Abstract. Standard French, the official language of the Central African Republic, is being acquired in a form close to that of metropolitan France. On the other hand, Sango, the national language, is far from being standardized, in spite of steps taken to codify it, and there has not yet emerged a 'correct' form of the language.

1. The French language. About thirty years ago I asked a young Central African at some distance from the local administrative post why he wanted to learn French. His answer was this: Tonga na mo hinga yanga ti français ape, mo yeke zo ape When you don't know the French language, you aren't a human being.

This declaration was made in the colonial era. In those days the only contact that a rural person would have with French-speaking persons was the occasional one with the local administrator or a representative of the cotton firm. Most people actually never had to communicate personally with one of these, but in the village they saw what happened when a fellow Central African had that experience. It was humiliating to be addressed in incomprehensible speech: you did not know what was being said nor were you able to respond. You were made to feel what indeed you were called, a savage.
Gbeya was the local language, and Sango was the lingua franca. If the Central Africans working for the whites in this area were not themselves Gbeya, they all knew Sango. In this language they could interpret what the white had said, and all the local people except the elderly and young would understand in Sango.

French made you a human being because it was the language of power. Except for missionaries, Protestant and Catholic, and Portuguese merchants of long-term residence, whites never knew any more than a few words or phrases in Sango.

A few years later, while doing a person-by-person survey on Sango in a small Gbeya village, I asked these questions: "Whose language is French?" "Whose language is Sango?" and "Whose language is Gbeya?" The answers clearly showed that something had changed in the linguistic focus of the people of this area: French was the white man’s language, Sango was the language of the Central African Republic, and Gbeya, predictably, was the village language.

There had been an evolution from what Joshua Fishman (1965) might call primordial ethnicity toward modern statist consciousness, without the emergence of any local, so-called tribal, ethnicity. (Ethnic allegiance eventually came to play a part in national politics, but there is no evidence that these loyalties had any linguistic characteristics.)

What had happened between the two events I refer to was that the colonial territory of Oubangui-Chari had become the Central African Republic. Written into its constitution — for reasons that have yet to be brought to light — was the adoption of Sango as the national language, complementary to French as the official language. But the people I was interviewing could not possibly have known this fact. In 1966, even six years after independence, they were still very much out of touch with national affairs. There was, for example, not one radio in the village. We have to assume that the projection of the new identity was independent of any
ideology being expressed in Bangui, the capital. Whatever led to the change, I assume that the factors were related to the phenomenon I identified as early as 1962, when some people seemed to reject words in Sango that came from their ethnic languages (as reported in Samarin 1966).

We would like to know what role the French language has today. It is acquired by many more Central Africans than in the colonial period. Education has been made available to a much higher percentage of the young people, more of them go on to secondary schools, and a very significant number get training at the university level in French. There are several working in their own country with professional doctorates. In 1962, by contrast, only twelve young people had passed their 'premier baccalauréat' and six the 'deuxième' (Samarin 1966:190).

The quality of French achieved by those who attend the several 'collèges' is probably as good as anywhere else in francophone Africa. And those who go on to university do not find themselves at a linguistic disadvantage. This achievement in second language acquisition is probably due largely to the availability of models. Education has been supported and assured by the French government; this includes a very great number of 'coopérants' who have since independence taught at various levels, but in particular in the secondary schools. Others provide technical assistance in a wide range of activities characteristic of a modern state.

The large number of French-speaking young people are projecting a new identity. Living mostly in the urban centers, they are at some remove from their ancestral rural centers of focus. Identifying themselves with the whole body of 'fonctionnaires' in the country, they are 'engagés' in a new kind of life, only part of which is political. The French language is certainly symbolic of this identity, at least in certain contexts. We must not, of course, limit ourselves to the young in talking about people with this identity. All of the educated must be included. It is important to observe that they see themselves as different from the majority of Central Africans, whom they identify as 'paysans.' It would appear that today peasants represent the marked social category for the educated, whereas in the colonial era the
marked category for both whites and blacks was the 'évolué.' This change is bound to have its linguistic effects.

