VERB-MARKING IN SANGO PREDICATE CHAINS

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0. INTRODUCTION

Sango is important for the study of synchronic, diachronic, and theoretical linguistics, because it is one of the few contemporary pidgins actually going through the process of 'acquiring' speakers for whom it is the primary, if not first, language for most purposes except education. It is important that this process be described, not only for its inherent significance in linguistics, but also because it parallels that which is characterizing the history of Tok Pisin. Indeed, the nativization — or 'creolization' — of the two languages may have begun at approximately the same time, but research on what is happening to Tok Pisin as a consequence of nativization was initiated before the present one (see, for example, Sankoff and Laberge 1973/1980; Verhaar 1990).¹

This paper is another of a series issuing from a project entitled 'The Linguistic Consequences of the Creolization of Sango' at the University of Toronto (see References). In this one we address ourselves to subject marking in predicate chains. It arose in an observation by Samarin in 1988, confirmed by one of his Central African research assistants, that children in Bangui, the capital of the Republic, frequently replaced a pronoun of the first predicate by what used to be hardly more than a redundant subject marker of a noun phrase, a prefix to the verb, in the second predicate. This paper examines that phenomenon from a synchronic perspective. But it does more than that. It adds a diachronic perspective by comparing predicate chains in a corpus obtained in 1962. Finally, it compares what a single educated young adult speaker does with what children do. The corpora are described below.

First, we characterize the patterns of subject marking that were found in the spontaneous narratives of a number of adults, adolescents and children recorded in 1962. We then describe the subject marking patterns in similar narratives of a certain number of young people in 1991. Then we compare what these speakers do with what a contemporary young adult does in the same texts. Although the three corpora are somewhat limited, they reveal significant linguistic patterns. The two salient ones are these: (1) children in 1991...
used more predicate chains than speakers in 1962; (2) children in 1991 more frequently than the older population replaced the pronoun of the first predicate by the generalized subject marker in the second predicate. Although the conclusions are based on limited corpora, they are highly suggestive of some of the consequences of the nativization of Sango and will probably be confirmed by further analysis. We close with some observations on methodology.

1. PREDICATE CHAINS AND SANGO GRAMMAR

We must insist that we are here concerned with the way the same subject is marked in a chain of predicates. It will immediately become obvious that these chains resemble something called 'serial verbs,' much studied by Africanists and by other linguists concerned with the ostensible universals manifested by verb serialization in pidgins and creoles. While recognizing the importance of these studies, we do not intend to contribute directly to them here, having as our primary goal the documentation of the linguistic consequences of the creolization of Sango. But we do not entirely ignore the topic, for which see the Conclusions.

One might assume that determining what makes up sentences in African languages is a simple matter. This is far from true. Indeed, Samarin's Central African assistants, who transcribed his texts, confessed that they were not always certain where to end one sentence and begin another.

The nature of this difficulty means that there is a margin of error in our analysis. Very often, it is difficult to tell whether two or more clauses are verbs in seriation, two closely-related but separate acts, or merely consecutive acts without a connective. For example, the sequence

(01) lô mú wâli lô hon nà nî
3s take wife 3s pass with DEF

could be interpreted as 'he left with his wife' (serialized verbs), but, since mú wâli also means 'to get married', it could also be interpreted as 'he got married and they left' (consecutive actions).

Before proceeding, we must make a simple fact clear about all simple predicates: the subjects of predicates can be either a noun phrase or a pronoun. In the first case, the verb takes an obligatory prefix, à-. The only exception to this rule is topicalization, in which case a pronoun may follow the noun phrase.

There are three options for verb-marking in predicate chain constructions: a
pronoun can be used, the third person prefix à- (here called subject marker, SM) can be added, or no marking can be made. Therefore, in a predicate chain with two verbs, there are nine logical possibilities (although predicate chains with noun phrase subjects are constrained by the grammatical point mentioned above).

2. THE CORPORAS

The first corpus consists of 15 texts collected by Samarin in the Central African Republic in 1962. The texts were based on tape-recorded, spontaneous discourse. Although some sociological data was collected, the ages recorded for the speakers are not always precise. Nevertheless, ages range from "child" to "aged adult" (see Table 1). These 15 texts appeared as Volume 2 of the Basic Course in Sango (Samarin 1967b).

The second corpus consists of nine of the 900 texts, from about 900 speakers, collected again by Samarin in Bangui during ten weeks of 1991. The speakers range in age from 8 to 14 (see Table 2). Of the nine texts, seven appear to be traditional tales and two are personal narratives. All were spontaneous discourses, transcribed by a Central African assistant (whom we will identify as CKS).

