Linguistics as a social activity:
Involving the community in the Central African context

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How is linguistic research in Africa usually done?

By Academics or students:

- Often done outside of the community, or even outside of the country!
- Often under time constraints
- Often under financial constraints

By non-academics (community or religious):

- Insufficient technical or academic skills
- Works unpublished and unknown
- Labors of love, done over many years
- Very little finances available

What if we could bring together the strengths of both?

- Time depth: work could be ongoing over many years

- Insights: native speaker depth and breath of knowledge

- Richer experience for both the community members and the researchers

= participatory research

Participatory Research

- What is it?
- Research which engages the wider community in involvement. This is done through:
- Activities & events
- Raising Awareness
- Imparting Skills

Why would I want to do it?

- Higher quality results in the long run
- More positive experience
- Building relationships and trust
- Continuity: others carry on where you left off . . .
- Multiplying your efforts . . .
- *Sounds like more work though, do I have time for this?*
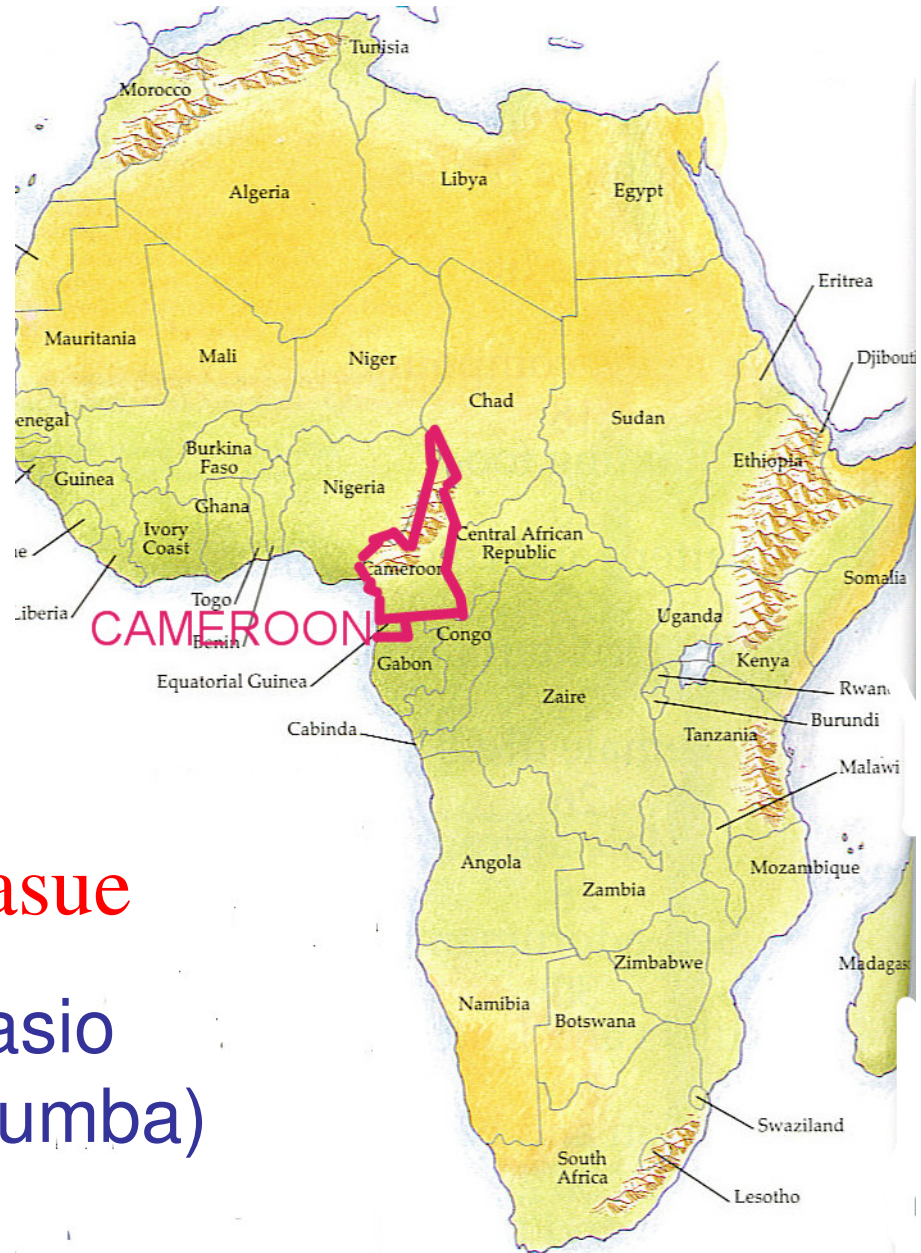
A matter of time . . .

