
Reviewed by William J. Samarin, Emeritus (University of Toronto)

The spread of a language is nothing more than its being acquired as a language supplementary to the one learned in childhood (the so-called mother tongue), which increases the linguistic repertoire of speakers. The term usually applies to geographical spread, although it can be ascribed to parts of a population or linguistic community. One can speak, therefore, of the spread of English, not only as the consequence of colonization, but also along with the globalization of politics and economics in which the United States came to play a major role since World War II. It is natural that a spreading language is frequently also a lingua franca, one that is a natural language or a pidginized variety of a natural language (see Samarin, 1987).

History of the origin and spread of Sango

Pidgin Sango (henceforth Sango) is one of the lingua francas that arose in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when the French government and King Leopold II of the Belgians explored, acquired land, and colonized a large part of central equatorial Africa. The others are Bangala, Kituba, and Lingala — all Bantu in origin. All but the modern version of Bangala have spread, the latter being restricted to the northeastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

Sango, because of the absence of another lingua franca and as a result of the process of colonization, spread quickly and widely in central Africa (what the French used to call the Haut-Oubangui). Having been created in the Ubangi river basin, it spread south into what became the Belgian Congo for some kilometers, into the lower parts of the Chad, and in some of the adjoining eastern part of the Cameroon. Following the establishment of independent political states in the 1960s, there has been a retrenchment in the sphere of Sango distribution.

1. Editor’s note.
The author, Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto, has carried out research on Sango since 1952 and has lived in the Central African Republic for ten years over the last fifty years. His last period of research was in the early 1990s.

2. Sango’s being a pidgin is argued in Samarin (2000b); see also Samarin (1986: 385).
extra-territorially. At one time it was even outlawed in the Chad. Elsewhere, as in the DRC, other lingua francas, now become national languages, usurped Sango’s role. The cover of Mark Karan’s book is therefore erroneous, because it has arrows moving out into seven directions in central Africa, indicating a geographical spread of the language (and this is also suggested on the very first page of the book).

The title of the book is also seen to be misleading once one has begun to understand its contents. Karan is not clearly arguing that Sango is spreading throughout the Central African Republic (CAR), let alone the neighboring countries, although this might be inferred from some remarks (pp. 66, 69, 81, 93, 101; pages without author citation are from Karan). For example, he does not start his study with a time when the language was known by fewer people than today, and he does not satisfactorily describe the dynamics of this spread. He simply observes that age grading, where test scores (see below) are correlated with age decades, “reveals that Sango is spreading at a fast rate” (66, and Fig. 6.2). Therefore, I see no justification in deducing the rate of the acquisition of Sango as a second language, which almost everyone in the country knows, from the ability to repeat fifteen sentences with a minimum of mistakes.

An explanation for the spread of Sango over the CAR must be a historical one: that is, based on data that are analyzed and rigorously interpreted. In the absence of a historical account — and despite some obvious facts — writers have made allegations that are erroneous and speculative. For example, it has been said that the Sango of Protestant missions spread around Bossangoa (“Le sango des missions protestantes a rayonné autour de Bossangoa” [Bouquiaux et al. 1978: 13]). I may have published works for a mission in the 1950s (e.g., the Ba la [‘Look at the sun’] primers, begun at Bozoum, experimented with at Mbaiki), but this was only to improve the quality of works that could be used in literacy campaigns. The District of Bossangoa, most of whose inhabitants are speakers of Gbeya (= Gbaya), have been evangelized in that language since the 1920s, and I came to this district in 1954 with the intention of continuing this practice, not wanting to use Sango in what was called a “monolingual” area, where people were more comfortable in their own ethnic (“village”) language than in Sango, already known by much of the population. Sango was, nonetheless, the medium of rudimentary, basic education, preparing catechists (i.e., apprenticing pastors) and their wives for the Protestant mission’s central Bible school near Bozoum.

3. On the estimated number of speakers of Sango, see www.samarin.ca.

4. Not mentioned in the book is the fact that this is a publication of Karan’s doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, the supervisor of which was William Labov.

