

## The impact of the upcoming referendum (2016) on the linguistic density and diversity in Darfur – Sudan

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### Abstract

Darfur region in western Sudan has witnessed a civil war since (2003). The ongoing war has resulted in a mass destruction of some vital institutions such as the poor healthcare system, the lenient infrastructure and education. As an attempt to bring stability and peace to the region, Sudan government and some rebel groups signed a peace deal in Doha, Qatar in (2006) known as “Doha Peace Agreement”. In one of its articles Doha Peace Agreement declares a referendum to be organized in Darfur. Through the declared referendum, Darfurians have to decide the status of the current five states (North, South, West, East and Central Darfur), whether to remain as they are today or to return back to the previous one region system. In terms of linguistic diversity, Darfur is one of the richest regions in Sudan. This linguistic diversity may negatively have harmed by the upcoming referendum process, particularly, if the voters make the dream of the five regions comes true. Therefore, the current study is attempting to investigate the probable disadvantages of the referendum on the overall linguistic diversity in Darfur. To undertake this study, the researchers have designed and conducted an interview based on (10) questions. The interview questions were distributed to three experts with a good awareness of the linguistics density and diversity of the region. The interview questions then analyzed manually and the results have statistically calculated. The study resulted in some important findings among which is that, the one state choice will enrich and protect the linguistic diversity and will make peace possible to this high conflict zone.

**Keywords:** darfur, languages, referendum, linguistic diversity, language policy, language planning

### 1. Introduction

In May 2006, both the republic of Sudan government and some rebel groups signed a peace deal known as Darfur peace agreement in Doha, Qatar. In one of its chapters, it was declared that a referendum would be held throughout the region to determine its permanent status. Although the peace agreement has confirmed the issue of three states composing Darfur in 2006, however, the breaking news was the announcing of more two states to be established on 9 March 2011. The new baby born states declared were central Darfur around Zalingei and Eastern Darfur around Ed Daein. According to Darfur Peace Agreement a referendum will be organized on 11- 13 April 2016. To decide the status of the region whether to turn into one united region or to remain five as they are today. There are some expectations by a number of linguists from the region, claiming that the five states situation may negatively affect the linguistic density and diversity of a region where many local languages beside Arabic playing the role of lingua franca are spoken today. For instance, the reality of five states may put the linguistic diversity under the threat of diaspora, particularly, when we consider the massive destruction of the societal ring as a result of the ongoing conflicts. Speaking to Radio Dabanga, a Sudanese mass media broadcasting abroad, ([dabangasudan.org](http://dabangasudan.org)) Mahmoud, Saleh states that conducting a referendum in Darfur is not a priority for the people at this moment, however, what is important according to the speaker is the implementation of the peace process, stability and disarmament which have been agreed upon in one of the articles of the peace deal signed in Doha. Furthermore, in an interview by Radio Dabanga, ([dabangasudan.org](http://dabangasudan.org)) Kamaladdeen, Ahmed also illustrates that five states situation in Darfur will influence the entire region, particularly its investment plans. Additionally, the researcher also claims that if referendum resulted into five states a lot of challenges may

occur. For example, it will be difficult to avoid ethnic cleansings through reducing the opportunities of peaceful coexistence. Thus, the unity of the region is vital for building strong rapport and social interactions between the different social components. It is only through this unity that we can make peace possible in the entire region. Moreover, Kamaladdeen thinks that the five states dream is only a priority for those seeking positions, promotions and the elusion power. One state situation on the other hand, is seen by many intellectuals as a golden chance via which we can put an end to the ongoing war in the region.

### 2. Statement of the problem

As stated above a referendum will be organized in Darfur as a benefit for Doha peace agreement. Therefore, voters will go to pooling stations to decide whether Darfur remains as one state or to be divided into five states. This referendum is seen by many linguists as a threat for the existence of the linguistic diversity in a region, where many unwritten languages are spoken today. Given, these languages can play positive role in creating a peaceful atmosphere in which different ethnic groups live side by side, particularly when voters make the situation of one state possible. However, the researchers believe that in case of five states, lack of budgets won't enhance linguists' efforts in protecting these languages from dying out. As Abu- Manga mentions via a delightful work available online ([www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00142-EN.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00142-EN.pdf)) there are some hindrances and obstacles against such maintenance in Sudan among which is lack of linguists. He also claims that the Sudanese academic circles have suffered a lot from lack of linguists in general, and from those specialized in Sudanese and African languages, in particular. However, the few qualified linguists who were trained abroad have been for a long time also working abroad. Darfur is not an exception case in this regard,

thus, breaking down the region into five will no doubt worsen its linguistic diversity. Moreover, the literature review shows that little efforts have been done due to lack of budgets directed towards language education as well as preventing endangered languages from dying out.