- Language learning
- Long-term connections for long-distance data sources
- Benefits to the community, such as orthography statements, dictionaries, videos, websites and books
- Getting more people involved in the work in various ways as allies and volunteers
- Building awareness and skills . . .

Cameroon, Africa Case Studies
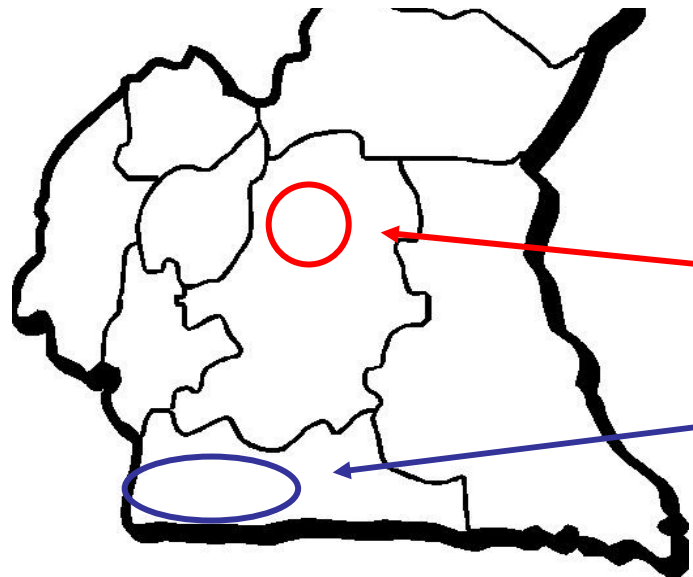
Cameroon: Africa in miniature

- 270 languages spoken by 16 million people
- Wide range of ecosystems: forest, high plateau, mountains, wooden plains, savanna, Sahel . . .
- Diversity in languages: Narrow Bantu, Grassfields Bantu, Adamawa, Chadic, and others.

