated, Ngwaba language is among the Afro-asiatic language family. In a bid to find out the causes of language death and language endangerment, Isa, Ahmed and Grema (2014) report that a language is lost as a result of speakers shifting towards a stronger language in the community, or by political reason such as colonisation. For the later, there is a potential cultural assimilation. To preserve such languages from loss, Tsunoda (2012) reveals that "languages need to be documented because once a language is lost there would be no opportunity to record it" (Isa & Grema, 2014). Wurm (2002) has suggested that communities must be proactive in language maintenance and revitalisation, because "language endangerment can be reversed if the children are encouraged to relearn the language with the help of the surviving speakers in playing situations. Literacy programs and mother tongue education are of course essential as well, especially if they are backed up with language attitudes such as ethnic

identity awareness.

Tandefelt (1992) captures the process of language lost in a formula: $A > Ab > AB > aB > B$. This means that language A represent the minority language (that is the language which is dominated socially, politically, or numerically) and language B represents the majority language (the dominating language) in a multilingual society. The intervening variables between A and B point to the process of initial second language learning Ab , followed by a period of Bilingualism AB , then followed by almost total language shift aB , at a point 'a' the minority language is endangered by B.

Similarly, in a review of secondary data, Kumar Jha (2018) list up major causes of language endangerment. Two of the major causes are: a) lack of research on the endangered languages. This means that "All languages need to be documented and described for communities and individuals to have access to them" (Kumar Jha, 2018), and b) there is lack of active support and participation of individuals throughout the community, as well as the development of teachers and curriculum designed to meet current and future needs (Kumar Jha, 2018).

Nggwaba Language

There is a very few literature written on Nggwaba language. For instance, with respect to the status of Nggwaba, Ethnologue (2015) referred to it as a threatened language. This means the language is facing severe decline in the number of speakers. Ethnologue (2023) states that the population of Nggwaba is approximately 10,000, but the language vitality is tagged endangered because children no longer learn and use the language. The digital support of the language is referred to be "Still", which means the language shows no signs of digital support. Likewise, the National Population Commission (2020) estimates Nggwaba people to be around 26,000 worldwide.

In a study on endangered languages, Fakuade, Gambo and Bashir (2003) claimed that about 66% of Ngwaba people use Hausa, Kilba and Fulfulde in their homes and within their immediate community. The authors' findings further revealed that 100% of Nggwaba use Hausa for trade and when discussing serious issues because it is their language of wider communication. Similarly, 66% of Nggwaba people have been reported to be using only Hausa with friends, while 33% reported to be using Kilba and Hausa. Even though the study is very important, they did not attempt to develop the orthography of Nggwaba. The only written document that attempted to discuss the identity of Nggwaba people and a brief wordlist of the language is a pamphlet written by Yakubu (2021) Nggwaba Made Easy. Yakubu further alleged that based on the EGIDS rating scale, Nggwaba is ranked at 8a level. This means the language is moribund in which the only remaining active users of the language are members of the grandparent generation and the older ones.

Arising from above literature, it is clear that there is hardly any attempt on developing the orthography of Nggwaba. So, in order to preserve our culture and tradition

through our languages, there is the need to have a proper documentation of Ngwaba language which should be used in early primary schools in line with the National Policy on Education (NPE)

**Theoretical Framework
Reversing Language Shift**

Fishman (1991) first provided the scoring scale referred to

as the Graded intergenerational disruption scale (GIDS). The framework is an eight-stage typology of language shift and a set of priorities for reversing language shift programs. But more recently, Lewis (2010) has initiated and extended the classification of scoring system termed the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS). Our study adopted the Lewis (2010) extended scale. Table 3 provides the descriptions of the EGIDS scale.

Table 3: Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale

Level	Label	Description	Unesco
0	International	The language is used internationally for a broad range of functions.	Safe
1	National	The language is used in education, work, mass media, government at the nationwide level.	Safe
2	Regional	The language is used for local and regional mass media and governmental services.	Safe
3	Wider communication	The language is used for local and regional work by both insiders and outsiders.	Safe
4	Education	Literacy in the language is being transmitted through a system of public education.	Safe
5	Developing	The language is used orally by all generations and is effectively used in written form in parts of the community.	Safe
6a	Vigorous	The language is used orally by all generations and is being learned by children as their first language.	Safe
6b	Threatened	The language is used orally by all generations but only some of the child-bearing generations are transmitting it to their children.	Vulnerable
7	Shifting	The child-bearing generation knows the language well enough to use it among themselves but none are transmitting it to their children	Definitely Endangered
8a	Moribund	The only remaining active speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation.	Severely endangered
8b	Nearly extinct	The only remaining speakers of the language are members of the grandparent generation or older who have little opportunity to use the language.	Critically endangered
9	Dormant	The language serves as a reminder of heritage identity for an ethnic community. No one has more than symbolic proficiency.	Extinct
10	Extinct	No one retains a sense of ethnic identity associated with the language, even for symbolic purposes.	Extinct

