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Endangered Languages: A Sketch of the Sengwer Sound System

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Within the next century as many as half of the world's seven thousand languages, are poised to become extinct at an alarmingly accelerated rate (Evans 2010). This correlates to a loss of knowledge, collective and individual identities, and social values. This loss is not only one of the most serious issues facing humanity today, but also it is representative of an unspeakable loss of information invaluable to humanity. This is so because these languages are among our few sources of evidence for understanding human history and each of these languages embodies unique local knowledge of the cultures and natural systems in the region in which they are spoken. This paper focuses on identifying and describing the characteristics of the Sengwer language in terms of its sound system as a contribution towards its preservation as an endangered language. The Sengwer language is an indigenous Nilotic language and has not previously received much linguistic attention. It belongs to the Kalenjin family of languages and is now on the brink of extinction. No research has been carried out in the linguistic domain regarding the sounds of this hidden gem that is critically endangered. A single speaker was used to elicit linguistic data because it has to be borne in mind that very few native speakers of the language exist. The Swadesh word list was used for this purpose because Sengwer orthography has not yet been developed and so it would not have been possible to compile a word list. Results indicate that the Sengwer phonemic inventory consists of five short vowels, five long ones, and six diphthongs. It also exhibits nineteen consonants in its inventory with tones that are used to mark both lexical and grammatical distinctions. Five syllable structure types are also noted and that the language tends to avoid marginal consonant clusters. This paper, therefore, intends to describe these aspects of this language that is poorly understood.

Keywords: preservation; endangered language; indigenous language; Swadesh list; phonemic inventory; tones; syllable structure

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1 Introduction

The world is rich and diverse with almost seven thousand languages which are instrumental for communication, lifelong learning, and enabling individuals to participate successfully in the world of work. These languages are closely linked with quite distinctive identities, cultures, worldviews, and knowledge systems. Upholding human dignity, respecting their diversity and differences should be part of the key to embracing linguistic diversity in the world. While the use of certain languages has expanded over the years for cross-regional and community dialogue, numerous minority and indigenous languages have been endangered.

The starting point for anybody learning a language is to figure out the sounds of that language because every language has speech sounds that pattern and constrain the phonological processes. Since consonants and vowels are the basic elements in every language, any study of the phonology of any human language would therefore entail the description of the systems and patterns of speech sounds in that language. The Sengwer language is an indigenous Nilotic language that has not previously received any linguistic attention. To the best of my knowledge, no research has been carried out in the linguistic domain regarding the sounds of this particular language that is on the brink of dying and which is poorly understood by many of its speakers majority of whom have been assimilated by the neighbouring communities. This paper, therefore, describes three sets of

sounds that make up Sengwer words: consonants, vowels, and tones as a contribution towards its preservation as an endangered language.

The paper is arranged in seven sections. The first one is an introduction that is followed by an understanding of the historical roots of the Sengwer people. A special mention is made in this section about the historical roots of the Sengwer as an indigenous people. This is followed by a section on the methodology used in data collection. The analysis and description of the aspects of the phonemic inventory of the language is done in the fourth section of the paper. Tones, as an aspect of the sound system of the language, are covered in section five. Section six deals with an analytical procedure of dividing syllables into their components. Concluding comments are made in the last section of the paper.

2 Sengwer and their Historical Roots

Sengwer (nicknamed as Cherangany or Dorobo) are an indigenous people and ethnic minority originally living as hunter-gatherers along the slopes of Cherangany Hills located in the Rift Valley Region. Sengwer are a people characterized by non-recognition, marginalization, oppression, mal-representation, illiteracy, poverty, torture, powerlessness, and discrimination.

...The Cherangany is a nickname given to us by the Maasai... they laughed at us because we had no cattle, and called us Cherangany (ni). (Arid Lands Institute, 2010)

The Nandi also use the term ‘Cherangany’ derogatively to refer to Sengwer to mean dwarf-like people who are abnormally short with big heads.

The Sengwer are also referred to as Dorobo. According to Wikipedia, this is a derogatory umbrella term for several unrelated hunter-gatherer groups of Kenya and Tanzania. It derives from the Maa expression ‘il-torobo’ meaning ‘hunters; the ones without cattle’. All these nicknames refer to the Sengwer being a poor people.