The only allusion in Karan’s work to the early history of the spread of
Sango is that it “spread out along the river trade routes” [also called “the old trade routes”], probably assuming that Sango was a lingua franca before the arrival of whites, as alleged by writers before him (p. 81; see also pp. 82, 92). Karan provides no evidence of such “trade routes,” and, as I have argued elsewhere, trade on the Ubangi river was controlled by each ethnic group and carried out most likely between individuals (Samarin, 1998). There were no “routes.” (On the history of the spread of Sango, see below.) More to the point is the statement that the areas “which claim the highest percentage of competence in Sango are the areas which were most in focus in colonistic [sic] development efforts” (p. 89). This is not elaborated, and confusion is introduced by saying that these were “areas which were accessible by available transportation” (p. 89). If he means roads, then how could they have figured in Sango’s early spread since — as the author claims on pages 81, 82, and 92 — it was only “until fairly recently” that roads started to be built? In any case, this assertion is false, contradicted even by the map (p. 90) showing the percentage of speakers in a sample of villages along the Ubangi river, which was colonized before the hinterlands.

Karan’s history of Sango is not informed by any research of his own, and it ignores what is already known. Sango was created on the Ubangi river, and it spread among the riverine population, because the river was traveled by thousands of foreigners, Africans and whites, the latter agents of the king of Belgium and the government of France and traders at different trading posts; Catholic missionary work did not begin until 1894, at Bangui. Right after the founding of Bangui as France’s principal post in 1889, exploratory expeditions began to penetrate the hinterland, attempting to get to the Chad. These expeditions and the military one toward the Sudan, in an attempt to cut off the British in their expansionism, used thousands of porters, foreign and indigenous, the latter mostly Banda and Manza; and among the first members of the indigenous militia were men of Ngbandi ethnicity, on whose language Sango is based. For example, it was reported in 1899 that this “patois commun” was used all the way from Rafaï in the east [to Bangui] (Dyé, 1899: 445); and by 1911 it was spoken from Bétou, a village at 3e degrees latitude down river of Bangui to Fort Crampel, in the hinterlands to the north on the Gribingui river (Clerc, 1911: 303). And Sango must surely have spread into those areas conceded to the exploitative companies, which were granted thousands of hectares from the very beginning of the twentieth century. For example, already in 1901 the Compagnie du Kouango français was established.⁵ (The Kouango river flows into the Ubangi river from territory inhabited by people of Banda ethnicity.)


In my own study of the spread of Sango I have tried to determine the
effects of the following: (1) the roles of the Sango-Yakoma-Dendis in every aspect of colonization, beginning with river transportation, (2) regional trading and that which followed colonization, beginning in 1887, (3) what Bangui as a linguistically diverse center of French colonization may have contributed to Sango’s development and spread, (4) Catholic and Protestant missions, starting in 1894 and 1923 respectively, (5) schools, (6) soldiers and porters, especially in the conquest of the Chad, which was accomplished by going directly north from the Ubangi river through Banda and Manza territory (requiring at least 70,000 porters in a twenty-month period), (7) land-grant companies, which were involved in the forced collection of latex and in trade, (8) the construction of the railroad between Brazzaville and the coast (1921–1932), because 33% of the total work force came from Oubangui-Chari (now the CAR) and another four per cent from the Chad, a total of almost 42,000 for the whole period, and, finally (and most recently), (9) the radio.

Historical facts, easily substantiated, lead one to conclude that a lingua franca would have been extremely useful. And it is no wonder that it had become a lingua franca across the Ubangi river in Belgian territory, given the fact that a vast area was inhabited by inland speakers of Ngbandi. The Capucins, who founded their mission in 1910 (see map in Slade, 1959), therefore learned it in the belief that they were learning the local language. Obviously, the local people believed that this was the language one used with whites. In 1917 the district “commissaire,” S. Sörensen, responded to a questionnaire on the use of language by saying that whites should use the “conventional” languages instead of the indigenous ones, citing Sango for the Ubangi district (in the northwest of the colony, most of whose population is and probably was Ngba, but a language related to the Gbaya group across the river). By the 1920s a network of roads had been constructed for administrative and economic purposes, and not “until fairly recently” as noted by Karan (see above). In 1925 an automobile could travel from Bangui to Batangafo in the north and in 1926 from Bangui to Carnot in the west (and the dates could have been earlier) (Laborie, 1945: 136, 140). At every one of the posts, speakers of Sango could be found. This is seen in the work of André Gide’s personal secretary (Allégret, 1993). The workmen used by the Baptist Mid-Missions pastor in constructing the mission at Fort Sibut (now Kaga Bandoro) in 1923, Arthur Seymour, spoke Sango; it was from them that he learned the language (Strong, 1984: 131). The Baptists adopted Sango in 1923 as the only language to be used (Strong, 1984:

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6. I am grateful to Johannes Fabian, my friend and colleague, for this information.