The number of partial bilinguals, however, must be very high. Although primary education is available to most, the number of those who drop out before taking the final examinations must be high indeed; moreover, not all qualify for the 'collèges.' Their competence in French must be incomplete. They therefore comprise another population, and I assume that they have their own identity, an identity that has definite linguistic characteristics. Their speech deserves study. What roles, we should like to know, do French and Sango play in it? What is the base, and what is the admixture? Is there in process a convergence of languages that will produce another variety, at variance with standard French and standard Sango? Nothing like this was apparent in my collection of samples of Sango speech in 1962, studied by Taber in his analysis of French loan-words (1964). But the society has undergone substantial changes since then.

2. The Sango language. While the history of French is largely predictable, and can be compared to that of other former French colonies, the history of Sango is not. It does not at least follow predictably from the fact that it was adopted as national language. One might have expected the standardization and instrumentalization of the language in recognition of its symbolic role and its near-universal adoption by Central Africans as lingua franca. Some steps were taken, but they are not exactly in a straight line. (A full account of the way the government has dealt with Sango would have to take into consideration the country's political history. This is beyond the scope of these few remarks.)

It was not until 15 January 1965, five years after independence, that there was established the Commission Nationale pour l'Étude de la Langue Sango, under the aegis of the Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale. Its members consisted of representatives from the ruling political party (MESAN), Education Nationale, the radio, and Christian missions. One of its earliest acts
was to request of UNESCO the aid of a linguist in establishing an orthography to replace those in existence. Luc Bouquiaux, a researcher attached to the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique, undertook this project in 1966, at which time he spent three months in the Central African Republic. He insisted that work on the language’s orthography would not be of any value without there being a grammar and dictionary of the language. (At this time Taber’s dictionary [1965], based on my data of 1962, was already available; my grammar had been circulated in 1963. Both of these were, however, in English. My grammar in French did not appear until 1970.) It was not until 1977 that another grammar in French was published, this time by Marcel Diki-Kidiri, himself a Central African with linguistic training (Diki-Kidiri 1977). It is a scientific descriptive grammar, using a phonological notation showing tones, that differs in significant ways from my own analysis. In the following year was published a Sango-French and French-Sango dictionary (Bouquiaux et al. 1978), with help from the Ministère de la Coopération Française, the Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique of UNESCO, and the CNRS. It is not clear what the dictionary is based on — that is, whose language it is supposed to reflect. No statement is made that it represents the speech of, for example, a majority of a sample of urban dwellers for whom Sango was the first or habitual language. I had, for example, always heard beer as sàmbà, with low tones, but the dictionary has it with high-low tones. As far as lexicon is concerned, the dictionary shows a strong bias toward the vernacular (also called Sango) on which the vehicular language is based. Bouquiaux has admitted that he has introduced vernacular plant and fish names to enrich the language’s vocabulary, but there are many other words in the dictionary whose status is not clear: e.g. is the word piriwa for tempête (storm) a word found in common use in Bangui or is it just a word that Sango and Yakoma people would use in talking the lingua franca? (Part of the explanation may lie in the fact that the secretary of the Sango commission was himself of Sango-Yakoma parentage and that he had prepared a dictionary which served as
Bouquiaux’s “point de départ” (1978:16).

The dictionary makes the first major step in French to provide a practical orthography for Sango. It makes no concessions to the idiosyncrasies of standard French orthography (using ‘u’, for example, instead of ‘ou’), and indicates vowel height with the use of acute, grave, and circumflex diacritics. There is no place, therefore, for tone to be marked in the practical orthography. Every entry is, however, accompanied by a fully phonological one.

In spite of the norms promulgated by the dictionary and in spite of the fact that Sango does not pose any difficult problems phonologically, there is still no consensus on the orthography. This is admitted in an article appearing in the Bulletin de l'Institut de Linguistique Appliquée de Bangui: “L’orthograph de la langue sango n’est pas encore normalisée” (No. 2, January 1980, p. 94). In his latest works (1982, 1983) Diki-Kidiri, for example, abandons Bouquiaux’s practical orthography for one that ignores vowel distinctions for tonal ones (dieresis for mid tone and circumflex for high). This choice has been made in spite of the fact that tone has little grammatical function and very little in distinguishing lexemes.