...The Dorobo problem has risen because these people, living in small scattered groups, spread over large areas without any property...lived from hand to mouth by hunting and bee keeping... (Arid Lands Institute, 2010)

Sengwer indigenous peoples are spread in and along Cherangany Hills administrative counties. These are West, Central and North Pokot, Keiyo, Wareng, Koibatek, Kericho, Bungoma, Trans Nzoia East, Marakwet East, and Marakwet West counties. Sengwer who still live within Sengwer ancestral territory are found in West Pokot, Pokot Central, Marakwet East, Marakwet West and Trans Nzoia East counties. However, colonial injustices forceful evictions and displacements, discriminatory forests preservation policy and Dorobo recommendations coupled with other natural catastrophes led to dispersion and assimilation of Sengwer community members. Today, members of Sengwer community are believed to be spread in Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Sudan. Sengwer in diaspora are found amongst Sebei (Uganda), Maasai (Kenya and Tanzania), Pokot (Kenya and Uganda), Ogiek, Marakwet, Turkana, Luhya, Nandi, Kipsigis, Tugen, Keiyo, and Kony.

The map in Figure 1 shows the current areas where the Sengwer inhabit.

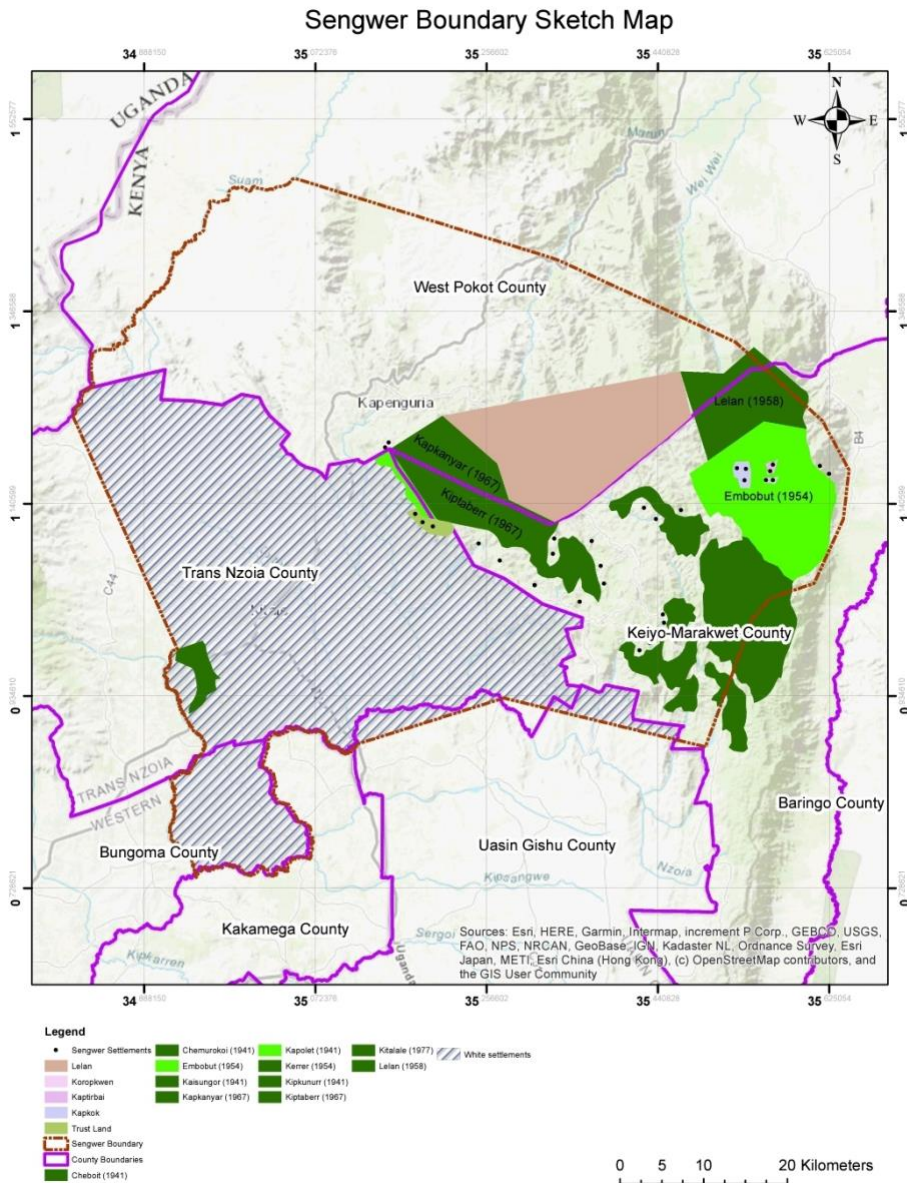


Figure 1 Sengwer Boundary Sketch Map. Source: Sengwer Centre for Indigenous Rights, used with permission