7. However, there is documentary evidence that both the Brethren and the Baptists were familiar with Calloc’h’s work of 1911 and were translating it into English.
131), whereas the Brethren worked in ethnic languages mostly until right after the Second World War. Karan (p. 92) is therefore wrong for the latter. Karan’s work provides little information on the spread of Sango and especially about the dynamics of its spread. He might have noted the first published observation of a French officer who was stationed at Mobaye in the 1890s, among the people called Sango, during the very time that what he called the sabir was emerging: It spread “almost everywhere following our [French] occupation,” he wrote (in my translation of the French), “because we have recruited among these populations [alluding to the Sangos, apparently including the Yakomas] our first militiamen, our first canoers [the Gbanziris and the Burakas [not distinguishable linguistically], being in frequent contact with the Sangos [because their territories and zones of trade adjoined each other], already knew [that is, at least some of them did] their language) and the assistants of our merchants [probably referring to all traders but especially those involved in the commercial societies devoted to the exploitation of the country in the first two decades of the twentieth century]” (Bruel, 1935: 165–166).

In the earliest years, clearly, the language was being spread, not by whites (whether officers in the service of France, white traders, or missionaries) but by Africans themselves. Some of these were indigenous peoples who had learned the new language (there was a “petit Baya” [Gbaya], “a very good interpreter”, who was used between Bossangoa and Kouki, in Gbaya territory, presumably by road [Laborie, 1945: 140]); others were foreign — some in the service of the whites, others trading on their own. For example, as early as 1895 the so-called Sarakolés in one expedition carried on their “petits marchés” with the locals (Maistre, 1895: 39). They were West Africans among all those referred to globally as “Sénégalais” in French service (Samarin, 1989: 34–39; Echenberg, 1991). Other peddlers came from the north. Thus, it was reported in 1918 that in the Ouham-Barya “circonscription” (between Kouki and Batangafo in my understanding) the Bornus, Hausas, and Saras came to “écouler leur pacotille dans les villages” (‘dump their junk in the villages’). It is important to note that they were selling goods in the villages, and not necessarily to Muslims in the service of the French agents. Nearby, around Bouca, on the Nana river a white reported that he had “excellent interpreters” in

8. Every contingent of whites and blacks had numerous boys who served as servants to both of the former. Hearing Sango all day long, they would have acquired the language in no time.

9. Rapport du 4ème trimestre [of the Colonie de l’Oubangui-Chari], 9 February 1918,” signed by Lamblin. (I failed to note the archival reference.) — Today Bornu is a state in northeastern Nigeria. The people referred to are better known as Kanuri, numbering about five million, who speak a Saharan language of the Nilo-Saharan family. The Kanuri have played an important role in internal trade.
getting information about the local peoples (“natives”) (Friedrich, 1913: 30). I should imagine that these used Sango in dealing with the local Gbaya, Manza, and possibly Banda.

A 1962 survey of the acquisition of Sango

It can therefore be incontrovertibly claimed that by the 1940s, Sango was being spoken as a second language (i.e., it had spread, to use Karan’s phrase) throughout the territory that had come to be known as Oubangui-Chari. Since then, of course, it has spread into more areas, acquiring more and more speakers. When I lived among the GbeyaSuma in the 1950s in the northwestern part of the country, I observed that all young and middle-aged men were fluent in Sango, and that monolinguals were found only among the children who had not yet been to school and the elderly. In 1962 I attempted to arrive at a more accurate estimate of bilingualism in Sango by personally interviewing in Sango or in Gbeya 255 subjects in four rural villages in the region where most of the population speak Gbaya-Manza dialects and languages. For a summation, see Table 1, and for each of the villages Tables 2–5. The average percentage of bilinguals was 66%, but when all the data are interpreted, it may be better: may have been as high as 86% (see Table 1), close to what seems to have been found in the census of 1988 (see Figure 8.1 in Karan’s work). Even in the Gbeya area, where missionary work had been carried out mostly in the ethnic language from the 1920s to 1960, the number of Gbeya-Sango bilinguals was high in 1962 (see Table 2).