Language development: SIL Cameroon

- SIL: using linguistics to serve development
- 80 local local languages in Cameroon used in the "Propelca" bilingual education system (elementary schools)
- Adult literacy programs
- Increasingly, local communities taking the lead, SIL provides training and consulting
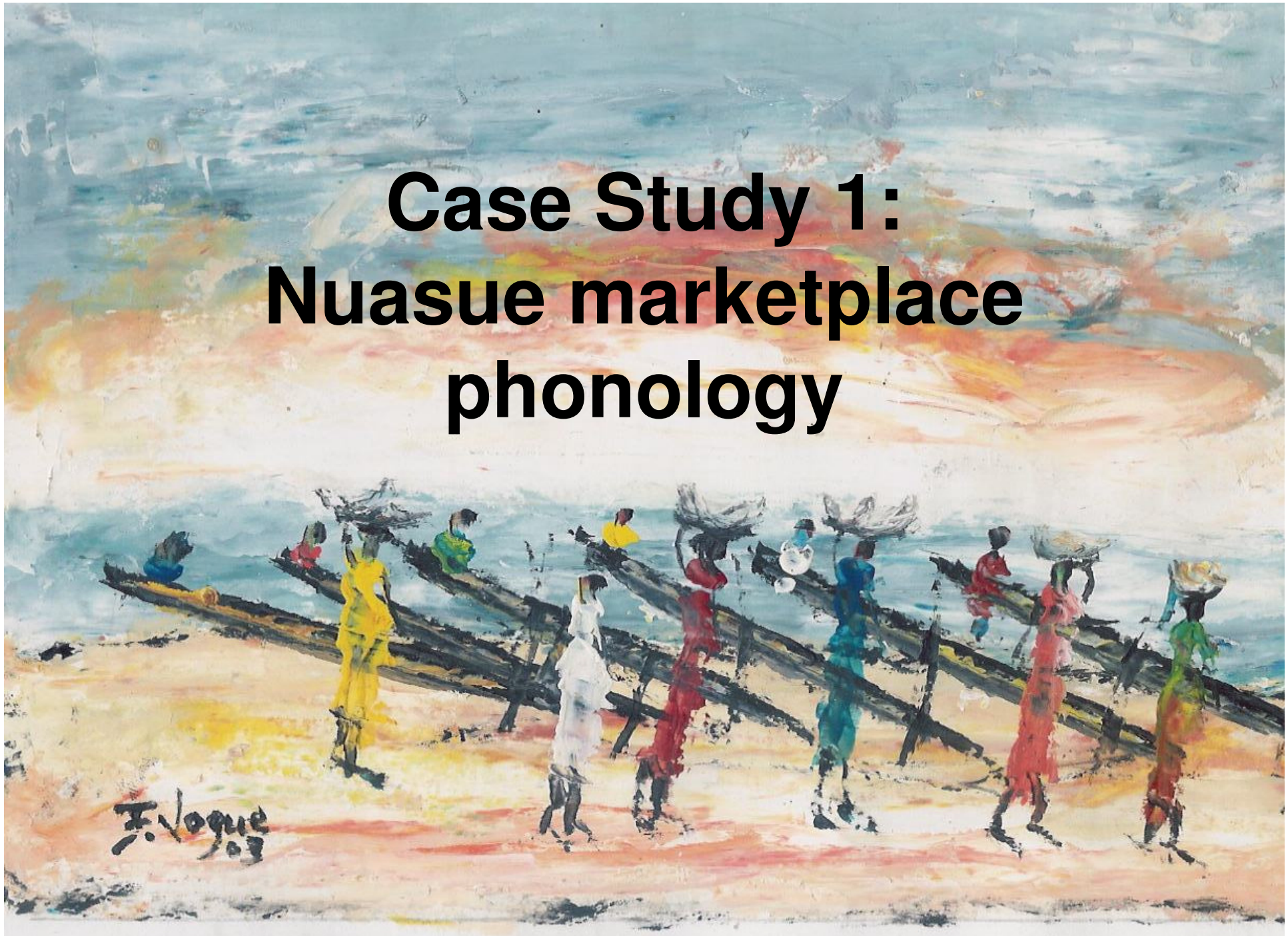
Case studies

- Nuasue: marketplace phonology
- Kwasio: dictionary by committees
- Cameroon: Formal and semi-formal language development training

Kwasio Congress, Dec. 2006

Case Study 1:
Nuasue marketplace phonology

The task: collecting data for phonological analysis

The usual approaches ("suspects"):

- Wordlist elicitation
- Sort out words, find minimal pairs
  - By hand: index cards, lists of words, etc.
  - Software: Toolbox, Findphone, PTEST . . .
- Elicitation of "holes in data" with language consultant

Phonology through awareness

- Method developed by Constance Kutsch Lojenga (1996)
- Elicit word contrasts from informal groupings, such as loiterers at market
- Thematic elicitation by groups, writing words on slips of paper. Later, sorting process . . .
- Some community members develop an interest and awareness of types of sounds
- Very focused and yet extensive data gathered from this process

Nuasue marketplace phonology

- Ginger Boyd (Leiden) used method as part of a study of vowel harmony in the central Yambassa (Nuasue) languages of Cameroon.

- At first, spontaneous groups were engaged in the marketplace. Indifferent results due to chaotic location.