During the 2009 Kenya Census, it was estimated that the population of Sengwer people was about thirty three thousand one hundred and eighty seven. Surprisingly, the 2019 census shows that the current population stands at ten thousand seven hundred and twenty nine. This indicates a massive decline of about twenty two thousand four hundred and fifty eight speakers of the language. This translates to 67.67% decline in population within a span of ten years. Should this trend continue, there is a likelihood that the language will be on the verge of extinction. The few remaining speakers may be assimilated into the neighbouring communities. There is therefore, need to document this language in order for it to be preserved.

From the information gathered, the language family tree of Sengwer looks like Figure 2:

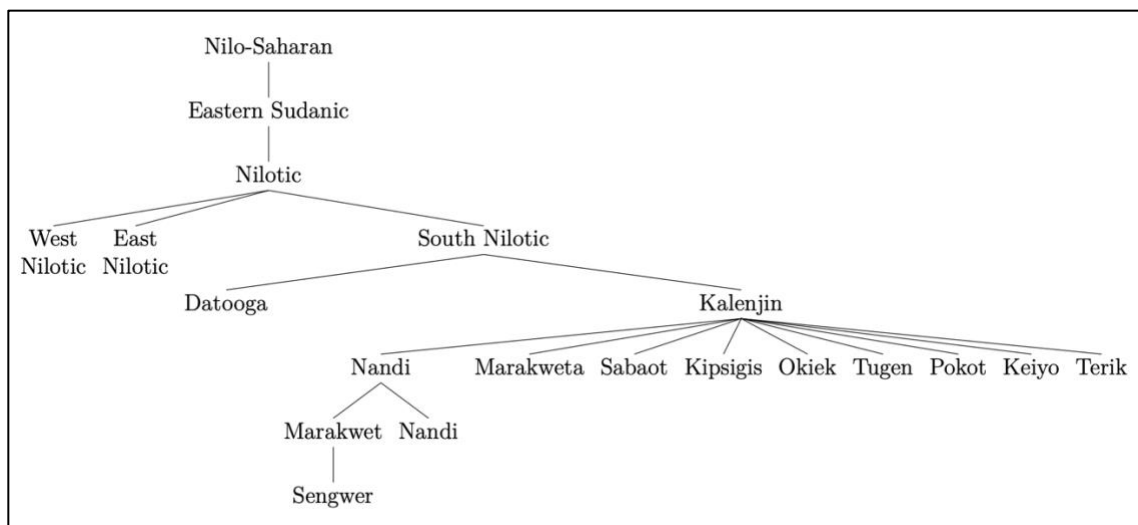


Figure 2 Sengwer language family tree

It is believed that the Sengwer trace their origin from a place called Rokos in Egypt. They came up the Nile River and moved eastwards, where they settled along the Cherangany Hills. The first person to settle there was called Sengwer. It is believed that Sengwer had two sons Sirikwa (firstborn) and Mitia (second born) and they had children who are now the descendants of the Sengwer sub-tribes today. They now form what has been known as the Indigenous Peoples of Cherangany Hills including the plains of Kapchepkoilel (Trans Nzoia, Uasin Gishu, Lugari, West Pokot) and the highlands of Cherangany Hills that form today one of the five Water Towers in Kenya. For thousands of years Sengwer were here, but some reasons caused the dispersion of the community; famine, tribal wars, the fall of Kipteeperr Mountain, Nandi war, disrespecting Orko, forceful evictions and displacements to create room for white settlers, and implementation of forest preservation policy of the 1930s.

The dispersions led to some of the community members remaining within the ancestral territory in Cherangany Hills while others went through Mau Forest Complex according to Ogiek of Mau they believe that some Sengwer community members lived in Mau over 400 hundred years ago – there are bridges and caves constructed and homes for Sengwer respectively. They later left Mau for Tanzania. Amongst the Luhya you will find people referred to as Apasirikwa and or Sengeli – they are believed to be of Sengwer origin. Other community members migrated to other communities and have since then assimilated for example by Keiyo, Tugen, Marakwet, Pokot, Luhya, Nandi, Ogiek, Sabaot, Sebei, Maasai, Turkana, among others. Some of the Sengwer can be traced in Tanzania, Uganda, Sudan, and other countries in East and Central Africa.