As Karan speculates, the rural schools seem to have been a significant place for the acquisition of Sango. This was asserted categorically by Simon Komon (Toronto, April 2002), a native of a village near Kouki, north of Bossangoa, who told me that in 1964, whereas, when he became a pupil for the first time, neither he nor any of his classmates spoke Sango, they were all speaking it in about three months. Although entirely uninformed about matters linguistic, he opined that the languages of the CAR are so similar to Sango that everyone can learn it easily (one of his father’s wives was a Banda, and Mr. Komon spent time with relations in the Banda region), and although he did not mention the role the teacher played in their learning Sango, he did say that the teacher was of a different ethnicity from a different region of the country. School, however, is not the only place where Sango is acquired in rural areas. At Bosson, where information from 32 subjects was obtained by myself in the study cited above regarding where Sango had been learned, almost 72% said that it was right in the village. What is surprising is that eight of them were female adults, and six children aged 6 to 12. One of the eldest, her questionnaire notes, “said that everybody [in the village] spoke some time or
Table 1. Competence in Sango in four western rural villages in the Central African Republic, where Gbaya-Manza languages and dialects are spoken, 1962, with number of speakers and percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Subjects</th>
<th>Understand only</th>
<th>Speak</th>
<th>Monolingual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bofire, 58</td>
<td>N = 25 / 43.10%</td>
<td>N = 27 / 46.55%</td>
<td>N = 6 / 10.34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boforo, 95</td>
<td>N = 2 / 2.10%</td>
<td>N = 73 / 76.84%</td>
<td>N = 20 / 21.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bokoin, 57</td>
<td>N = 0 / 0%</td>
<td>N = 42 / 73.68%</td>
<td>N = 15 / 26.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosson, 45</td>
<td>N = 18 / 40.00%</td>
<td>N = 27 / 60.00%</td>
<td>N = 0 / 0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numbers, 255</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean percentages</td>
<td>17.65%</td>
<td>66.27%</td>
<td>16.08%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the category “Understand Only” are those who themselves claimed ability to understand only, saying the verb ‘to hear’ in either Sango or the village (ethnic) language. I suspect, however, that when not intimidated by the situation, many of these — excluding the very young and the very old (only two elderly women among the subjects, all the others children) — could indeed converse in Sango.

The variable of age was established somewhat differently in the four villages, depending on the circumstances. To the category “Monolingual” were assigned those who appeared able neither to understand nor to speak Sango, the judgment being my own, based on all the information at my disposal: my own observations, the statements of the subjects, and the statements of bystanders. Because most of the alleged monolinguals were found among children in only two of the villages, I suspect that the average percentage is lower than sixteen. By deleting 10.00% from the categories of “Understand Only and Monolingual”, the average percentage of those able to interact in Sango is at around 86.00%, not at all unreasonable, based on my own experience in rural areas in this region.

Table 2. Competence in Sango in the rural Gbeya village of Bosson, District (now Sous-Préfect) of Bossangoa, 350 kms from Bangui 1962.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N of Subjects</th>
<th>Understand only</th>
<th>Speak</th>
<th>Read</th>
<th>Write</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adult women, 12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult men, 16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent girls, 4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent boys, 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children, 9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals, 45</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentages</td>
<td>40.00%</td>
<td>60.00%</td>
<td>13.33%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Every inhabitant of the village present at the time, a little over 35 km from Bossangoa, was interviewed. Most were Protestant, but the closest chapel was a Catholic one. Some of those who claimed only to understand are probably speakers also. Notice that there are no monolinguals.