From market to courtyard

- Strategy shifted to forming small groups through already-existing language committees.
- These groups worked well, and some group members went on to formal training.
- Food and drink at meetings obligatory.
- Now the groups continue meeting, but they are collecting words for a dictionary, using thematic questionnaires.

Results for Nuasue phonology informal data collection

- Large amount of finely-tuned data for phonological analysis, leading to a study on vowel harmony
- "market groups" now meet monthly to gather words for a dictionary
- Some community members have gone on to further training and produced other materials in the language
- What was considered one language is now being developed as three separate languages

Case Study 2: Kwasio dictionary by Committee
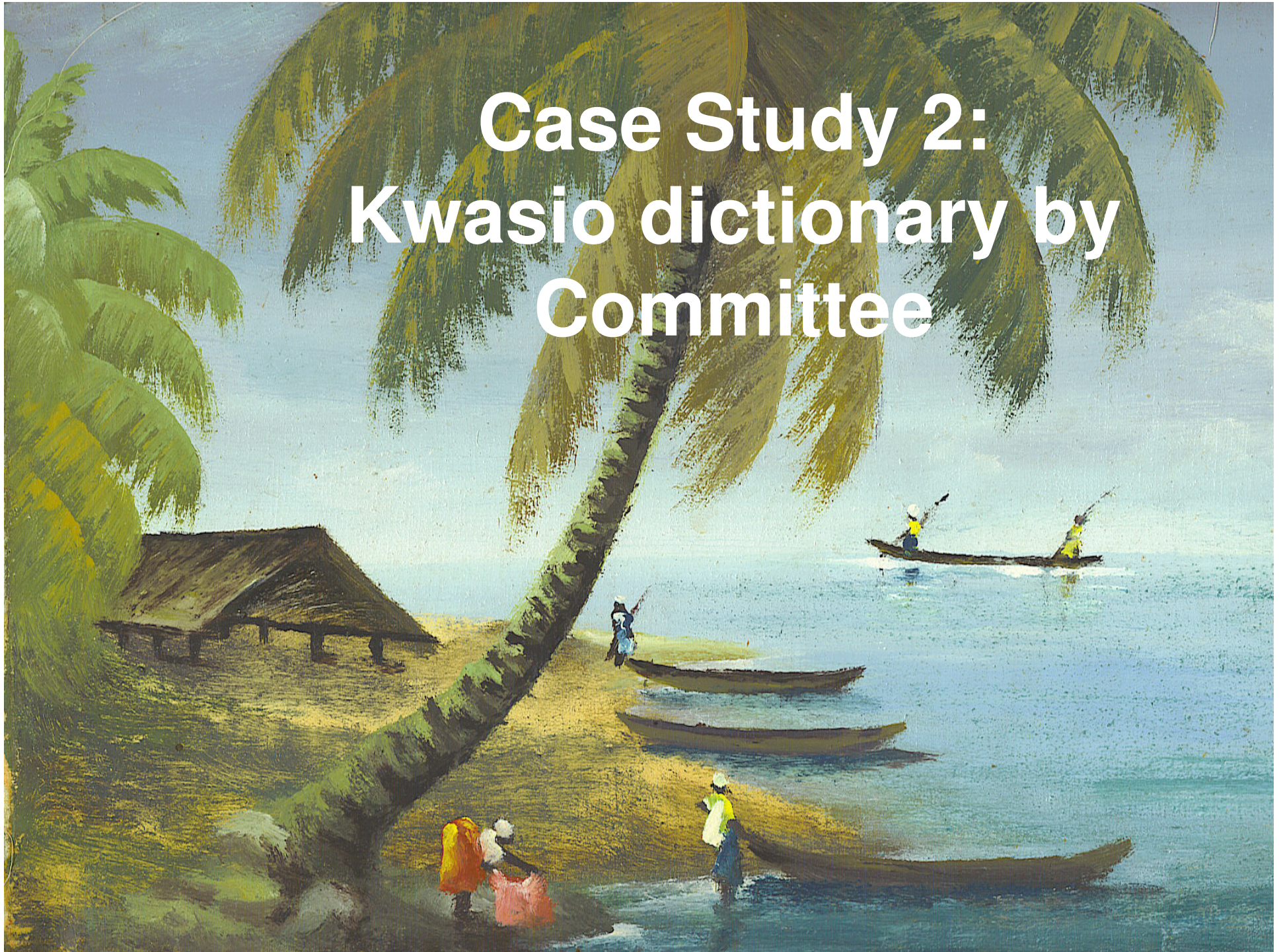
The task: collecting lexical data for a dictionary

