SUFFIXATION FROM PHONOLOGICAL CHANGE IN CREOLIZED SANGO

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INTRODUCTION

The most outstanding -- or at least most apparent -- change that has taken place in creolized Sango is in its phonology. Some phonemes in certain environments have allophones never before found in the language; some patterns of contraction are rather general and regular, other transformations are characteristic of specific words; two words of considerable grammatical significance suffer so much erosion that only a minimal sign marks their existence: these are yeke, the copula, and awe, the perfective marker.

This paper deals with the preposition !i 'of.' We limit ourselves only to a phenomenon that will be called !i-clropping, for reasons that will become clear, ignoring such changes as the loss of either (a) the vowel, with the high tone moving to a following vowel or resonant consonant, or (b) the loss of the t.

!i-dropping, on the other hand, is realized either by complete deletion or by loss only of the consonant and vowel, the tone remaining in one form or another. Whereas the absence of !i was noted forty years ago -- being common in an expression like yanga da 'doorway' (mouth house), which, however, could also occur with the preposition (yanga ti da) -- the tonalization of !i was first noted as a significant phenomenon in January 1988, when I was in Bangui collecting data for a study of the consequences of creolization in Sango.

(We must recognize, of course, that some of these expressions without !i, like the one for 'doorway' just cited, may have been inherited from the source language. In fact, that is very likely. Recognizing this, we would have to say that yanga ti da is an instance of pidginization, where a rule is erroneously generalized. One therefore might choose to arbitrarily exclude such expressions from the calculations, but they are yet so common in the corpus that they distort the picture that emerges from the children's texts.)

This phenomenon deserves to be understood, not only because it is indeed an indicator of creolization among young people, but also because of what it suggests concerning language contact in a multilingual city and especially because of its possible effect on Sango morphology.

In this paper we shall be concerned primarily with the sociolinguistic aspects of !i-dropping. First, let us consider briefly its grammar.

THE GRAMMAR OF !I

The most common function of !i is to mark the genitive. Possession, of course, is its predominant semantic role. But it occurs with both nouns and verbs: with nouns to mark attribution and with verbs to link complements of one type or another. For example: yanga !i kodoro !i baba !i mbi 'my father's village (i.e. ethnic) language' (language of village of father of me) and mbi vi !i awe 'I want to go' (I want of go).

This is a word with a very high incidence. In one text recorded by me in 1962 it represented 17% of the tokens of all words. In the 14 texts of three genres published in Readings in Sango (Samarin 1967) there is an average of 1.14 per sentence.

The preposition has its source in the indigenous language, which we can call Ngbandi for convenience. We shall return to this matter in considering what might be the origin of the present phenomenon.

THE TONALIZATION OF !I

When the consonant and vowel are lost, what usually happens is that the vowel (or resonant consonant when deletion takes place) of the preceding word is lengthened so as to carry the high tone. The result is an upward glide starting with low and mid tones, but a long high-toned vowel when the word already has high tone. But the phenomenon we are describing is highly variable. Thus, the word yanga 'mouth, language' (with MM) has also been recorded with a final short vowel with high tone or a long vowel with high. There is even an instance of the tone moving to a following resonant: plas (M) mbo (HL) 'place (from French) of the dog.'
THE CORPUS

The present analysis is based on a corpus of about fifty hours of recordings of extemporaneous speech from children aged 2 to 16 in the city of Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic in 1988. There are about 500 texts with almost as many different speakers. From the transcribed texts 169 were selected for this study. I started with the goal of having as many male and female speakers for each age and arriving at about 1000 records.