The status of Ngwaba relating to the various levels of the GIDS is 8a. Because the language is severely threatened, the effort of this work is to push two scales downwards to 6a in which the literacy activities within the home, school and community could be achieved. The results of this study can achieve it. To reverse language shift, we would start from the home by documenting the language, and then teaching the sound system of the language in the primary school and most importantly an advocacy at the community level by creating Ngwaba Language Board.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data Collection Method

A digital audio tape-recorder was used to record respondents' answers from the interviews/ interactions. With the aid of two language assistants, Mr. Thomas Daniel and Pastor Yohanna Yakubu nine Ngwaba folktales (children story) were recorded. The recorded folktales

were transcribed into texts and translated using Cameron (2016) transcription convention. The second procedure was the administration of a structured questionnaire to participating teachers in order to clarify issues on why the language is either used or not used as media of instructions in primary schools. Parents were also interviewed to ascertain the usability of the language at home and the community level. All teachers' and parents' responses were analysed using descriptive statistics.

Data Sources

There are two sources of data: primary data and secondary data. The primary data was derived from recorded folktales presented by folktale tellers. The data was collected during fieldwork in Gombi, Fashi and Gudumiya towns in Gombi and Hong Local Government Areas, (the areas populated by the Ngwaba people) in November 2023. Three Ngwaba folktale tellers were invited to participate and

with their consent, nine folktales were recorded in which each story teller provided three tales. Then, the secondary data consist of written documents/ literature on Nggwaba language.

Data Sampling Technique

To select language for the study, a stratified data sampling technique was used. Any language having less than 1, 500 speakers form part of the sampling. The focus was on Nggwaba people who are found in Gombi and Hong Local Government Areas.

Orthography of Nggwaba

As already stated, the focus of this paper was to develop the orthography of Nggwaba language. This section discusses the different features of the phonology of Nggwaba. This aspect includes the consonants, the vowels, the tones and vowel length.

Consonants

Using the International Phonetic Association (IPA), the consonant sounds that occur in Nggwaba language are /b, b̥, bw, pw, p̥, t̥, d̥, d̥, r̥, k̥, kw̥, g̥, gw̥, ɸ, ɸl, ts̥, ɲ̥, ɲ̥, m̥, mb̥, n̥, nd̥, f̥, v̥, s̥, z̥, ç̥, ʃ̥, h̥, l̥, lw̥, j̥, w̥/. The phonemic consonants of Nggwaba are shown in Table 3.

Table 4: Nggwaba consonant chart

Nggwaba Consonant Chart														
	Bilabial	Labio- dental	Dental	Alveolar	Post- alveolar	Retroflex al\ 'eOlar & bilabial	Palatal	Palatalized velar	Velar	Labialized velar	Labialized glottal	Palatalized velar	Glottal	Bilabial velar
Plosive	b p bw pw			d t		ɖ ɗ		g̟j	gɣ k					gb kp
Affricate & stop				ts						gɣ kw		g̟j k̟j		
Nasal	m mb			n nd			ɲ		ɲ g					
Fricative		v f	e	z s	ʃ		ç							h
Approximant	w						j							
Lateral approximant				l							kw			
Lateral fricative				ɬ										

Table 1 indicates that the following sounds do not occur in Nggwaba: the voiceless bilabial nasal /m̥/; voiceless palatal approximant /ɥ/ and voiced palatal approximant /ɥ̥/. Yakubu's (2021) pamphlet did not identify the consonant /ð/ in zadla 'calf'; dl̥əm 'name'; dla gwad̥tsə 'decide'. The study identified the voiced retroflex implosive velar /ɗ/ and voiced retroflex implosive bilabial /ɖ/, since in pronouncing both consonants the tongue is visibly curled

back during pronunciation. Furthermore, we observed labialised velar affricate and stop /gɣ/ as in gwanggwang 'healthy'; gwargwar 'snore' and /kw/ as in kwakəthla 'waist'; kwaryakwaryhə; 'ringworm'. Similarly, a labialized velar plosive is identified in Nggwaba consonants. These are /gb/ as in gbám 'baboon'; and /kp/ kpərman 'kneel'; kparzaha 'rocky surface'. The following palatalized velar plosive has been identified /g̟j/ as in the following words

gyana ‘tongue’; gya ‘fetch’. In palatal fricative another distinct consonant is noticed /ç/ as in the following hya ‘seed’; hyakada ‘fruits’; hyaji ‘eye ball’. A symbolic consonant /ʁ/ which is velar and plosive has been identified in the following Nggwaba words dzighan ‘turn round’; səngħən ‘learn’; tsəghən ‘daughter’.

Syllable Structure

The syllable structure types evident in Nggwaba are as follows.

