

the Cameroon, or the Caucasus have so many languages, but rather why Europe or parts of Asia have so few?

Indeed, there are good reasons to believe that our little transect through Arnhem Land is a good representation of how humans have been for most of our past – not just for the 99 percent or so of our history up to 10,000 years ago when we were all hunter-gatherers, but also for much of the time that followed. This is because the dawn of agriculture, although it led to an explosion in human populations, did not automatically lead to the development of much larger societies. Speech communities got a bit bigger but it was rare for them to exceed the few score thousand that could be held together as a homogeneous unit without the panoply of state control that only began with our incorporation into large centralized political entities like the Roman Empire or a modern nation state. Mapping the million or more years of human history onto a 24-hour clock, incorporation into large centralized states did not start for any human society before ten minutes to midnight

Box 1.1 The many paths to multilingualism in up-country Cameroon

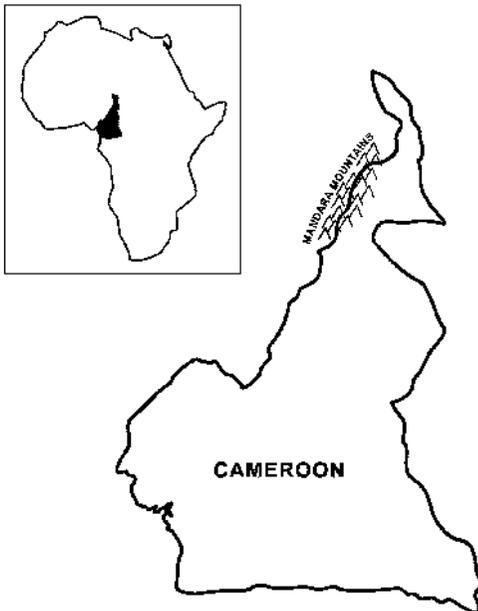


Jonas courting Gogo in Jilve village in the presence of other villagers (photo: Leslie Moore)

Jonas, the boy in this photo, comes from the village of Jilve in the Mandara region of Cameroon, another region of daunting linguistic diversity, where people speak small “montagnard” languages of the Chadic family, very distantly related to the Semitic languages. Here he is shown courting Gogo, the girl he wants to marry, in her mother’s compound, with her girlfriends in attendance. They are speaking primarily in Mada, Gogo’s paternal language. Mada is one of eight languages that

(five millennia ago in the Fertile Crescent). For many groups it has only begun to happen in the last seconds.

The island of New Guinea and its Melanesian surrounds, a few hundred kilometers to the north of Warramurrungunji's territory, is a good illustration of a region almost completely made up of Neolithic agricultural societies, with no centralized states until recent colonization by Europeans and Indonesians. Its population of around 10 million people speaks some 1,150 languages – under 10,000 people per language. In the Central Highlands, where the population density is highest thanks to intensive agriculture and pig breeding, elaborate networks of production and ceremonial exchange have gradually bound people together into larger speech communities. The more intensified the system, the more speakers per language. But, even in the most elaborate and intensified highland Papuan communities, the average number of speakers per language rarely exceeds 40,000. And in many other parts of Melanesia languages of that size seem unimaginably large: the nation



The Mandara mountains, Cameroon

something about how multilingualism works in Cameroon communities like Jilve. Besides the “normal” acquisition of their mother tongue, children learn French and later English in school, the regional lingua franca Fulfulde from night-time storytelling by their elders, and the languages of neighboring villages through self-instruction of the type we see here. From an early age parents ask their children to memorize messages, in languages they do not yet know, and to go and deliver them orally to people from neighboring villages. Even young children develop a strong metalinguistic awareness, for example using knowledge of cognates in related languages to help them remember new vocabulary.

Jonas speaks. Although he began learning Mada in order to court Gogo, the two of them already had two languages in common: Wandala (the local lingua franca) and Wuzlam, the first language of Jonas' father and of Gogo's mother. Prior to this visit, Jonas had prepared a list of topics of conversation and relevant Mada vocabulary, which he had noted on a piece of paper he brought with him but did not consult during the visit.

We know very little about how the impressive levels of multilingualism are acquired in small-scale preliterate societies, but Leslie Moore's pioneering ethnographic work (from which the above vignette is taken) has taught us