other [in Sango].” And another female adult informed me that she had learned Sango (presumably as a child) by asking her siblings and cousins in Gbeya what they had just said in Sango.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N of Subjects</th>
<th>Understand</th>
<th>Speak</th>
<th>Monolingual</th>
<th>Read</th>
<th>Write</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married women, 14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married men, 14</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls, 5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys, 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children, 13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young children, 10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals, 58</strong></td>
<td><strong>25</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentages</strong></td>
<td><strong>43.10%</strong></td>
<td><strong>46.56%</strong></td>
<td><strong>10.34%</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The village of Bofire is located on the main automobile road from Bossangoa to the northwest about 38 km before it gets to Boguira, where was located a mission hospital (with missionaries and Central African employees from other regions), a few shops, and a small market — therefore an interethnic microcosm of an urban center, but it had become this less than ten years previously. The “young children” are those who were learning to speak; in other words, they were learning Suma and Sango at the same time. (Gbeya and Suma resemble each other so much that they might be considered dialects with significant differences or as different languages.) My notes do not explain the absence of figures in the “Monolingual” cells except for ‘children.’ Perhaps all the others were accounted for.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N of Subjects</th>
<th>Understand</th>
<th>Speak</th>
<th>Monolingual</th>
<th>Read</th>
<th>Write</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married women, 28</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married men, 23</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls, 7</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys, 3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children, 25</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young children, 9</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals, 95</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>73</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentages</strong></td>
<td><strong>2.11%</strong></td>
<td><strong>76.84%</strong></td>
<td><strong>21.05%</strong></td>
<td><strong>0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This village, either a Gbaya or Banda one (or mixed), is about 20 km from the Bible school of the Brethren Mission at Bata and about 12 km from Bozoum on the road westward to Bouar. The two married women who did not know Sango were old. The interviewing was done in Sango. The high percentage of bilinguals may be accounted for by the relatively short distance to the daily open market at Bozoum and the opportunity to sell produce to the missionaries and students at the Bible school. The number of monolinguals among the two groups of children (especially the young children) is unusual — in fact, not credible. Some of these surely came on errands for the adults to the Bible school. Some of the eighteen monolingual children may have identified me with the missionaries, with whom relations over the preceding two decades (since the school’s foundation) had been acrimonious. When the young children are excluded the 86 other subjects prove to be bilingual at 90.52%, a more credible figure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>N of Subjects</th>
<th>Understand only</th>
<th>Speak</th>
<th>Monolingual</th>
<th>Read</th>
<th>Write</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Older women, 2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married women, 30</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls, 5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children, 20</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals, 57</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Percentages 0% 73.68% 26.32% 3.50% 0%

The village is about 38 km from Bossembele and 18 km from the principal road that goes to Bouar from Bangui. The language belongs to the Gbaya-Manza group but is mutually unintelligible with some other Gbaya dialects. This region has supplied Bangui with manioc, sold to truck drivers on the roadside, in partially prepared form in standardized baskets for many years. The interviews were done in Sango. The surprisingly high percentage of monolinguals among children is unexpected, but, unfortunately, I did not distinguish young children from the others. (Compare the surprising number of monolinguals among children at the village of Boforo, Table 4.) Nothing in my notes explains the absence of boys.

The sentence repetition test of proficiency in Sango

What Karan’s study really seems to be is an exercise in the use of a sentence repetition test (SRT) to determine the grade of competence (pp. 61, 64; but also called “proficiency” on p. 33, and “bilingualism in Sango” on p. 64) in a second language. Described in brief, the test consists of evaluating the ability of subjects to repeat a series of allegedly increasingly complex sentences (pp. 33, 37), based on procedures outlined by Radloff (1991) and Wetherill (1992) (p. 48). For whatever purpose it might be used, all depends, of course, on whether or not such a test has been demonstrated to be valid.

The second critical factor is the selection of the sentences. As to the use of memory in testing linguistic competence, Karan has little to say: he provides only bibliographical notations on a few publications, all of which are in favor of it, none of them, however, identified as dealing with second language acquisition (pp. 34–35). One would therefore have expected Karan to use this study as an argument in defence of the SRT; instead, one only infers this from the correlation allegedly established between the SRT and another means of evaluation: the Reported Proficiency Evaluation (RPE), which “is an estimation of proficiency in a language where subjects are evaluated by educated, mother tongue speakers of that language who are in regular contact [elsewhere “daily”] with those being evaluated” (p. 38; also p. 56). This independent evaluation is based on reports from seven educated speakers, “mostly” high school teachers who evaluated “about” five of their acquaintances in the town of Bossangoa (p. 39, curiously imprecise and no information is provided about the thirty-five subjects) with respect to accent, grammar, and vocabulary. Their ability to repeat accurately was tested with forty-
five sentences, some “extracted from recorded samples of speech” from a larger corpus and others created for the test (p. 37). It would appear that they are the sentences (but only forty in number) in Appendix 1 “Interlinear texts,” because fifteen of them are found in the final test (Appendix 4). Karan says that they sounded “natural” to educated mother tongue speakers of Sango (meaning “typical of the vernacular”?), who highly value good language skills and understand well the concept of naturalness (pp. 37–38).¹⁰ (What would an unnatural, as opposed to an ungrammatical, sentence be? And if most or all of the subjects for the test were to be found in rural areas, one would have expected the test sentences to be chosen from samples of their speech. These could have been found in Samarin 1963 and 1967 [from the year 1962] as well as 1966 — or new recordings could have been made).¹¹ This, in my opinion, is an unarguable assertion and, to the best of my knowledge, inconsistent with what I know about the sociolinguistics of Sango (on this point, see also below).