3 Methodology

The data in this paper is based on a mini research that was collected in Cherangany between May and July, 2016. The recordings which are analyzed in this paper are all taken from a single speaker, Moses Leleu Laima, an 82 year old male native Sengwer speaker who currently lives in Talau area of West Pokot County. Sessions with Laima totaled approximately 10 hours. It would have been preferable to use more than one speaker for the purposes of gaining a more accurate picture of Sengwer sound system, but it has to be borne in mind that very few native speakers of the language exist and majority have been assimilated by neighbouring communities and cannot speak Sengwer fluently. Also, logistics during research trips required that the majority of time was spent with a

single speaker. Basing phonetic analysis data from a single speaker is not without precedence (Maddieson and Ladefoged 1993, Marlo and Brown 2003). Voice quality may affect production of certain sounds; however, this mini research was based on a hypothesis advanced by Kent & Burkard (1981). They have hypothesized that because speech is a highly practiced and frequently used motor behaviour, "it should be resistant to many degenerative effects of aging" (p.57). In addition, the existence of underlying and equally well-established linguistic rules with which the normal elderly individual has had a wealth of successful communicative experience also suggests that speech patterns could be expected to remain relatively stable, even as advanced age induces progressive alternations in many bodily structures and systems related to perception, planning and execution of speech events.

Sessions with the subject were digitally recorded using a free audio recording and editing software programme called Audacity on a laptop and a set of high-quality shotgun microphone. This software was preferred because it can record WAV files that are common high quality audio files that one can use in most editing applications.

Elicitation was conducted in both English and Kiswahili: the English word was given and the consultant responded with the Sengwer equivalent. The Swadesh word list was used for this purpose because Sengwer orthography has not yet been developed and so it would not have been possible to compile a word list. All examples and descriptions of Sengwer are based upon data collected during this field trip.

4 Analysis of Sengwer Sounds

The study of the sound system of any language involves some crucial components. There are three sets of sounds that make up Sengwer words: consonants, vowels, and tones. It is important to note here that since the informant was elderly, a few challenges were naturally likely to have been encountered when these sounds were being produced. Perceptually, changes in the voice quality can be heard as tremors, breathiness, hoarseness and voice breaks. However, the informant appeared to demonstrate adequate speech production. As Hooper & Cralidis (2009) observes:

It is likely that changes within the sensory and motor systems, concomitant with adaptive changes in cognitive skills, combine to produce distinct, yet functional speech for us as we age. (p. 56)

4.1 Phonemic Inventory

The language has nineteen consonants, three of which are prenasals. It also has five short vowels and five long ones. From the data collected, six diphthongs were identified too. Sengwer also uses tone for lexical and grammatical contrast. The airstream mechanism used is pulmonic egressive and preliminary results indicate that voicing can be used to show grammatical contrast.

Table 1 below shows different places and manner of articulation used in Sengwer:

4.1.1 Sengwer Consonants

Place Manner	bilabial	Labio- dental	Alveolar	Palato- alveolar	Palatal	Velar
Stops	p		t			k
Nasals	m		n		ɲ	ŋ
Fricatives			s	ʃ		ʁ
Affricates				tʃ		
Prenasal stops	^m b	ⁿ w	ⁿ d			^ŋ g
Approximants		W	l, r		j	

Table 1: Place and Manner of articulation

There seems to be a phonological alternation in the phoneme /k/ and /ʁ/. This is because at one point in rapid speech my consultant would be heard articulating /ʁ/ in ‘ghas’ /ʁas/ ‘hear’ and in articulating the same word in isolation, he would say ‘kas’ /kas/ ‘hear’. This, however, cannot be generalized to the Sengwer speakers only but it is worth noting it.