The third corpus is more in the way of an addendum to the second. CKS not only transcribed the texts, but also provided a tape-recorded version in what he in French called "Sango standard", his perception of the adult form of Sango. It is important to note that he was given no instructions about what features to insert, delete or otherwise 'correct', so that he had no knowledge of which features this study would examine. Indeed, the original purpose of this 'adult' version was to make the highly contracted speech of the young people more intelligible to Samarin, although it was assumed that differences important to the study of contemporary Sango would appear.

These three corpora thus provide the basis for a comparison between pidgin Sango and creolized Sango, as well as between current children's and adults' forms of speech. (On the methodological limitations of the study see below.)

For the purpose of this study, a computer database was set up to count verb-marking in predicate chains. Rather than entering whole texts, only examples of predicate chains were entered. In each example, there are often more than two predicates involved, so that, for example, although there are
336 predicate chain examples in the 1991 corpus, these contain some 374 pairs of predicates. In addition to a manual count of the number of all verbs in each text was made.

3. VERB-MARKING IN SANGO: 1962

The total number of verbs for the fifteen texts from the 1962 corpus is 1069. The number in each texts varies from 23 to 183. The proportion of predicate-chain examples to the number of verbs varies from 3.2 % to 31.3 %, with the average being 12.3 % (for full details, see Table 1).

Of the nine verb-marking possibilities discussed above, six occur in the Sango of 1962. One form, in which a 0/-marked verb precedes a pronoun-marked verb, is excluded from the analysis as it occurs only once, as the second part of a three-verb chain. (By 0- we mean the absence of the verb prefix.) Examples of the remaining five forms are as follows:

Pronoun repetition
(02) mbi  ga  mbi  sárá  tene  nf
1s  come  1s  do  word  DEF
'then I talked'

Pronoun-prefix
(03) lô  gwè  á-pîkà  mbi
3s  go  SM-hit  1s
'he went and hit me'

Pronoun-0
(04) álâ  gwè  0  dùti  ká
3p  go  0  sit  there
'they went and stayed there'

Repeated prefix
(05) à-mú  lenge  à-zią  nà  li  tî  lô  âwè
SM-take  necklace  SM-put  on  head  of  3s  PERF
'when they have placed the necklace on her neck ...'
Verb-marking in Sango Predicate-Chains

Prefix-0

(06) à-gwè 0 lu nzo
SM-go 0 plant corn
'he planted corn'

In the above forms, all pronouns occur in pronoun repetition (an abbreviated way of referring to the same pronoun being used in both predicates), but only lô 'he/she/it' and àlà 'they' occur in pronoun-prefix forms (that is, pronoun in the first but prefix in the second predicate), and only lô, àlà and mbi 'I' occur in pronoun-0 forms.

The most common forms are the repeated prefix (where the verbs of both predicates take the prefix, 60 occurrences, or 45.8 % of the total) and the repeated pronoun (49 occurrences, or 37.4 %). (In the first instance, the subject was made explicit earlier in the discourse.) After these forms, pronoun-prefix forms and prefix-0 forms are less common, occurring less than 10 % of the time (for full details, see Table 3).

If the marking on the second verb only is taken into account, the prefix emerges as the preferred form, occurring as 54.2 % of the total. The pronoun follows at 38.2 %.


The total number of verbs for the nine texts from 1991 is 1606. The number in each text varies from 50 to 369, and the proportion of predicate chain examples to the number of verbs varies between 15.6 % and 36 % (for full details, see Table 2). This is a significant fact, and will be commented on below.

Eight of the nine possible combinations of verb-marking occur in contemporary children's speech. Two forms, exemplified in (07) and (08):

Prefix-pronoun

(07) à-ma à-só lô kâi
SM-hear pl-this3s calm-down
'he heard [what was said] and calmed down'
0-prefix

(08) 0 ga â-gi âlà gba
     0 come SM-seek 3p in-vain
     'and then 3s sought 3s in vain'

are excluded from this study for two reasons. Firstly, these forms are few in number, even in children’s speech. Secondly, these forms are unusual in that they never occur first in a predicate chain. Examples of the remaining six forms are given below:

Pronoun repetition

(09) i gô i bâ télé
     1p go [gô from gwè] 1p look television
     'then we watch television'

Pronoun-prefix

(10) âlà püsé lô à-bi lô ká
     3p push 3s SM-throw 3s there
     'they pushed him to the ground'