(1) CV

a. bi ‘break’

b. ma ‘tribe’

c. zə ‘son’

(2) VC

a. ən ‘self’

b. um ‘stranger’, ‘guest’

(3) VCV

a. aru ‘leopard’

b. uda ‘pot’

c. əsə ‘do’

(4) CCV

a. dlin ‘hear’

b. glin ‘sight’

c. dləm ‘ear’

(5) CVV

a. fiu ‘labial’

b. hui ‘run

c. mui ‘know’

d. fuu ‘fail’

(6) CVCV

a. zafa ‘young man’

b. giha ‘corrupt’

c. suru ‘in-law’

(7) VCVC

a. ajin ‘blood’

(8) VCCV

a. əddə ‘bite’

b. unda ‘indicate’

c. udlə ‘seated’

(9) CCCV

a. thlin ‘teeth’

Vowels

Nggwaba has eight oral vowels which consists of six short vowels /a, e, i, ə, o, u/ and two long vowels /ii, uu/. Figure 2 presents the Nggwaba vowel chart:

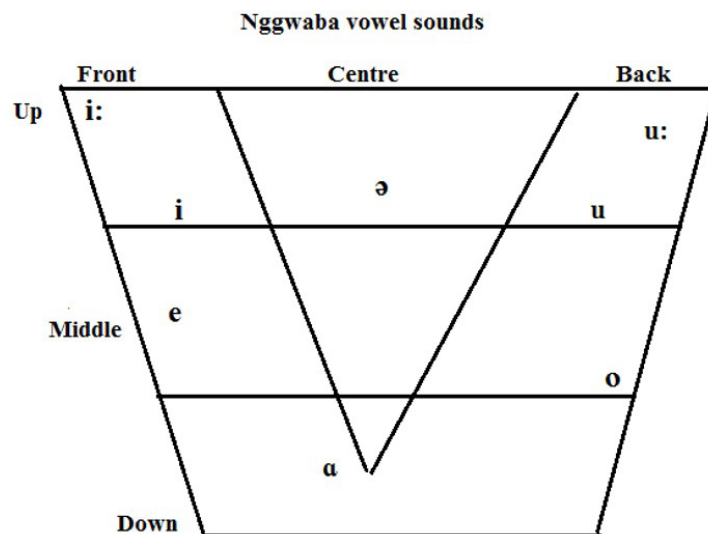


Figure 2: Nggwaba vowels

Vowel Length

Nggwaba seems to have a limited set of long vowels. Only two long vowels /ii/ and /uu/ have been recorded and attested in few lexemes:

[i:] ndəbiighə ‘prisoner’

uii ‘wound’

[u:]tuu ‘cry’

ruuya ‘death’

Tones

The Nggwaba language has two primary tone levels. These are (high) H and (low) L tones as in the following:

H **L**

1. ərá ‘them’ ərā ‘cold’ ‘cool’

2. chám ‘clear’ chām ‘veranda’

3. wúm ‘to like’ wūm ‘stone’

4. dlín ‘tooth’ dlīn ‘to listen’

DISCUSSION

It is interesting to note that Nggwaba people have clearly shifted the strength of speakership to different languages depending on their location they settled. For instance, Hausa, Fulfulde and Kilba have been identified as the languages that are acting as predator languages which have gradually influenced and consumed Nggwaba being a small and weak language. The young Nggwaba often view his language as having a low status in comparison with the above mentioned languages.

As Fishman (1991) pointed out “the destruction of a

language is the destruction of a rooted identity". We can further accept the assertion that "The principal objective of language is to enable efficient communication and foster social engagement" (Bordeos, Pecolados, Cardeno, Flores and Bitangcor (2023). And since language is a resource and a right (Ruiz 1984), at the level of social integration and social identification, the development of the orthography of Nggwaba and document its literature is very vital for its survival and maintenance.

As can be attested from the results of the interview, only 20% of the parents use Nggwaba to communicate with their family at home. This indicates that the home is not favourable for the maintenance of the language. The finding agreed with what Bamgbose (1993) said about endangered or dying languages as "one which is not used in any serious function and its relevance lies only in... some old people who have knowledge of the language and who are using it less and less". Ironically, while 90% of the parents would like their children to understand Nggwaba, 100% do not use Nggwaba to preach or make announcement in their worship centers.

With respect to teachers' responses, Nggwaba language is facing the problem of survival. This is because the language is not being used in formal education. The results revealed that 100% of the teachers indicated that Nggwaba language is not used as a medium of instruction in schools. It has also been observed that "Many languages of the world are yet to be reduced to writing" (Fakuade 1999), Nggwaba is one of such languages. And due to lack of orthography, 80% of the teachers cannot read and write in the language.

CONCLUSION

So far we have observed that Nggwaba belongs to the Afro-Asiatic family moving down to Chadic subgroup then South Biu-Mandara. The Nggwaba people are found in Gombi and Hong local Government Areas of Adamawa State, Northeast Nigeria. Nggwaba language is tonal and highly threatened because there is severe decline in the people who speak it. It is recently estimated that less than 1000 people speak Nggwaba language. It is also observed that the language is not used as medium of instruction in schools. Most of Nggwaba people have shifted from Nggwaba language to Hausa, Fulfulde and Kilba languages. As such there is paucity of literature on the language. The work adopted the Lewis (2010) Extended graded intergenerational disruption scale (EGIDS). To be able to develop the orthography of Nggwaba, folktales were recorded and transcribed with the help of language assistances.

Despite the fact that the focus of this study is the development of the orthography of Nggwaba language, we have attempted a phonological description of the language. Further research may seek to determine the morphology and other features of Nggwaba language.

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