Phoneme	word	Gloss
/p/	‘pu:t’ /puut/	Hair
/t/	‘tapta’ /tapta/	Flower
/k/	‘keel’ /ke:l/	Foot
/m/	‘Munyu’ /muɲu /	Salt
/n/	‘nam’ /nam/	Hold
/ɲ /	‘nyung’un’ /ɲuɲun/	Soil
/ŋ/	‘ng’ayam’ /ŋajam/	Sand
/s/	‘sarur’ /sarur/	Tail
/ʃ/	‘keshapta’ /keʃapta/	To lie
/ʎ/	‘keeghas’ /ke:ʎas/	To hear
/tʃ/	‘chii’ /ʃti:/	Person
^m b/	‘Mbar’ /mbar/	Land
ⁿ w/	‘nwach’ /nwatʃ/	Short
ⁿ d/	‘sande’ /sa ⁿ de/	Husband
^ŋ g/	‘ngu’ / ^ŋ gu/	If
/w/	‘woo’ /wo:/	Big
/l/	‘lekwa’ /lekwa/	Child
/r/	‘arawa’ /arawa/	Moon
/j/	‘ya’ /ja/	Bad

Table 2: Examples of phonemes in words

4.1.2 Vowels

Sengwer has vowel sounds that are oral i.e.that is air escapes from the mouth when the vowel is produced. The vowels are contrastive in the sense that switching one of the vowels for the other leads to a change in the meaning of the word. The following are the vowels of Sengwer:

1)

a. Short vowels

Phoneme	example in word	gloss
/a/	‘amu’ /amu/	because
/e/	‘sese’ /sese/	dog
/i/	‘im’ /im/	at
/o/	‘oren’ /oren/	ashes
/u/	‘un’ /un/	wash

b. Long vowels

Phoneme	example	gloss
/a:/	‘chaang’ /ʃta:ŋ/	many
/e:/	‘keel’ /ke:l/	foot
/i:/	‘iit’ /i:t/	ear
/o:/	‘loo’ /lo:/	far
/u:/	‘muut’ /mu:t/	five

c. Diphthongs

Phoneme	example	gloss
/ai/	‘kaina’ /kaina/	name
/ei/	‘mukulei’ /mukulei/	heart
/eu/	‘eu’ /eu/	hand
/ia/	‘kaitit’ /kaitit/	cold (weather)
/ui/	‘tui’ /tui/	black
/oe/	‘oeng’ /oeng/	two

5 Tones

Apart from the above-mentioned features of the sound system of Sengwer, another aspect of its sound system is the existence of tones in the language. In tonal languages, every syllable is pronounced with a certain melody to it- its tone. Change of tone on a given syllable may change the meaning of the word, be it a mono or polysyllabic word. If a syllable’s tone can modify the meaning of the word. It is called lexical tone. Tones may also have other effects on the language, such as serving grammatical functions. Preliminary data show that Sengwer has two contrastive tones: High and Low and they are generally realized of vowels. A word may have a different lexical meaning depending on whether it is said with a high pitch or a low pitch. Since there are

two contrastive tones in the language, a disyllabic word may have a two-way pitch contrast as illustrated below:

2)

‘muut’	/mú:t/	five
‘muut’	/mù:/	slow
‘koi’	/kóí/	liver
‘koi’	/kòì/	long
‘kama Chepkite’	/kámá Chepkite/	Chepkite’s mum
‘kama Chepkite’	/kàmá Chepkite/	Chepkite is dead

Tones in Sengwer can also be used to mark the grammatical distinction. For example it is used to mark number:

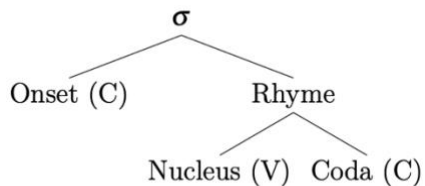
3)

‘moi’	/mòì/	calf
‘moi’	/mòí/	calves
‘ng’eliep’	/ŋèliɛp/	tongue
‘ng’eliep’	/ŋéliɛp/	tongues

6 Syllabification

A syllable is the smallest possible unit of speech. Every utterance must contain at least one syllable. It is convenient to talk of speech as being composed of segments such as vowels and consonants, but these segments can be observed only as aspects of a syllable. A syllable can also be divided for descriptive purposes into its onset and rhyme. The rhyming part of a syllable consists of the vowel and any consonants that come after it. Any consonants before the rhyme form the onset of the syllable. The rhyme of a syllable can be further divided into the nucleus, which is the vocalic part, and the coda, which consists of any final consonants.