Pronoun-0

(11) lô gô 0 tôkà â-zô tf lô
     3s go 0 send-message pl-person of 3s
     'then he sent a message to his people'

Repeated prefix

(12) à-mu â-mbênî à-gô nà âlà
     SM-take pl-some SM-go with 3p
     'he took several with him'

Prefix-0

(13) à-ga 0 gbû têrê tf mbi
     SM-come 0 seize body of 1s
     'then he grabbed me'
No verb marking

(14) fàsó 0  gô  0  irì  á-mérëngé
   now 0  go  0  call  pl-child
   'and then he called the children'

(There is a possibility that in Sentence 11 the pronoun lô is actually repeated but is realized as a long vowel of the preceding verb and that in 13 the verb prefix is realized as a lengthening of the vowel of the preceding verb. Examples such as these must be studied acoustically. In Sentence 14 the first pronoun might be explained by assimilation, but the absence of some kind of subject on the second verb cannot be explained.) It should be noted that all pronouns occur in pronoun repetition, all but one (mbi 'I') occur in pronoun-Ø form, but only the third person singular and plural (lô and álâ) occur in pronoun-prefix forms. (There is, however, one occurrence with the second person singular mò.)

The figures show that children never employ a pronoun as verb marker if an overt NP is subject. This is understandable, given the grammatical fact mentioned above. Of the 75 predicate chains with NP subject, 73 employed the prefix à- on the first verb, while two (which occurred in only one text) had no verb-marking whatsoever.

The two most common forms of verb-marking are the repeated pronoun (129 occurrences) and the repeated prefix (134 occurrences). After these forms, the next most common is the pronoun-prefix combination.

However, when only the marking on the second verb is taken into account, the prefix emerges as the most common form. Of the 368 predicate chain pairs considered here, 192 (or 52 %) mark the second verb with à-.

3.2. Verb-Marking in 'Adult' Sango: 1991

The picture which emerges for verb-marking in the Sango of a contemporary adult is quite different. It should be noted that the adult's figures add up to less than those of the children because many of the predicate chains in the children's texts were reduced by him to simple predicates.

The favoured pattern of verb marking in 'adult' Sango is pronoun repetition, which comprises 231 of the 346 adult forms, or 67 %. The next common form is the repeated prefix (109 occurrences, or 31.5 %). Other forms, especially those involving Ø-marking, are so infrequent as to be irre-
levant (for full details, see Table 4).

A similar picture emerges for the marking of the second verb. Pronoun-marking remains at 67 %, and prefixing only increases 0.5 %, to 32 %.

3.3. Comparisons and Changes

A comparison of the 1962 and 1991 (children's) corpora suggests that the difference in predicate chains is one of degree rather than kind. Two changes can be observed (for the following, see Tables 3 and 4).

The first change is in the amount of chaining which occurs. In 1962, the proportion of predicate chains to the number of verbs averages at 12.3 %, whereas in 1991, the proportion is 20.3 %. Thus it would seem that the use of predicate chains in general has increased.

The second change, perhaps more important, is an increase in the pronoun-prefix pattern. The occurrence of this form has risen from 8.4 % of all forms in 1962, to 15.8 % in 1991. Of the 11 pronoun-prefix forms in 1962, one might be surprised to learn, 9 occurred in "adult" texts, whereas only one occurred in the child's text and one occurred in the 18-year-old's text.

A comparison of the patterns for verb-marking in the two 1991 corpora shows clearly that children make more use of the prefix à- than does the adult. This fact is especially apparent in the marking on the second verb: the adult uses pronoun-marking almost twice as often as children, and children use the prefix almost twice as often as the adult. Interestingly, children also use 0/-marking on the second verb about 13 % of the time, whereas the adult uses it less than 1 % of the time (a figure which is within the margin of error, and therefore negligible).

A better way of demonstrating the difference between these two corpora, rather than by simply comparing figures, is by examining the number of changes made by CKS.

The most common changes are, first, to replace the prefix with a pronoun, and second, to replace 0/-marking with a prefix or a pronoun. For example, of the 58 occurrences of pronoun-prefix, 49 are replaced, predominantly with a repeated pronoun, as shown in (10) and (11):
Verb-marking in Sango Predicate-Chains

3.4. Chaining Verbs

Before concluding, we must note that those verbs which occur first in the chain are confined to a small number, notably verbs of motion. In the 1962 corpus, the verb ga 'come' occurs as the first verb 39 times, with 22 different second verbs. Next common is the verb gwè 'go', which occurs 20 times with...
16 different verbs. These two verbs together comprise about 45% of the total occurrences of first verbs in chains, a fact not without significance (see below). Other verbs which occur less often but more than three times and with more than one verb are mú 'take', si 'arrive', dûti 'sit', kirí 'return', londo 'arise', hûndà 'ask' and kpe 'run'.