A record is defined as an instance where \textit{ti} could have occurred. However, excluded were expressions in which \textit{ti} did not link a following word to a preceding one. For example, sentence-initial phrases such as \textit{mbi} `as for me,' \textit{ti} \textit{tene} `that is to say,' and one instance of sentence-internal \textit{ti} \textit{mo} `concerning yours' (of of you). Actually, two instances of the tonalization of the first expression after verbs occur in the corpus -- which, if they were not performance errors, illustrate the encroaching generalization of the new rule -- but are deleted from the statistics: \textit{mbi} \textit{saa} a \textit{mbi} \textit{mbeto} `As for me, I was afraid' [I do of me fear]; \textit{mbi} i \textit{tiri} i \textit{mbi} \textit{ape} `As for me, I wasn't fighting [I am fight of me not]. The vowels before \textit{mbi} -- a and j -- carry the high tone of \textit{ti}. On the other hand, conjunctions derived from noun phrases -- \textit{ngbanga} \textit{ti} and \textit{ndali} \textit{ti} (which can be written solid) `because' -- were included in the corpus: one record for the first and six for the second (the form preferred, according to my casual listening, by radio journalists), all with \textit{ti}.

The final corpus included texts from 64 males and 35 females because of the differences in the lengths of the texts. This resulted in an adequately balanced corpus of 628 male records and 637 female records: a total of 1275. Information about ethnicity and level of education was available. Ethnicity figures in the analysis below.

THE ANALYSIS

The records were divided according to whether \textit{ti} occurred, whether there was tonalization of \textit{ti}, and whether the latter did not occur. Since I did not personally check all the transcriptions but relied on the work of my two Central African assistants and my Canadian research assistant, the figures for tonalization and deletion have a margin of error, but not, I think, a great one. In any case, complete absence of \textit{ti} represents only a small percentage of the phenomenon we are studying. For the present, all figures conflate both types of \textit{ti}-dropping.

1. When males and females are compared, we do not find what has been noted in other studies of language change. Whereas 27.53\% of the male records exhibit \textit{ti}-dropping, those of the females increase to only 29.67\%.

2. As for age, the youngest cohort -- those from age 2 to 6 -- does reveal the highest percentage: 48.84\%. But the corpus includes only 43 records. The figure drops to 25.59\% for those from age 7 to 11 (with 512 records), and a close 27.43\% for those from ages 12 to 16 (with 649 records). When the population is divided into two cohorts -- one including ages 2 to 11 (555 records) and the other 12 to 16 (649 records) we find a remarkable similarity in performance: 27.38\% in the first and 27.42\% in the latter. When age (12-14) and gender are combined (with 498 records), we find hardly any difference: 24.68\% for males and 22.39\% for females.

3. Ethnicity can be compared for only four groups that are represented by records of over 100 (but 47.31\% of all records). The Banda cohort (175 records) is characterized by 33.71\% of \textit{ti}-dropping; the Manza (133 records), 30.83\%, the Yakoma (106 records), 25.47\%, and the Ngbaka (183 records), 10.93\%.

From this analysis we are led to conclude that neither gender nor age is strongly correlated with the incidence of \textit{ti}-dropping. To put that in different words: in the population of young people from the ages of 2 to 16 the innovation is rather evenly distributed in all but one ethnic group. This generalization takes on even greater significance when we correlate the phenomenon with types of words in an attempt to explain it below. (At the moment there is no explanation for the low incidence among the Ngbaka. Their
language, like other Ubangian ones, distinguishes kinds of nouns with respect to possession, but the morphology of possession would not seem to explain the Ngbaka's reluctance to accept ti-dropping [Thomas 1963:89, 106]. Moreover, the analysis of phonological change in the same corpus from which the present data were drawn does not reveal any significant differences among the Ngbaka [Samarin and Walker 1992]. On the other hand, there is one discourse from an eight year-old girl one of whose parents is Ngbaka and the other Banda in which ti-dropping occurs 37.93% of the time, in a total of 29 records.)

EXPLANATION

The analysis suggests that ti-dropping is a phenomenon that has arisen in the last two decades or so (although analysis of older speakers (17-30) has yet to be done). And it is an urban phenomenon. At Bossangoa, where I was getting samples of Sango from young people in 1991, I found that every child whose speech was characterized by this phenomenon had spent some time in Bangui. Where does it come from?

When I presented my discovery as evidence of creolization to a group of Centralafricans, linguists and linguistic researchers, in 1988, the response was one of incredulity. First, not a single person expressed any familiarity with it. Second, they explained it away as either an error of child language or an imitation of Yakoma speech. That it is characteristic of young people is beyond dispute, but it is certainly not a mistake in language performance.

