The story of this inscription is the following. In 1994 I was asked by the Director of the American Peace Corps in the Central African Republic to give a couple of talks at the site outside the town of Mbai, where a fresh group of volunteers were learning French and Sango at the same time. Sango has been the territory’s only lingua franca since its occupation by the French in 1890. Not much used by the French themselves, it was, however, used by missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic. At Independence it became the National Language, while French was the Official Language. In 1991 however it too became official. I first talked to the volunteers, telling them something about Sango’s origin as a pidgin, and then something about its grammar and vocabulary. I then spoke to the Central Africans, who were living at the camp and were teaching both Sango and French. Since they were not professionals, I felt obliged to give them some suggestions on the difficulties that Americans would have with sounds like gb and mb and especially with the three levels of tone that the language uses, marked in the sentence above by grave for low tone, acute for high, and no diacritic for mid tone. I also encouraged them to teach the volunteers to speak the language as Central Africans spoke it—not some simplified or artificial variety of it. It was then in a moment of conviction and passion that I uttered the sentence inscribed in the print. The twelve words are translated as follows: language/mouth of village is cord/rope that binds heart/liver of people become one. I was using the expression ‘village language’, used originally for the ethnic languages, to refer to Sango as the country’s language. (The country is often referred to as a village. I was, of course, implying that Sango, not French, was what bound Central Africans together, and it would be Sango that would bind these young people to those with whom they would live for two years or more. Now, what is the best translation? As with all translations, several are possible, depending on the style that is desired, for example.

With a common language one heart.
A shared language makes a united people.
The people’s language for a united people.

I was happy to learn that after I had left, the teachers made posters and banners with my slogan and displayed them throughout the camp.

W.J.Samarin, April 21, 1997