4)



In Sengwer, the syllables are divided as follows: V, VC, CV, CVC. It has both open and closed syllables. Examples in words are as follows:

5)

V	‘amu’	/a.mu/	because
VC	‘am’	/am/	eat
CV	‘ya’	/ja/	bad
CVC	‘mit’	/mit/	head

The general observation here is that the language accepts consonant clusters in the onset only and not coda positions. The onset and the coda are optional elements while the nucleus is mandatory. Also, the data shows that the only syllabic consonant is /m/. This is attested in ‘mren’ /m.ren/ ‘man’. This is only acceptable word initially.

7 Conclusion

The objective of this paper was on identifying characteristics of the Sengwer language in terms of its sound system as a contribution towards its preservation as an endangered language. The focus was placed on its phonemic inventory, tones, and syllabification. Emphasis was placed on these because nothing is more ephemeral than the sounds of language. Identifying the sounds and documenting them is imperative for purposes of enabling future generations to embrace and use them since many of the world’s languages are fading away. The sounds can only survive if the language is spoken. It is important to note that embracing linguistic diversity in the world will not only act as a force for quality education but also foster respect for linguistic and cultural diversity. Our languages tell the stories of who we are our worldviews, values, and knowledge systems better than ‘official languages’. Africa has very many indigenous languages through which people in different parts of the continent communicate; pass on their history and norms. By describing the sound system of Sengwer as an endangered language, it will enable the speakers to not only preserve it but also embrace it. Recognizing the need to embrace it is the right step towards having an inclusive society. Documenting this language will enable it to get into more hands in the world to continue to raise the literacy rate in our local languages. This is because the first step to learn a language is by mastering its sound system. Since it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is recommended to have a study carried out of Sengwer sounds in complete utterances to have a true picture of the phonotactics of the language since another crucial part of preserving a language is in its use.

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APPENDIX: Swadesh List

List of 200 words of the Basic Core Vocabulary, as set out by Morris Swadesh, from "Archaeology and Language" by Colin Renfrew.

This list was intended to include the words most likely to be present in any language as native vocabulary (not borrowed). The words are listed in alphabetical order.

1. ALL - tukul
2. AND- ook
3. ANIMAL -Tiony
4. ASHES -or
5. AT-im
6. BACK-patai
7. BAD -ya
8. BARK (OF A TREE)- perto
9. BECAUSE-amu
10. BELLY -moet
11. BIG -woo
12. BIRD-tarit
13. TO BITE- ke-sur
14. BLACK-tui
15. BLOOD-koroti, kisen
16. TO BLOW (WIND) -kous
17. BONE-kowo
18. TO BREATHE - ki-muuny
19. TO BURN (INTRANSITIVE)- ke-ped
20. CHILD (YOUNG) -lekwa
21. CLOUD - polta
22. COLD (WEATHER)- kaitit
23. TO COME- kucho-choo
24. TO COUNT – ki-yiit
25. TO CUT – ke-til
26. DAY (NOT NIGHT)- peet
27. TO DIE – ke-eme
28. TO DIG –ki-pat
29. DIRTY - simnyo
30. DOG - sese
31. TO DRINK – ke-lu
32. DRY (SUBSTANCE)-pusaat

33. DULL (KNIFE)-mtus
34. DUST - terit
35. EAR -iit
36. EARTH (SOIL)-nyung'un
37. TO EAT –ki-am
38. EGG –lokoya
39. EYE-kong
40. TO FALL (DROP)-ku-chunda
41. FAR-loo
42. FAT (SUBSTANCE)- yakwai
43. FATHER- papa
44. TO FEAR- kiywei
45. FEATHER (LARGE)- kiywei
46. FEW –ng'eri
47. TO FIGHT-Ke-porio
48. FIRE -ma
49. FISH
50. FIVE -muut
51. TO FLOAT
52. TO FLOW –ke-yinda
53. FLOWER -tapta
54. TO FLY -Kutirito
55. FOG -kuberet
56. FOOT -keel
57. FOUR – angw'an
58. TO FREEZE -kupotiltl
59. FRUIT-
60. TO GIVE- kikoto
61. GOOD -kararan
62. GRASS -susu
63. GREEN -nyaleel
64. GUTS
65. HAIR -puut
66. HAND-eei
67. HE -keutut
68. HEAD-mit
69. TO HEAR -keeghas
70. HEART -mukulei
71. HEAVY -nyikis
72. HERE -yu
- 73 TO HIT –ke-kwer
- 74 HOLD (IN HAND) -nam
- 75 HOW -yune
- 76 TO HUNT (GAME)-kisakas
- 77 HUSBAND-sandet
- 80 I -ani

