
Reviewed by R. WILLIAM J. SAMARIN

The fundamental weakness of this book’s analysis is the author’s failure to recognize the object under study. Sango is indeed a language, but not all languages are alike. Sango is a pidgin. This makes a great deal of difference in the way it should be studied.

That Sango *is* a pidgin is an assertion that was made over forty years ago (Samarin 1955). Earlier, its special features were recognized by a number of French colonists in what was Haut Oubangui, then Oubangui-Chari, and then the Central African Republic. It was called a *langue véhiculaire*. The earliest allusion to it was made in 1894, but the following is best for our present purposes. Father Raoul Goblet, writing at the Mission Sainte Famille at Bessou on 31 July 1896, says that the missionaries (further up the Ubangi river than Saint Paul des Rapides at Bangui) are learning Langwasi (a variety of Banda, also spelled Langbasi), believing it to be the most widespread, adding, “Je ne parle pas de ce langage barbare de la rivière, qui fait que tu te comprends avec tous les tributs riveraines. Ce n’est pas une langue, mais un volapuck quelconque.”

Thornell rejects the idea that Sango is a pidgin, asserting that it is a “Ubangi language” (13), as if being a pidgin removes Sango from the genealogical class of Ubangian languages, one of the branches within Niger-Congo. What she implies here, and makes clear throughout the book, is that Sango resembles the other languages of this family and has a genetic relationship to them (16). But a few lines above this assertion is that “Sango is a newly arisen language” (elsewhere simplified to “new language” [87, 90, and *passim*]). As a pidgin, Sango would, of course, be a new language; and I have taken great pains to demonstrate that it arose at the time when the region was being occupied by Belgian (as early as 1887) and French military expeditions and was serviced for trade by the Nieuwe Afrikaansche Handelsvenooschaap (NAHV), a Dutch trading company (Samarin 1967, 1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1984/1985, 1989). Their workers and armed militia—apparently all African from different parts of the continent, speaking many different types of languages—were the ones who in attempting to learn Ngbandi pidginized it and “created” (as is said) the new language. Thornell rejects this view by saying that
"Sango came into being before the Europeans’ arrival in the area in the 1890s" (13). (A Central African, not cited here, has been making this claim since 1977 [Diki-Kidiri].)³

While not recognized as a pidgin, Sango is considered a simplified language (20), “the outcome of imperfect second language acquisition” (23). The way in which Sango came into being is not clearly argued, surprising in view of the fact that the author presents the historical account as original to herself. First, “Ngbandi seems to represent the most mobile language in the area at that time” [that is, before Europeans arrived] in that “it was used in trade situations.” Ngbandi “in these contexts gave rise to a simplified variety.” And because it was “interregional” (but not characterized), it “is likely that it comprised a wide range of variation . . .” For this reason it is “more adequate to speak about several varieties [of the trade language] instead of a single variety.” Finally, “The different varieties together with the jargon [not identified] used by the colonisers gradually merged and developed into Sango.” (All these quotations are from page 31.) The chronological factor is significant. Thornell rejects my argument for the emergence of Sango in about two decades on the grounds that this “period of time seems too short” (30), apparently contradicting herself by the use of “gradually”, since Sango appears to have been stabilized by 1911, when Father Calloc’h’s work was published (not cited by Thornell). In dealing with Sango, Thornell is ill-informed about pidgins in general although a few works are cited. On the origins of pidgins, for example, it has been well demonstrated that some have arisen in a couple of decades. On Sranan, for example, see Voorhoeve 1964, 1971, 1973; on Chinook Jargon (a pidgin in spite of its name) see Samarin 1986b, 1988.

Failure to recognize that Sango is a pidgin inescapably affects the author’s analysis and interpretation of linguistic data. Arguing that judgment, unfortunately, would require much more space than is afforded in a review. What can be commented on, however, is the failure to understand Sango as an African language. At issue is its lexicon, a topic of some importance in the book. Thornell suggests, first, that Sango’s vocabulary is “smaller than the vocabularies of European vernaculars”, while recognizing that due to the lack of ongoing lexicographic work, its exact size is not known (93). Yet without documentation she avers that the vocabulary of Sango and those of surrounding Ubangian languages “are more similar in size” (that is, by comparison with European vernaculars) (94). It is true that she attributes 6,000 entries to the dictionary by Bouquiaux et al. (1978). But this is a dictionary of a special kind.
First, it includes many words from the ethnic language (identified as s.r., that is, sango riverain) with no declared justification. Second, it includes many neologisms, some of which are identified with an asterisk, some not. (Sango, Yakoma, and Ngbandi are somewhat arbitrary and local names of the same language.) Third, it is arguable whether some of these are really words or phrases, and whether they are possibly idiosyncratic (see Samarin 1980 for a review). Whatever Sango's lexicon is, it must certainly be less than those of other Ubangian languages. I myself have a collection of almost 6,000 ideophonic adverbs alone for Gbeya. And Thornell would have found a rich vocabulary in the dictionary of a dialect of Gbaya similar to, if not mutually intelligible with, the one at Carnot, where she did most of her work (Blanchard and Noss 1982; Noss 1981). Nor did she consult the later and much more comprehensive dictionary of Ngbandi than the one cited (Lekens 1958). In any case, since her research was based on a corpus of 51,781 “running words” (apparently meaning word tokens) of tape-recorded speech (53), she fails to say how many types there were. And whereas she observes that in my corpus of 1962, 49.1 per cent of the types were from African languages (as opposed to French), she fails to note that there were only 489 of them! (Samarin 1966). (This fact led Einar Haugen to wonder if Sango was a language at all!) My estimate thirty years ago was that Sango had about one thousand words; today, I am comfortable in saying fifteen hundred, and two thousand at the most, which is not unreasonable for a creolizing pidgin.