No one has worked harder than Diki-Kidiri to implement the use of Sango in the Central African Republic, but he has done it in France, in works published with the aid of the Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique, an agency of the Institut National d'Education et de Formation. One of these (1982) consists of French texts translated into Sango and adds a Sango glossary helpful in the domain of civic instruction; the second (1983a) is a dictionary devoted to Activités économiques et sociales. Diki-Kidiri has been active in creating neologisms for Sango on the basis of patterns he finds in the language. (These are few indeed, because the language has practically no morphology.) He reports some success. He says that he gave radio announcers about 50 neologisms in 1969 and found that about a dozen were being used a few years later (Diki-Kidiri 1983b:29).
It is not clear to what degree all of these published works may influence policy and practice in the Central African Republic. Being expensive, they will find their way, one assumes, to only a few bureaus in the country.

Of possibly greater influence is the Institut de Linguistique Appliquée de Bangui, affiliated with the University. It is at least the place where linguistically trained people can focus their attention, as they already have, on both French and Sango. Instructors at the University will come to the study of these languages with some coherent linguistic theory. Although some will certainly have little more than the traditional grammatical approach used in the teaching of French, some will have been trained in, and all will sooner or later be exposed to, the kind of descriptive linguistics practiced by researchers working with the CNRS. It is not clear what its contribution to the Institut National Pédagogique, Ministère de l’Education Nationale, might be. It was this institute that in 1975 supervised the teaching of Sango and the teaching of several subjects in that language in primary schools. This led to the publication in 1977 of some material with a practical purpose by this institute. The Service National d’Alphabétisation et d’Education des Adultes also published, probably around this time, some literacy material. I have not seen any of these works. It is reported that the Central African government is again interested in using Sango in primary schools (Gerbault 1987). In her questionnaire survey of 210 persons in Bangui, Gerbault found that 82.54% wanted to see Sango taught in school.

Following recommendations coming from UNESCO, there was launched in the Centrafrican Republic, as in some other African countries, a literacy program that was aimed at increasing the production of cotton. Thus was born in 1975 the Département d’Alphabétisation Fonctionnelle et d’Education Permanente (DAFEP), aimed at three cotton-producing regions. One of these was the largely Gbeya-speaking region of Bossangoa, where the program was initiated in 1978 and projected until at least 1985. An assessment of this program is found in
these words: "Les résultats de ce test final reflètent bien le désintérêt des paysans à l'égard de l'alphabétisation, très peu seulement se sont présentés au test final... (in 1979)" (Bah-Gayn 1984:83). This statement ignores the fact that the number of enrolled went from 401 in 1978 to 1,266 in 1980. The goal of the project was to teach reading, writing, telling time, and doing arithmetic — all of which were comprehended by the term 'alphabétisation' (Bah-Gayn 1984:89).

In 1979 only 43.05% of the enrolled 'auditeurs' (N367) in three 'communes' took the final test, of which 61.39% (97 out of 158) passed (Bah-Gayn 1984:83). It appears that the orthography for the DAFEP project was different from all others: dieresis was used to mark the low front and back vowels.

3. Conclusion. It is not likely that the subjects we are concerned with have yet come to the attention of researchers working in the Central African Republic. Most of the effort by CNRS researchers has been directed to the study of vernacular languages. Even Bouquiaux's commendable project on the Sango dictionary was something he did 'on the side' for a number of years, fortunately assisted by his colleagues. There is no doubt that Sango's place in Central Africa's life is firm and that it will attract scientific and practical efforts in the years to come, in spite of the number of educated Central Africans who "dénient au Sango la capacité de conceptualisation et de discours philosophiques et économiques" (Bah-Gayn 1984:141).

At the moment there is no stereotype of 'correct Sango.' (There is, of course, a very strong normative tradition for French.) Central Africans recognize different varieties, and some of them may be stereotypes. One is Protestant Sango, in which many thousands of Central Africans are literate. (In the 1950s I found that 75% of the Protestants of an isolated Gbeya village were literate — that is, could read — in Sango. But 80% of Central Africans are considered illiterate, a figure that is probably not founded on any actual survey (Bah-Gayn 1984:421). Many people can recognize the Sango of certain geographical areas, mostly by
features of pronunciation. And city dwellers, especially those of Bangui, talk of the
difference between their Sango and that of the rural areas. (In speaking French they would
refer to the 'provinces.') None of these varieties, however, is denigrated. Variety is simply
recognized as one of the characteristics of the Sango language. It is different for the
uneducated or semi-educated people. They not only identify an urban Sango — spoken very
fluently, with a richer vocabulary, but especially with a considerable admixture of French —
but would like to emulate it. This is the variety that Paul Wald characterizes as
'vernacularized Sango.' If there is any linguistic focus for Central Africans in general it
must certainly be this variety. It represents being modern and cultured from a Central
African point of view.