Karan claims to have found a coefficient of correlation between the RPE and the SRT results for the preliminary tests — those who were reported to be good speakers of Sango also got the best scores (pp. 54–56). However, since no RPE correlations were made in the final study of speakers of all sorts (see below), I see no reason for assuming a correlation in the latter. For me, the validity of the SRT test remains problematic.

Because the short list of test sentences (provided as an appendix but without translations and without explanation of the diacritics for tone — bâ for high, bã for mid, and ba for low) are said to been judged “natural” by Karan’s co-workers, one must conclude that they are of the kind that one can easily find in everyday speech among most speakers of Sango in most domains and in most contexts. But this is not so: these sentences have been taken, I believe, from the speech of an educated minority of Bangui and recorded for the test by one of these, whose speech might have been identified as urban. (On a covert urban model of Sango, see Samarin, 1994a.) There are at least two reasons for my conclusion:

1. The first is that most of the sentences are characterized by unusual features of vocabulary and grammar. A critique of the test sentences is not presented here for want of space, and for the fact that it would not be of interest to the general

¹⁰. I doubt that his assistants had these qualities. Moreover, although such individuals must exist in the population, identifying them would be no simple task. Nothing written by educated Central Africans in Sango strikes me as being in the “natural” vernacular.

¹¹. After giving a lecture about my research on change in Sango to a group of linguistically trained Central Africans at the University of Bangui in 1988, I was told that the variable replacement of the preposition tî by a high tone (R for ‘rising’) was a “mistake” made by children: e.g., li tî mbî > li R mbî (head of 1sg. prn.) ‘my head.’
reader. Yet, the artificiality of some of the sentences can be illustrated by the very first one, “Today Mom cooked *koko* and meat” in my translation. Why were adults required to repeat a sentence typical of the speech of children? Moreover, the use of the word *mamâ* reveals the influence of French *maman*: in my corpus of children’s speech in Bangui this kin term is always followed by a possessive, such as *tî mbî ‘my* (of 1sg. prn.). Moreover, the word *koko*, the leaf of a wild plant of the tropical forest in the southwest of the country (*Gnetum africanum*, Bouquiaux et al., 1978), cooked green and finely sliced, is possibly not known at all in remote parts of the savannah. Should not the first sentence have been absolutely simple?

2. The second reason is that there are no contractions. In the natural speech of inhabitants of Bangui one expects a great deal (Samarin, 1997). One of the words, with its nonobligatory prefix *a-*, is *yeke*, the copula: thus, *aeko, ake, ae, aa, ay*, and so forth. Its literary form has been and continues to be *ayeke*, as in sentence 2 in Karan’s book (p. 139), which must be judged literary.

Another characteristic of these sentences is that they contain no words of French origin, and this in spite of their common use. Many borrowings from French have been fully integrated in the language for decades: e.g., the only way to say ‘push (v.)’ is *pusu* from French *pousse*. Karan claims, however, that the use of such words is stigmatized, adding, “especially in Bangui and among the elite.” (For remarks on the 473 French words that occurred in my 1962 corpus that consisted of 36,572 words — or 33,743, depending on the count —, see Samarin, 1967: 258–259; for a more detailed analysis, see Taber, 1964 and 1979). That Karan’s colleagues claimed to disfavor their use is contradicted by my observations of actual practice and the analysis of a good sample of the speech of young people in Bangui. In any case,