The book's core consists of two parts: "General structures of Sango" (64–105) and "Lexical-semantic aspects" (106–76). The first is for the most part redundant, since the topics had already been covered in works cited by Thornell. The second is a study of twenty verbs from the core vocabulary, by which she means the most frequently used. Although she admits that any such list is a function of the size of a corpus (89, 112), she fails to compare her list with what she could have learned from one of my publications, i.e. Samarin 1967. Table 1 exhibits the ten most frequently used verbs.

Thornell applies a model of lexicographic study devised by Åke Viberg, arriving at the unsurprising conclusion that the semantics of these verbs follow “general patterns” (by which she means “throughout the world”), Ubangian patterns, and a few specific to Sango itself. A greater contribution to human knowledge would have been a doctoral dissertation on the lexico-semantic peculiarities of Sango as a pidgin.

Finally, it is not correct that I was a Baptist missionary in the Central African Republic (63), I never said that Europeans arrived in the
Table 1. The first ten most frequently occurring verbs in Sango and Wolof

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>THORNELL 1997</th>
<th>SAMARIN 1967</th>
<th>CALVET 1970</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yeke ‘be’</td>
<td>yeke ‘be’</td>
<td></td>
<td>xam ‘know’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tene ‘say’</td>
<td>sara ‘do, make’</td>
<td></td>
<td>am ‘have’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sara ‘do, make’</td>
<td>tene ‘say’</td>
<td></td>
<td>wax ‘speak’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hingga ‘know’</td>
<td>mu ‘grab’</td>
<td></td>
<td>ni ‘say’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>am ‘have’</td>
<td>gwe ‘go’</td>
<td></td>
<td>def ‘do’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baa ‘see’</td>
<td>ga ‘come’</td>
<td></td>
<td>dem ‘leave’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ga ‘come’</td>
<td>baa ‘see’</td>
<td></td>
<td>nekk ‘be in a place’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mu ‘grab’</td>
<td>yi ‘want’</td>
<td></td>
<td>man ‘be able to’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>we ‘be finished’</td>
<td>lingbi ‘be able to’</td>
<td></td>
<td>now ‘come’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ma ‘hear’</td>
<td>wara ‘find, receive’</td>
<td></td>
<td>bogg ‘want’</td>
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1890s, but in 1887 (59), and it was I, not Helma Pasch, who published an article about the copula (110; Samarin 1986a).

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ENDNOTES

1It is a pleasure to reappear in the pages of WORD after thirty-seven years. My first three articles on Sango were published here (1955, 1958, 1961). I am grateful to André Martinet for having encouraged a young man whose competence in linguistics had risen only to that of a B.A., but who, although ensconced in the grassland of Oubangui-Chari, had been a subscriber to the journal since 1951. I regret, therefore, not having taken advantage (because of shyness, I suppose) of my several stopovers in Paris since 1952 to nourish an acquaintance that had begun with a brief encounter in the halls of the University of California at Berkeley in 1956.


3This is not original with him, however. Georges Bruel, who had been an administrator in the 1890s, declared that Sango had been a lingua franca before the arrival of whites (1935:vi, 558, 165–6). Knowing nothing but what Bruel had written, I repeated this claim in my first paper on Sango (1955:256). Diki-Kidiri is another who has yet to recognize that Sango is a pidgin. He says things like this: “En raison de son expansion, son vocabulaire s’est constamment transformé et sa syntaxe a développé des traits propres”, which differentiate it from other Ngbandi “parlers”, especially vernacular Sango (1987:113) Manessy (1990), while not denying the fact, fails to typologize it explicitly.
The reason for its high incidence of the verb we is that Thornell makes no distinction between the use of the verb with the meaning given here—very low in frequency, I would say—and the marker of the grammaticalized perfective, àw (frequently pronounced by young people in Bangui as àw: e.g., lô kwàwà (3sg.prel die marker) ‘She's already died.’ These verbs might be compared with the ten most frequently used verbs in a corpus of 100,000 words of Wolof; cf. Calvet 1970.

REFERENCES