The usual approaches ("suspects"):

- "Ex nihilo" or *no method*

- Wordlist elicitation, objects, pictures . . .

- Concordance searches

- Elicitation based on dictionaries from other languages

- Elicitation of "holes in data" with language consultant (or specialist input . . .)

- Thematic questionnaires . . .

SIL Africa Area new tools

Bantu Initiative (templates & software):

- *P-TEST* Phonology template software

- Orthography template

- Grammar/Discourse template

- Ron Moe's Thematic questionnaire (1,400 themes w/questions)

Africa Area Comparative wordlist (1,700 words, drawn from15 wordlists cross-referenced)

Others from SIL: FLEX, Adapt-It, etc.

1400 Themes

1 The physical universe
1.1 Sky
1.1.1 Objects in the sky
1.1.1.1 Sun
1.1.1.2 Moon
1.1.1.3 Star
1.1.1.4 Planet
1.1.1.5 Meteor
1.1.1.6 Comet
1.1.2 Air
1.1.3 Weather
1.1.3.1 Wind
1.1.3.2 Cloud
1.1.3.3 Rain
1.1.3.4 Snow
1.1.3.5 Dew
1.1.3.6 Storm
1.1.3.7 Lightning, thunder
1.1.3.8 Weather related seasons
1.2 Earth
1.2.1 Types of land
1.2.1.1 Mountain
1.2.1.2 Flatland
1.2.1.3 Valley
1.2.1.4 Cliff
1.2.1.5 Underground
1.2.2 Ecosystem
1.2.3 Matter
1.2.3.1 Soil, dirt

Questions & examples

1 L'univers physique

Quels sont les mots qui font référence à tout ce qu'on peut voir?

ex: univers, ciel, terre

ex: monde

1.1 Ciel

Quels sont les mots qui signifient le ciel?

ex: ciel, firmament

Quels sont les mots qui décrivent l'aspect du ciel?

ex: bleu, noir, clair, nuageux, plein de nuages, brillant, ciel de nuit, orageux, étoilé, menaçant

Quels sont les mots qui décrivent l'endroit où le ciel touche la terre?

ex: l'horizon

1.1.1 Objets dans le ciel

Quel terme général fait référence aux objets dans le ciel?

ex:

1.1.1.1 Soleil

Quels sont les mots pour parler du soleil?

ex: soleil, solaire, notre soleil,

"Word collection kits"

100-page thematic questionnaire divided into three parts ("A," "B," and "C")

Kits include:

- 33 pp. thematic questionnaire (A,B, or C)
- 100 pp. notebook ("cahier")
- Pen
- Large manila envelope

Over 120 distributed, between 20-40
filled in over a two-year period

"Word collection kits" go to various small groups

- Men's, women's and young people's church groups

- Language committee sub-groups

- Villages & compounds

- Some elites sponsor a group

Committees work at their own pace

- Some meet bi-weekly or monthly
- Some incorporate dictionary work into their usual meetings

•Food is often present to motivate progress

Committees work the questionnaire

- Words elicited by theme, numerically, without definitions (usually)

- Designed to be used in workshops, gathering 50 speakers for two weeks to collect 10,000 words

- Committee method: committees receive "word collection packet" and work independently

4.4.2.5.3	
4.4.2.6.	**MANQUER DE DISCIPLINE = GIA PIŪR**

1.- Manquer de discipline = Gia piür, Wanda wanda Mu...