12. A number of years ago I claimed that “there is no doubt ... that a sample [of Sango speech] (a) with certain French words or (b) with code switching between Sango and French or (c) with French words closer in pronunciation to correct French than earlier loans would be identified [by speakers in a test] with Bangui” (Samarin, 1994a: 178; not cited by Karan). — The view of a French researcher was that speaking Sango mixed with French indicated that one was educated (“lettré” or intellectual [Wenezou-Dechamps, 1987: 6; “élite” in Wald, 1994: 117]), but that one knew how to remain simple (Wenezou-Dechamps, 1990). Students, it has been reported, were indeed sensitive to mixing French into their Sango: 53.98% were not at all happy with their Sango, and 82.30% said that they only rarely or never speak Sango without using a French word (Wenezou-Dechamps, 1987: 5). The number of students who used both French and Sango (interchangeably or mixed, it is not clear) with their friends in 1975 was 44.94%, in 1985 54.38% (Wenezou, 1986). And there are several studies on the use of French in addition to those cited by him: e.g., Joyce & Samarin, 1997 (age/education and gender are not significant factors in predicting the use of standard French pronunciations of loanwords); Samarin & Walker, 1992 (the incidence of French words increases with education and the more educated a speaker is, the
since French borrowings are so characteristic of the language, even when spoken by those deep in rural areas, why were they avoided? The reason, I think, is that his Central African colleagues had made a judgment as to what constituted “natural” Sango.

And how can the vocabulary of Sango be “difficult” when in my corpus of 1962 from several places in the country there were only 475 of African origin? (The words and their frequencies are given in Samarin, 1967.) This is what I suspect is the average number of word-types in everyday use; 1,000 perhaps over a longer period of time and in special domains. A maximum of 1,500–2,000 word-types is quite probable and not unusual for pidgins. (For more on the vocabulary of Sango, see Samarin, 2000b.)

The egregious example of the ersatz nature of the test sentences is the use of ata sô in sentence 11 (p. 140) with the meaning ‘même si’ (‘even if’). The problem with the expression is not that ata (or atâa) is a borrowing from Lingala, for there are several Sango words from this language (Guthrie, 1951: ‘quoique, même si’), some from its pidginized predecessor. The problem is that it is a recent introduction, I assume, on the part of the élite to replace the French word même which had been used with this meaning: e.g., même lo gâ làsô (even if he/she come today) ‘even if he/she should come today …’ for the more indigenous and common form lo gâ làsô, mbi ke gwe na lo (1sg. prn. cop go prep 3sg. prn.) ‘if he/she comes today, I’ll go with her/him’, overall pitch on the first clause making it dependent — or preceded by tongana ‘if, when.’ The word is not found in my corpora nor in Bouquiaux et al. (1978). As might be expected, however, it is found in the Summer Institute of Linguistics’ dictionary of 1990 and that of Diki-Kidiri (1998). (The first time I heard it was in conversation in Sango with the latter in 1994.) A borrowing is understandable, even when it is being forced on the Sango language, but what justification is there in Karan’s sentence for the second word, sô, not used by Diki-Kidiri but, significantly for a textual critic, by Summer Institute of Linguistics [SIL] (1990): in the latter its meaning is ‘even though, although,’ as opposed to the simple atâa, defined as ‘même, même si’ (= ‘even if’). I know of no justification for this locution, and I believe that this entry is invalid, and constitutes a typical example of speakers making a semantic distinction where none exists in the language.

more French-like are the words); Thornell, 1997 (reviewed in Samarin, 1999); Dechamps-Wenezou & Gerbault, 1988; Wenezou-Dechamps, 1986, 1987. (An example of the latter’s “franc-sango” is my own recording of arranger problèm sô entre ï ae [a-yeke] bien (arrange problem this [Sango] between 1pl. prn. subjmcopula [Sango] well) ‘settling this problem between us is good’ (with Sango words identified) from a sixteen-year-old native speaker of Sango (not knowing any other Central African language), a student in collège, his eleventh year of schooling.) On code mixing and code switching in Bouar, see Wald (1990) and (1994), and others for which full information is not available.
We should take advantage of this occasion to observe the way the base language of a pidgin and the status of its speakers jointly affect a pidgin. The word sô has several homophones in Ngbandi, but whose functions have not yet been adequately described. An attempt was therefore made to gain some understanding of its use. For this study, eighty-nine citations were extracted from Lekens’ dictionary of Ngbandi (1958). In this work each example is translated both literally and freely in Flemish. The latter were translated for me into English by four persons; three of them had Dutch/Flemish as their primary and dominant language. The original citations were also translated by a Central African native speaker of Yakoma, a Central African variety of Ngbandi, into French as well as Sango. The meanings arrived at were the following: ‘there’ (là / daar; ainsi, de cette façon, comme ça / zo, aldus) (as in sentence 10, ‘He/she is still very much of a child, that’s why he/she does foolish things’), ‘while’ (pendant que / terwijl, onderwijl, sedert, als), ‘otherwise, since’ (autrement, sinon, car / anders, want).