**3. Study Questions**

- 1) To what extent the situation of one state enriches the linguistic diversity in Darfur?
- 2) What is the impact of the referendum on local languages?
- 3) How linguistic diversity can establish a peaceful coexistence in the region?

**4. Study Hypotheses**

- 1) One state situation enriches the linguistic diversity of Darfur.
- 2) The result of the referendum negatively influences the local languages, particularly the situation of five states.
- 3) The linguistic diversity establishes a peaceful coexistence to the entire region.

**5. Literature review**

Sudan is characterized by its linguistic density and diversity, similar to the situation of many tropical African countries. It is one of the most heterogeneous countries in Africa in terms of linguistic density and diversity. The literature review shows that Sudan is a country with approximately 120 living languages as well as eight extinct ones (James). Some of these languages are spoken in Darfur a region of Sudan, which borders the Central African Republic, Libya, and Chad along the Sudanese western border. Darfur is currently divided into five states. In addition to the previous three states: Gharb Darfur (West Darfur), Janub Darfur (South Darfur), and Shamal Darfur (North Darfur), the region has witnessed a birth of two newly states. The two states were announced on 9 March 2011, when the federal government

in Sudan issued the establishment of: Central Darfur around Zalingei and Eastern Darfur around Ed Daein. Although Sudan is one of the richest countries in Africa regarding its linguistic diversity however, Abu – Manga claims that there are extra-distinguished characteristics that make it especial, among which are:

- Instability of its language situation.
  - Multiplicity of border languages.
  - Existence of a number of West African immigrant languages.
- These characteristics and many other more require intensive investigations to determine their strengths and weaknesses, particularly when it comes to their role in building nations. This why the current study views the importance of the linguistic density and diversity in Darfur as a central theme that enhances in building a peaceful heterogeneous society. The literature review also shows that this linguistic diversity is facing some challenges today. Regarding languages Darfur is a multilingual region where tens of languages are spoken beside Arabic language used as a lingua franca in everyday communication. Most languages in Darfur are classified under Nilo- Saharan family. Fur and Masalet vernaculars are the most widely spoken in terms of the number of speakers. Although these languages are widely spoken, but unfortunately most of them are unwritten regardless the poor attempts made in writing them. As pointed out by Abu-Manga languages such as Fur and Masalit are among the most widely spoken Languages in Sudan. For instance, the 13 languages described by Hurreiz & Bell (1975) as the largest spoken languages in Sudan, includes Fur and Masalit respectively. While Fur vernacular is spoken by (663.913), Masalit on the other hand, is spoken by (418.920) they add. Due to the huge variety of cultures and ethnic groups in the region, Darfur also boasts a wide variety of languages within its borders. The following table illustrates its main languages.

**Table 1:** Distribution of the main languages in Darfur

Language	Distributed and dominant areas
Arabic	▪ Lingua franca, predominately found south of Nyala and in the eastern portions of Darfur, but smaller enclaves of Arabic speakers are also found along the Chad border in a narrow strip north of Jebel Si, between Fur and Zaghawa.
Fur	▪ Is located in the center of the region, reaching from Wadi Azum in the west to Al Fashir in the east. It belongs to the Fur language group of Nilo-Saharan language family.
Daju	▪ Is only found in a small pocket near Nyala. It is an offshoot of the Western branch of the Eastern Sudanic group of the Nilo-Saharan language family.
Erenga	▪ Considered a dialect of Tama, is found north of Geneina and across the border in Chad.
Fongoro	▪ Is considered almost extinct as most speakers of the language have shifted to speaking Fur, the remaining speakers are found south of Sinyar.
Fulbe	▪ Or Fulfulde, is only found in a small area south of Nyala.
Masalit	▪ Is located mostly west of Wadi Azum and around Geneina; it is also spoken across the border, and in a small isolated area south of Nyala. It belongs to the Maban language group of Nilo-Saharan family
Sinyar	▪ Is mostly found along the border south of Masalit. It is closely related to Fongoro.
Tama	▪ Is only found in a small Tama speaking pocket between Jebel Si and Jebel Marra. It is closely related to Daju.
Zaghawa	▪ Zaghawa, is popular in the northern portions of Darfur.