In the 1991 (children's) corpus, ga 'come' occurs as the first verb 194 times, with 58 different second verbs, and next is gwè 'go', which occurs 58 times with 27 different verbs. Therefore, these two verbs together comprise about 70% of the total occurrences of first verbs in chains (compare the figures for 1962). Other verbs which occur less often but still more than once or twice and with more than one verb are mú 'take', ngbâ 'remain, continue', dûti 'sit', sigí 'leave', sârà 'do', ti 'fall' and hon 'pass'.

Another important aspect of these initial verbs is that only two occur with 0-marking on the second verb. In the 1962 corpus, all occurrences of 0/-marking on the second verb involve only ga (4 times) or gwè (6 times) as the first verb. In 1991, ga occurs 22 times followed by 0/-marking. The fact that ga ends in the same vowel as the prefix would make one suspicious of this finding were it not for the fact that gwè also occurs 18 times followed by 0/-marking. Thus, this is not merely a case of faulty transcription or phonological assimilation. (However, one might argue that conditioned loss in the first has led to deletion with the second. In this paper we will not attempt an explanation of this phenomenon.)

4. CONCLUSIONS

The study which we have described here is important both for the findings and the methodology.

The findings suggest that there is a change going on in the use, if not in the verb-marking patterns, of predicate chains in Sango. Since we have not studied texts from before 1962, and there were none recorded spontaneously before the 1950's, it is impossible to say for certain when predicate chains were introduced to Sango, or if indeed they were a feature of the language from the beginning. (Predicate chaining is, of course, a feature of Ubangian languages.) However, our analysis here demonstrates that, in the last thirty years, there has been an increase in the use of such chains in discourse.

If this finding can be confirmed by a much larger corpus of children's speech, compared with a much larger corpus of speech from the 50s and 60s,
we might be obliged to conclude that one of the consequences of nativization is syntactic complication. The hypothesis might be stated in this way: When people were using Sango as a second language (in its stable pidgin state), they were inclined to use simple sentences; when people, whether young or adult, began to use Sango more and more frequently, making it their primary daily language, they began to use more complex sentences. We do not have an explanation for this kind of change. However, clearly one must consider the possibility that in nativization Sango is becoming indigenized: that is, influenced by the Ubangian substratum. If this is so, the process must be happening among bilinguals, probably adults.

The findings also suggest that the third-person prefix à- has been transformed from a subject-agreement marker into a kind of generalized predicate-marker. This marker seems to link clauses with a common subject into a larger discourse unit, perhaps even a sentence. This hypothesis is supported by the increase in the pronoun-prefix pattern over the last thirty years. However, a more thorough analysis, performed on entire texts, is required to confirm the hypothesis. (Here too internal and external factors have to be taken into consideration.)

Similarly, the patterning of verb-marking with ga and gwè seems to indicate that the two verbs are used as markers of consecutive or continuative events (cf. Pasch n.d.:7), another Ubangian feature. These verbs have become more closely associated with the second verb, and behave more like auxiliaries. Again, without reliable data from an earlier period, it is impossible to tell when this semantic and syntactic extension took place, if ever. Their salience in these few texts again suggests the need for more thorough analysis.

4.1. Methodology

Two observations about methodology might be made. The first has to do with how one goes about studying predicate chains (or verb serialization) and the other with how one studies creolization.

As for the first, the present study is based on tape-recorded natural speech, whereas Pasch's appears to have been based on elicited sentences from a single Central African who presumably translated from German to French into Sango. Elicitation, while seeking to achieve the linguist's specific goals, is fraught with risks, particularly when the language being studied is subject to considerable influence by one of these languages (French).
As for the second, the findings of this study demonstrate the need to utilize more than one kind of methodology in studying creolization. If we had relied only on CKS's 'adult' version of the texts, we might have been led to believe that adult Sango represented an earlier, pidgin stage of Sango in which predicate chains were linked only by repetition of the subject pronoun. As the analysis of actual texts in pidgin Sango shows, such is not the case. Therefore, reliance on the 'native intuition' of a creole speaker, and the assumption of apparent time which it involves, is questionable.