Yakoma (and its related dialects, including Ngbandi) does indeed have something similar. It makes use of two prepositions (both ti and te) and juxtaposition to mark 'possession.' These are used with respect to alienable and inalienable 'possession.' The latter might be illustrated with the word fon (with low tone). In the singular there is a glide on the vowel before ala (HL) 'third person plural,' because the pronoun's first vowel is deleted. In the plural (marked with the same prefix as is now found in Sango), however, there is also a glide before mbi (M) 'first person singular' and le 'third person singular.' The children of Bangui might have heard the pattern with this conditioned use of rising pitch in inalienable nouns and generalized it. If this is what happened, it should be noted that they outperformed those they were imitating. We saw above that the Yakoma did not have the highest incidence of ti-dropping.

One would expect a higher incidence of ti-dropping with inalienable nouns even in Sango, and we do get 32.85% (with 344 records). But it should be noted that they include words that are pseudo-prepositions like those found in other African languages: le 'eye, face,' yanga 'mouth,' ya 'belly,' poko 'back,' tere 'body,' li 'head,' as well as ndo 'on top of.' These represent 93.02% of this corpus of inalienable nouns. In other words, it does not seem that this group of words behaves very much differently -- as inalienable nouns -- than others.

Similarly, when we take ten kinship terms (206 records), we find a percentage close to the one just noted: 33.98%. This includes 17 occurrences of merenge 'child' immediately followed by a qualifying noun: e.g. merenge walli 'daughter' (child female), the most common way to designate such a person, although the use of ti is fully grammatical (but perhaps not frequent) in adult speech.

French borrowings, most of them recent, are also subject to ti-dropping. The thirteen words in the corpus are the following: auto, balon, camarade (with the final consonant deleted), chambre (with a final vowel added), ciment, cochon, commencer, ecole, jouet, papa, place, robe. Among all the records ti was dropped 31 times and was retained 29 times. This fact reveals both the degree of integration of these words in the language and also the strength of the emerging rule.

Nominalized verbs behave in the same way as other nouns: e.g. singo 'arrival' from si 'arrive.'

The verbs that occur with tonalization are the following: ga 'come,' gwe 'go,' komase 'begin' (from French), ken 'refuse,' kpe 'flee, run,' ngba 'remain, continue,' and pe 'be able' (from French peut). Two of these -- gwe and komase -- occur without tonalization, as well as hinga 'know' and yi 'want.' However, it is possible that this last verb, already carrying a high tone, is lengthened. The verbs, especially ga and gwe, will need more study. Although there is a difference between gwe ti vo 'go to buy' gwe vo 'go and buy,' the
first susceptible to tonalization and the second not (therefore susceptible to being interpreted as ti-dropping without tonalization because of pronoun dropping among young people, I have done my best to interpret the discourse, aided sometimes by translations in French.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has demonstrated that a major change has taken place among urban young people in the process of creolization or vernacularization of Sango.

1. The dropping of ti, as described here, in almost a third of all the places where it could occur, irrespective of age, gender, or type of word.

2. The origin of ti-dropping is still problematic. If the Yakoma and their Sango co-ethnics were indeed imitated by others, there is at this time no explanation as to why the Sango of the Yakoma people should be a model for the other people of Bangui, especially since it is clear that these people, when speaking their ethnic language, are influenced by the creole. To what extent and in what ways their indigenous language influences speech in Sango is not known.

3. The dropping of ti may be leading to the emergence of possessive suffixes, such as some of the Centralafrican languages (like Gbaya) have. Evidence for this comes from a dispute between two boys, one of them telling the other "You stole my pen," and the other responding, "I did not steal your pen." For 'pen' the French bic is used. Thus: bikm (LHM) instead of bik ti mbi 'my pen' and bikmo (LHL) instead of bik ti mo 'your pen.' The argument here is that since m never before occurred as a free form variable with mbi, it must here be considered a suffix, and if it is a suffix, then mo must also be considered a parallel suffix.

The precise phonetic nature of this phenomenon is to be studied acoustically.