As clearly shown in the above table Darfur is a multilingual region where so many vernaculars are spoken beside Arabic playing the role of lingual Franca. However, the literature review shows that the majority of these vernaculars are unwritten and that they are going to disappear unless something is done. It is also found that such linguistic diversity can create a homogenous society through considering these vernacular languages, and this cannot simply take place in the situation of five states. The importance of theses languages is also vital particularly when it

comes to the issue of language and identity which defines who we are from other peoples’ eyes as well as who we are from our own eyes. In other words, theses languages can determine the identities of different ethnic groups, and that is why linguists believe that when people lose their languages they also lose their cultures and identities. Gellner’s states that a single, uniform language can only facilitate the process of nation building with due respect to the social and economic evolution of the time. Additionally, the

author also claims that industrialization and nation formation, which are the main characteristics of the eighteenth century, are no longer necessary or sufficient configurations today. That is the reason behind the occurrence of some criticisms against those who call for language unification. For example, some unitary language theory centers have been criticised on the reality that in the wake of language explanation and unification, there is usually not an appearance of a single pure language. Thus, further criticism against some dialects as well as jargons may continue to exist even within a rigid and homogenize situation like the case of France. According to some critiques it is not multilingualism that encourages division; however, it is the speakers' attitudes, feelings and symbolism that influenced such language division.

If this is true the researcher adds, some would find it as good news, particularly those attempting to include an element of multicultural acceptance within their plans of nation - building. However, because many of the sociolinguists are dealing with cases in Africa or South-east Asia where both resources and alternatives are few, one might wonder whether these authors are merely writing to please the governments or whether it is just an option. Referring to the notion of the nation occurred in the eighteenth century in Western Europe, Caviedes, Alexander, mentions that some national identity mechanisms such as religion, language and symbols are seemed older than history itself. Moreover, he refers to the importance of identity as a source of symbols and validity in nation - building. However, he differentiates between two approaches (primordialism and constructivism), despite the fact that each approach shares the view that culture, language, and religion have historically been the central components of national identity. However, while primordialists focus on the innate of convergence between the character of the people who speak the language and its nature. Constructivists on the other hand, are more likely to point out that identification is taught and developed through the presence of a common language. According to Wikipedia primordialism argues that the existence of ethnic groups and nationalities is due to traditions of belief and action towards primordial objects such as biological factors and especially territorial location. In it is worst influence primordialism can lead to conflicts and ethnic cleansings. As historian Sandra Joireman claims that it is a primordialist view that resulted in Rwandan Genocide in which approximately 800, 000 have been murdered within the duration of three months. Nigeria has also experienced such violence during what is known as the Nigerian Civil war in 1967.

However, in the situation of Sudan it seems as if the primordialism fever has turned into chronic disease. For instance, the country has witnessed such violence from the dawn of the independent. As officially reported, at least one million people have lost their lives due to the long civil war and as a result, the country has been divided into two countries (republic of Sudan & republic of South Sudan) without achieving prospective of the comprehensive peace to the nations of both the offspring country as well as the parent. Today, both countries are facing the same destination represented in civil wars and instability. For instance, in case of Sudan, war is going on right now in many regions including South Kordofan, Blue Nile and Darfur. Therefore, this study addresses the influence of the upcoming referendum in stabilizing Darfur region in particular.

**6. Material and Methods**

Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used in

undertaking this study. The data was primary collected through an interview questions distributed to three experts from the region. The respondents are knowledgeable and have a good awareness of the linguistic density and diversity of the entire region. The aim of the interview questions was to gather the necessary data as related to the respondents' attitudes towards the impact of the referendum on the linguistic diversity in Darfur. The interview questions were divided into three axes before distributing them to the respondents. Each axe attempts to study a particular problem as related to the study. Moreover, the researchers endeavour to show the percentage of the respondents while analyzing the data collected. Therefore, the study considers both qualitative and quantitative methods.

**7. Data Analysis and Discussions**

After collecting the interview questions, the researchers manually analyzed the data collected. The manual calculation and the results analyzed, confirmed the validity of the hypotheses. The following axes show the data analysis.

- **The impact of the referendum on the linguistic density and diversity in Darfur.**

**Table 2:** The interview questions base on the first axe

1.	To what extent the situation of one region enriches the linguistic diversity of Darfur?
2.	What is the influence of the five states situation on the vernacular languages in Darfur?
3.	How do you view such claims that the referendum is a political issue and won't influence the linguistic diversity at all?
4.	To what extent do you think that Darfur is a monolingual region where the majority speaks (Arabic) as a lingua franca?

Regarding the above questions, the majority of the respondents believe that the situation of one region positively in enriches the linguistic diversity as well as the cultural diversity that enhances a number of ethnic groups to enjoy living together side by side. Additionally, they believe that linguistic diversity creates a positive atmosphere of interaction between the different components of the social groups in the region. In terms of five states situation, the majority agreed that language maintenance is difficult to be establish. In addition, in case it is established it seems difficult to select some languages over others simply because speakers of the ignored languages may protest against such polices. Particularly, when we consider the dilemma of many African countries where the issue of languages has resulted into internal conflicts, to name some neighboring countries, Ethiopia is a good example.

Therefore, some respondents state that the situation of the expected five states is also risky in terms of ethnicity division. For instance, the majority of the settlers in a certain state may regard the new state as theirs, the situation that definitely raises more tensions between the different ethnic groups.