It remains to determine exactly what the third corpus represents. It is not clear as to whether CKS regards the adult version as some kind of literary style, as an idealized standard, or as the way adults actually speak. The first possibility is supported by the fact that he often replaces the indirect discourse pronoun ni '1st person, speaking' by mbi 'I', in quoted speech, possibly bringing the text more in line with the 'direct quotation' style normally associated with written discourse. The last possibility would mean that it is adult Sango, rather than children's Sango, which has undergone substantial morphosyntactic changes in the last thirty years.

Although the assessment of texts by creole speakers has its drawbacks, we believe that it can also be a source of valuable information, if for no other reason than the perspective it affords us on stylistic variation. Several claims have been made about the structural changes that accompany the acquisition of native speakers, claims made on the basis of a linguistic analysis of the creole language. And yet, as far as we know, no one else has gone back to speakers of the pidgin to verify these changes. As valuable as sociolinguistic studies have proven to be, they might frequently be made even more valuable, it would appear to us, if, whenever possible, linguists obtained information from members of the speech community about conclusions that have been arrived at through linguistic analysis.

In our case, we would like to know not only what young people are doing with Sango, but also how they and others feel about this linguistic behaviour. For example, when Samarin commented on an adult woman's having said àydapè for à-kè dà apè 'there isn't any', she said that she could "stretch out" the phrase if she wanted to. This statement suggests an awareness of the relationship between uncontracted and contracted forms, such as was observed among some speakers of Tok Pisin (Romaine and Wright 1987:64, Mühlhäusler 1986:70). More research on the relationship between contracted and full forms in Sango, and the correlation of these forms with the social features of
speakers, needs to be undertaken.

As we have seen, an approach which utilizes the evaluation of creole speakers is not without its problems. It would, of course, be more valuable to get other versions of these texts from a variety of adult speakers, in order to test the validity of the differences we have observed, and to determine what CKS' corpus represents.

In the meantime, it has been demonstrated how much one can learn, not only by analyzing texts of spontaneous discourse, but also by analyzing other versions of the same texts synchronically, and similar texts diachronically.

**TABLE 1**: Demographic figures of speakers and verb counts -- 1962 texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnic</th>
<th>#Verbs</th>
<th>Records</th>
<th>%age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>adult</td>
<td>banda</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
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<tr>
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**TOTAL**: 1069  31

**AVERAGE**: 71.3  8.7  12.3%
TABLE 2: Demographic features of speakers and verb counts -- 1991 texts

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker</th>
<th>Sex</th>
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<th>#Verbs</th>
<th>Records</th>
<th>%age</th>
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<tr>
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<td>232</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
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<td>37.3</td>
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TABLE 3: Figures for verb-marking for 1962 texts

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<th>Verb-marking</th>
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<th>NP Subject</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%age</th>
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<td>a-</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a-</td>
<td>Ø</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>Ø</td>
<td></td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 4: Figures for verb-marking for 1991 texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verb-marking Subject</th>
<th>Non-NP Subject</th>
<th>NP</th>
<th>Total Total</th>
<th>%age</th>
<th>CKS</th>
<th>%age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ProN</td>
<td>ProN</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>35.1 %</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>66.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProN</td>
<td>a-</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>15.8 %</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ProN</td>
<td>a-</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.0 %</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a-</td>
<td>a-</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>36.4 %</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>31.5 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a-</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.0 %</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ò</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.8 %</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**

1. The present research on Sango began in January of 1988, when Samarin spent ten weeks in Bangui, and was continued in 1991 and 1992, when he again spent ten weeks on each occasion. Most of this research was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Canada) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Committee of the University of Toronto. Their financial assistance is gratefully acknowledged. The Secrétariat d'Etat de la Recherche Scientifique et Technique of the Central African Government authorized the pursuit of this research and support for it was given by Michel-Marie Koyt, Director of the Institute for Applied Linguistics in Bangui. The Mission Evangélique des Frères (Grace Brethren Foreign Missions, USA) provided much assistance without which this research would not have been possible. Samarin happily thanks them all for their help, while assuming personal responsibility for his use of the data and the conclusions he has arrived at. Finally, the people of Bangui are thanked for their willingness to be interviewed and for the assistants who carried out some of this work. Since the presentation of this paper at the colloquium at Cologne marked the fortieth anniversary of Samarin's arrival in Bangui (June 1952), Samarin would like to take this occasion to thank the citizens of the Central African Republic for the pleasure of having lived and studied among them, and in some ways served them, for nearly ten years.
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Sankoff, Gillian

Sankoff, Gillian and Suzanne Laberge

Verhaar, John W.M. (ed.)