- 79 ICE-tekeres
- 80. IF –ng’u
- 81. IN -orit
- 82. TO KILL- kebur
- 83. KNOW (FACTS)-nai
- 84. LAKE-ararai
- 85. TO LAUGH –ke-rori
- 86. LEAF-sogho-sok
- 87. LEFT (HAND) –eu ka tam
- 88. LEG -korok
- 89. TO LIE (ON SIDE)-ke-shapata
- 90. TO LIVE – ke-sop
- 91. LIVER – koi moi
- 92. LONG –koi moi
- 93. LOUSE -isiria
- 94. MAN (MALE)-mren
- 95. MANY -chaang
- 96. MEAT (FLESH) - peny
- 96. MOON -arawa
- 97. MOTHER -iyo
- 98. MOUNTAIN -tulwa
- 99. MOUTH - kuut
- 100. NAME -kaina
- 101. NARROW -marich
- 102. NEAR -lekt
- 103. NECK -kaat
- 104. NEW -leel
- 105. NIGHT -kemoi
- 106. NOSE -ser
- 107. NOT -mo
- 108. OLD -yous
- 109. ONE -akenge
- 110. OTHER -alak
- 111. PERSON chii
- 112. TO PLAY – ki-oreren
- 113. TO PULL –ki-chut
- 114. TO PUSH-ke-torta
- 115. TO RAIN – ku-ropen
- 116. RED -pirir
- 117. RIGHT (CORRECT)- kararan
- 118. RIGHT (HAND)-au tap tai
- 119. RIVER - oino
- 120. ROAD-or
- 121. ROOT -tikta
- 122. ROPE -anwa
- 123. ROTTEN (LOG)- kinuun

124. RUB -kinyiil
125. SALT -munyu
126. SAND –ng’ayam
127. TO SAY- ke-mwa
128. SCRATCH (ITCH) –king’or
129. SEA (OCEAN) -ararai
130. TO SEE- kiroo
131. SEED-kesui
132. TO SEW –ke-nap
133. SHARP (KNIFE)-ng’atlip
134. SHORT -nwach
135. TO SING –ke-tien
136. TO SIT – ke-tepi
137. SKIN (OF PERSON)-mui
138. SKY -parak
139. TO SLEEP- ke-ruyo
140. SMALL -mining
141. TO SMELL (PERCEIVE ODOR)- ke-ng’uto
142. SMOKE -iyet
143. SMOOTH -tilil
144. SNAKE -ndara
145. SNOW-
146. SOME -
147. TO SPIT-ku-ng’ututa
148. TO SPLIT –ke-paat
149. TO SQUEEZE –ke-iiny
150. TO STAB (OR STICK) –ke-erut
151. TO STAND –ke-telel
152. STAR-tapoi
153. STICK (OF WOOD)- sitet
154. STONE-koi
155. STRAIGHT-kachulak
156. TO SUCK-ku-reri
157. SUN-asis
158. TO SWELL-ki-kuutu
159. TO SWIM-
160. TAIL -sarur
161. THAT-nyin
162. THERE-yuun
163. THEY -ichek
164. THICK -lomool
165. THIN -tenden
166. TO THINK –ki-pwat
167. THIS-nyi
168. THOU/YOU-inyee
169. THREE -somok

- 170. TO THROW –ke-wirta
- 171. TO TIE –ke-rat
- 172. TONGUE –ng’eliep
- 173. TOOTH (FRONT) –kelep kapsingile
- 174. TREE -keet
- 175. TO TURN (VEER)-ke-weech kei
- 176. TWO -oeng
- 177. TO VOMIT-ki-ng’ungta
- 178. TO WALK –ke-man
- 179 .WARM (WEATHER)-lalang
- 180. TO WASH –ki-un
- 181. WATER -pei
- 182. WE -achiek
- 183 .WET- kiepei
- 184. WHAT-nee
- 185. WHEN-oyu
- 186. WHERE-au
- 187. WHITE -leel
- 188. WHO-ng’o
- 189. WIDE -paraa
- 190 .WIFE -korko
- 191. WIND (BREEZE)-yomat
- 192. WING -
- 193. WIPE-puuch
- 194. WITH (ACCOMPANYING)-ok
- 195. WOMAN -chepyoso
- 196. WOODS -kerti
- 197. WORM -kimoiyo
- 198. YE-
- 199. YEAR-kenyiit
- 200. YELLOW-toleyo

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