Historically, Darfur was divided in terms of geographical areas known as 'Dar' which refers to an area occupied buy a certain tribe so as to facilitate its ruling, but the good news was that local tribal leaders were strong and wise enough to prevent their people from committing crimes and incase it happens they negotiate their problems with their neighbours. However, recently the power and solidarities of the local tribal leaders have been disappeared for unknown reasons leaving the region under

the rule of jungle. The above table also shows that five states situation will create more financial problems which hinders the execution of several projects including languages maintenance. Although the majority of the respondents view Arabic as a lingua franca in the region but they also agree that the result of the referendum will impact the vernacular languages to some extent.

▪ **The importance of the referendum in Darfur peace making process.**

**Table 3:** The interview questions base on the second axe.

1. How can the linguistic diversity makes social peace possible in the region?
2. How can linguistic diversity build strong nation in Darfur?
3. What is the role of languages in Darfur conflicts?

The above interview questions are based on the second axe where the respondents were asked to show their view points towards the relation between the referendum and peace making process. The majority of the respondents agreed that local languages are strong enough to make peace possible for the entire region. Simply because languages are tools for expressing different cultures and through respecting the diversity of these cultures a healthy social environment will be created and this will result in a homogenous society. The respondents also state that local languages can build a strong society in Darfur only when the linguistics diversity is encouraged and treated as a national wealth. Descending from the fact that diversity is power, the respondents state that it should be protected by rule of law. For instance, some respondents mention that because diversity is as vital in creating peaceful coexistence, therefore it is taught in well-known universities all over the world today. Regarding the role of languages in conflicts, the majority of the respondents did not confirm this relation however, the researchers have mentioned above the case of Ethiopia as a neighboring country.

• **The role of the referendum in protecting the local languages in Darfur from dying out.**

**Table 4.** The interview questions base on the third axe.

1. What is the influence of the referendum on endangered languages?
2. How important is the role of the linguists in the upcoming referendum?
3. How can the five states situation financially impact on the documentation of the unwritten languages in Darfur?

The final axe shows the respondents’ attitudes towards the influence of the referendum in protecting languages from dying out. According to the respondents’ attitudes, there are many factors behind the occurrence of the language endangerment in Darfur. First, the majority think that young generations regularly shift from their vernaculars into Arabic within their daily conversations today. This situation results into language death, since connection between generations, is no longer exist. Second, the majority of the respondents state that shifting is seen by some as a kind of prestige since Arabic language is a marker of civilization and it is mainly spoken in the cosmopolitan cities. Conflicts on the other hand, has impacted negatively on using these vernaculars since many people from villages flew their

homes towards the main cities where they shift into Arabic to find better jobs in areas where communication in workplace is conducted through Arabic. Therefore, the majority of the respondents believe that it is extremely important for decision makers to consult applied linguists so as to facilitate better workplace communication descending from the fact that applied linguists do this through providing materials as well as recommendations. The respondents also believe that lack of connection between generations lead to languages death and that is why people lose their cultures as well. Additionally, they think that language policy in Sudan has negatively impacted the development of the vernaculars, particularly when we consider the policy of Arabic as a medium of instruction at schools. Till recently, if students are caught speaking their home languages in the school arena they collectively received corporal punishments. The majority of the respondents also believe that the upcoming referendum deal negatively influences the process of protecting our languages from dying out particularly when five states result become true. For example, they believe that so much money will be lost in providing logistics and bonuses to the governors of the five expected states who will be accompanied by a huge number of cabinet’s members, ministers, deputy minsters, security officers and body guards. Additionally, much more money will be lost as an unseen expenses represented in several women as first, second, third and fourth ladies under the Islamic sharia law which allowed polygamy. Thus, it is common for men surrounded by power and solidarity to get married to a number of women descending from this Islamic legislation. Finally, we can say that the bad records of corruption as well as the social injustice in the entire region will worsen the situation of language maintenance. For example, the majority of the respondents claim that there will be very little chance to invest money so as to protect theses languages from dying out within this bad record of corruption as well as challenges cause by lack of funding in this regard.

**8. Findings**

In the light of the data analysis, the study resulted in the following: first, the situation of one state enriches the linguistic diversity and will establish a peaceful coexistence to the entire region. Second, the situation of five states on the other hand, puts the linguistic diversity in risk by reducing their documentation, teaching and learning opportunities.

**9. Recommendation**

Finally, the researchers recommend the following:

- 1) Decision makers have to do their best in making the unity of the region possible, during their referendum campaigns.
- 2) There is a need for investing more money as well as efforts in documenting out these vernaculars so as to protect them from dying out.
- 3) There is a vital need for training more linguists from the region.

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