My observation about the absence of a model of correct Sango has to take into
consideration some of Gerbault's findings (1987). When subjects were asked to evaluate their
competence in both French and Sango as excellent, good, rather good, and not too good, only
13.80% gave themselves the best mark, 41.90% as good, 39.04% as rather good, and 4.28% as not
too good. (There were variations according professional categories, with merchants having
the highest scores.) Why these low scores in a city where Sango is the most important
language of communication among people whom all linguists would consider perfectly good
informants for data on the language? This is a matter that certainly needs investigation. I
do not think that the answer is going to be a simple one. I would venture the guess that scores
would be different between those who were and those who were not literate in Sango and that
Protestants might be less confident of their competence in Sango because of their failure to
master the language of the Bible. But there will certainly be other factors that determine
speakers' perceptions of their competence in the language. For example, while waiting for an
appointment in the office of the Minister of Interior in 1966 I could not help overhearing a
conversation in Sango interlarded with a great deal of French. After I had talked with the
two men for a while, they remarked at how good my Sango was. I believe that what they had noticed was that I did not use very much French: I was not a code-switcher as they were.

The linguistic problem is to identify what vernacularized Sango is. It is not captured by the grammars and dictionaries now in existence. Only texts, analyzed as Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985, for which see Bibliography) did creole speech, will reveal its distinguishing features. I expect that a great deal of originality will be displayed. A considerable use of French will not be its only salient feature. The lexicon, limited, Bouquiaux estimates, to about 800 words (and only 490 non-French morphemes in my 1962 corpus of 37,000 morphemes in running texts), will be used with great creativity. We will also find, I am sure, that urban Sango is more than one thing, that it varies according to speaker's identity, context, topic, interlocutor, etc. The Sango of the future is being born in this speech. What this means is that there will be other varieties. We see this already in the 'Double Sango' spoken by young people in Bangui (Senhouêlè 1979). It is an argot that symbolizes a particular urban, adolescent identity. It may be something of an anti-language.

It should be noted that Sango is not recognized as a pidgin in the Central African Republic. Although its lexical poverty is apparent to those who are educated in French, this is apparently not sufficient reason for them to reject the language as a spoken medium. Sango is not seen as a bastardized form of the vernacular. For those who are aware of the vernacular, the vehicular language is accepted simply as another variety. In French Sango is never called a pidgin, and Diki-Kidiri (personal communication) objects to this characterization. Obviously we have here an important topic of research. How do various classes of speakers characterize Sango linguistically — as a language? And what are their attitudes concerning its function by comparison with the vernaculars of the country? Gerbault (1987) believes that the vernaculars are losing ground to Sango in the capital.

We also need research on the impact of Sango on vernacular languages, a topic that has
as far as I know attracted little attention among linguists who study pidgins. While
decreolization has been talked about a great deal, what we should also pay attention to is this
other aspect of language contact, where a pidgin or creole language is in some kind of
'dominant' position with respect to others. I was struck in January 1973 by the way speakers
of vernacular Sango adapted their speech to that of vehicular Sango, abandoning, for
example, the use of a discontinuous negative marker for a postposed one (pepe). This
observation has been confirmed by Paul Wald, who has been working with Yakoma young people
in Bangui. They distinguish 'yakoma approfondi,' which is the language spoken by their
elders, and 'yakoma élémentaire,' their own. The remarkable thing is that this second form of
Bangui Yakoma is modelled after vehicular Sango. Clearly this variety of Yakoma is a badge
of their urban identity. It reminds one of the variety of English called London Jamaican. If
it survives, we might expect their rural compatriots to mimic it. More research is needed to
determine exactly what are their attitudes towards their elders' speech, which they seem to
view as 'sophisticated Yakoma.'

Finally, we need a number of different kinds of research on literacy. What is the effect of
different kinds of orthography on the acquisition of literacy (learning to read)? How long
does it take children, women, and men to become literate? With the Ba la primers my wife and
I devised in 1953 — so called because of the sentence on the second page, 'Look at the sun' —
we found that people could learn in three months.

The whole question of orthography should be settled as quickly as possible. Most of the
work that needs to be done has already been done on the orthography; the remaining few
questions can be resolved, I should think, with a reasonable amount of research and
experimentation.

Works cited


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NOTES

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