2.- Etre glouton = Nsal yagu

| 4.4.2.6.1	**ETRE DESORDONNE = SA MA NAMIAGA- MIA GA**

1.- Etre désordonné = Samam na miaga-miaga

2.- Mal tenu = Biala mbuara

3.- Peu soigné = Ki'le bal bembpi ye ywiä

4.- Négligé = Kinung ne mere na mala

* 5.- Malpropre = Ki'be ntanéa-Nlundana mimbuiri

4.4.2.6.2	**SE TROMPER = BVINDA**

1.- Se tromper = Ful, bvinda

2.- Faire une erreur = Ful, sa mbvinda

3.- Faire une adffe = Bu tuom

Results for Kwasio lexical data collection through wordlists

- First notebook received had over 4,000 entries. Over 2,000 of them are now in a Toolbox lexical database.

- Entries tend to be phrases, not single words

- Excellent for building a thematic ("thesaurus-style") lexicon/dictionary

- Data will need to be re-worked, entries combined to make a standard dictionary

- Orthography issue still needs resolved (but workbooks are good source of orthography data)
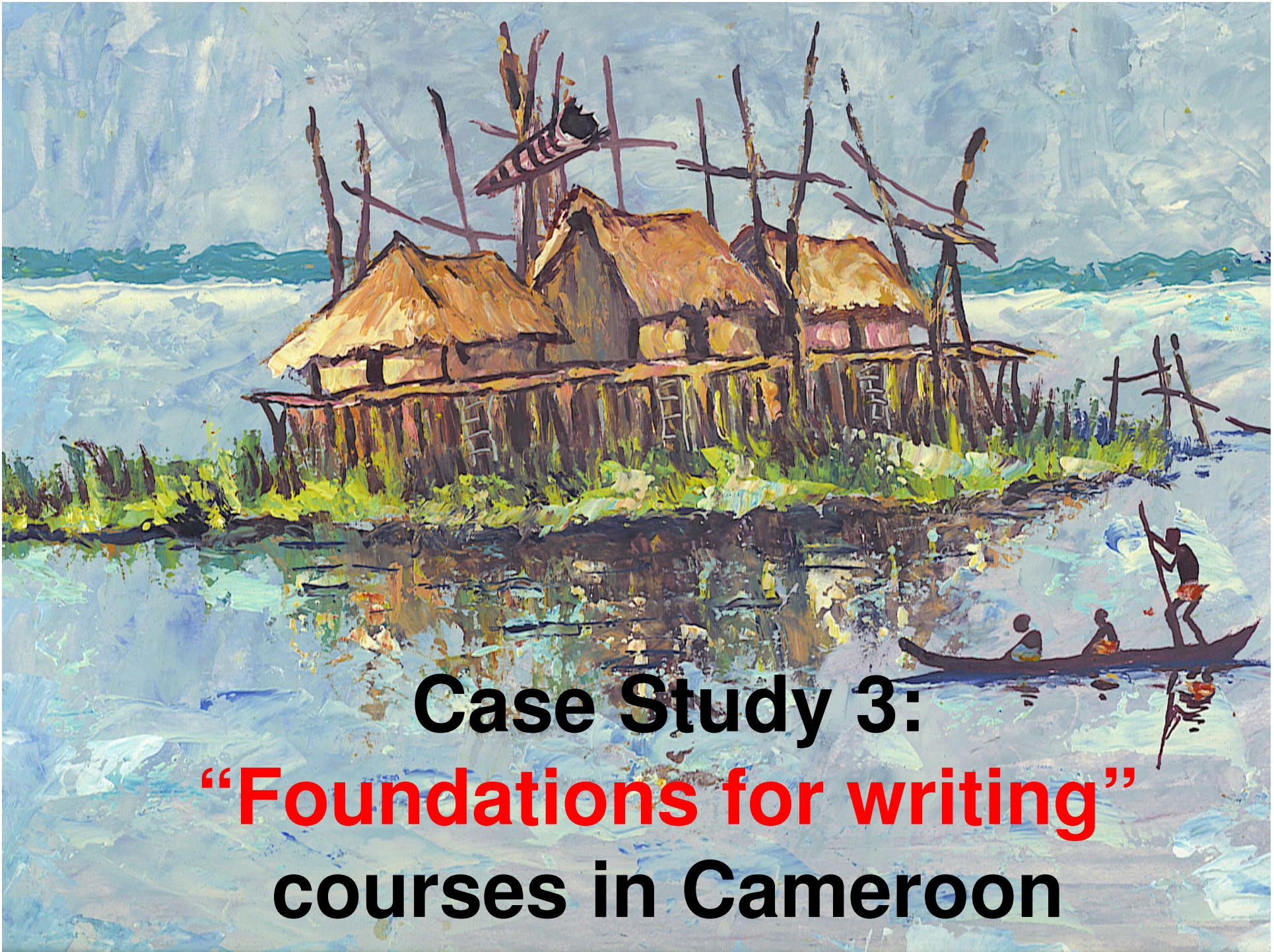
Case Study 3:

"Foundations for writing"

courses in Cameroon

Foundations for Writing

- Series of one-week courses with research assignments to be completed between each one
- Interactive format (Criterion-Referenced Instruction, learning that LASTS)
- Initial cycle: 12 languages chosen to participate
- One course every three months for two years
- Each language represented by a group of two to four speakers
- Each language assigned a linguist mentor
- Student interns from the "BASAL" program also assisting local-speaker participants

Foundations for writing courses in Cameroon

Immediate goals:

- Orthography statements in each participating language
  - 1,700-item wordlist collected
  - Basic analysis of phonology, including tone
  - Superficial analysis of morphology

Long-term goals:

- Formation of local working groups for long-term community-based language development

Courses

- Phonetics
- Tone
- Data management

- Noun phrase (noun classes)
- Verb phrase (verbal morphology)
- Produce phonology statement based on PTEST template software
- Produce orthography statement

Other courses

- Use of computers, various software
- Production of literacy materials
- Mobilization of the community for language development
- More advanced grammar workshops
- Discourse analysis workshops
- And many more . . .

Results of "Foundations for Writing" series of courses (2002 ff)

- 9 out of 12 languages of the original group have orthographies and are producing educational materials
- All of the languages have phonologies written up, along with 1700-wordlists
- Work continues. Some of the participants continue to study and develop their own language, or new participants join over time.

Considerations:
Method & Philosophy

How should the researcher work?

Alone in his study . . .

Or in an elite library . . .

Or with the community, sharing the joy of discovery?

- Who better to work on the language, than the members of the community itself, in partnership with the academic community?

What the community has to offer

- Native speaker intuition
- Rare consonant in Kwasio mentioned, later found

•Early Kwasio writing system showed tonal & syllabic insight

What the community has to offer

- Vast knowledge of the language & culture

"Every elderly speaker who passes away is a library lost."

- Pre-existing groups, associations, and networks

What the community has to offer

- Locally-produced research and documents

Kwasio: nearly 50 documents and counting

  - Skolaster's (early 1900's) work lost in a flood
  - Book of proverbs still out there somewhere
  - Multiple versions of hymnbooks show progress in writing

Baka: school curriculum of 15 previously "unknown" books, found in remote mission

What language communities lack

- Financial: "Cannot afford language development" (Paul Newman)
- Technical knowledge, infrastructure, and equipment
- Group cohesion may be lacking
  - The Kwasio: multiple lonely attempts at language development
  - "Please, help bring us together!"
- Awareness, meta-linguistic expression

A question of trust

- Kutsch-Lojenga: "Explain to them what you are doing and why, every step of the way."

- The language is precious to them, part of their identity.

- "You don't even speak this language, what do you know?"

Conclusion.

References

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- Roberts, James and Keith Snider. 2006. "SIL comparative African wordlist (SILCAWL)."† SIL Electronic Working Papers 2006-005: 49. http://www.sil.org/silewp/abstract.asp?ref=2006-005