It is more than incidentally interesting that the creation of ata sô is a modern instance of pidginization in Sango, because we are justified in assuming that a number of persons were involved in repairing Sango for its lack of a subordinator meaning ‘even though’ combining a word from another language with one from Ngbandi: ‘Kossi’s child is taller than Befio’s, even though they are of the same age’ (literally, child of Kossi subj-m-copula subj-m-pass 3sg. prn. of Befio, ata sô year of 3pl. prn.subj-m-be equal body). And this creation is probably motivated by the original meanings of sô and the analogy with other neologisms in pidginization: such as tonga sô ‘thus, like this’ and fadë sô ‘now.’ The compression of Sango’s disjunctive discourse into sentences with French-like subordinators is a characteristic of linguistically self-conscious Central Africans. A person translating the English sentence and its equivalent in French must first decide whether or not the concept of ‘even though’ is important enough to make it explicit in Sango.

The word (or words) sô and a few others have become popular in Bangui, I believe, because of the high profile of the Yakomas during the fifteen-year tenure of political power, and are frequently more expressive than lexical or grammatical in function: a demonstration that one is ‘hip, with it.’ This phenomenon of style (in one of its senses) is illustrated also in the way future time is marked in Sango (Samarin, 2001b).

If we can cite the modern transfers (borrowings) from Yakoma as change in Sango, the case of Sango should illustrate again the way “character” and “image” figure in the dynamics of language change (for Tok Pisin, see Kulick, 1992, reviewed in Samarin, 1994b). One of the interesting aspects of the Sango case is that

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13 I am grateful to Liesbeth Danneels-Yperman, Stefan Elders, Ger Reesink, and, Terrence Schram for their help in translating the Flemish.
although Yakoma young people confess to speaking a superficial variety of their traditional language, not a profound (deep) variety of it (Wald, 1990, 1994), they decorate their Sango with a few common Yakoma words.

Since for the longer and more complex sentences a “diversity of different grammatical structures” consisting of dependent and embedded clauses was desired, and since a “less common vocabulary” was a criterion of a “difficult” sentence (p. 37), Karan should have defended the notions of complexity and difficulty from a linguistic point of view. He cites no publications that demonstrate the difficulty of acquiring dependent and embedded clauses in either first-language or second-language acquisition. And there should have been an exegesis and commentary on the sentences themselves to reveal the alleged increasing complexity and difficulty. Myself, I do not find these sentences at all challenging except for words and constructions that might be used by the linguistic elite of Bangui (and I find some of them downright bizarre).

Some of the weakness of Karan’s preoccupation with the sentence is revealed in the instructions he gave to the test administrators. They were to inform each subject that after the first two practice sentences there would be others to repeat, and that these sentences would get longer and more difficult (p. 57). One is puzzled. Since there is no word for sentence in Sango, what word was used? If it were the French phrase, how would the uneducated subjects understand it? And even explaining the concepts “longer” and “more difficult” for something as abstract as language is a challenge in Sango. Every assistant undoubtedly had his or her way of communicating these ideas, destroying any possibility of a standard test.

Construction of the testing instrument

Any study of Sango that is based on or influenced by the beliefs and intuitions of the Central African elite, especially that relatively small group of persons whose linguistic sensibilities have been aroused by some education in linguistics, will most certainly be vitiated. Undisciplined by the rigors of research on a vernacular and not — or not sufficiently — aware of the vertiginous amount of variability in contemporary urban Sango, Central Africans should not be relied on for a “natural” corpus of Sango or judgments about the same. There is no justification for the belief that mother-tongue (native) speakers of Sango in Bangui are the best judges of what is natural or good Sango. Rather than having a perspicacious sensibility to the vernacular, this elite is advancing the notion of a “standard Sango” with a prescriptive grammar. Mr. Diki-Kidiri, for example, had workshops in Bangui in 1983 and 1985 to train radio broadcasters to improve their Sango (personal communication, Cologne, September 1992). As a result, he reports (DikiKidiri, 1994:
29), “Central African radio-television is considered as one of the places where the best and most modern Sango is spoken” ("la radiotélévision centrafricaine est considérée comme l’un des lieux où le sango est le meilleur et le plus moderne"), a statement contradicted by persons interviewed in rural areas for Bangu’s Radio Rural. Furthermore, Karan did not compare the judgments of his own educated (and, in my opinion, avant-gardist) judges with others who could not claim to be such speakers.

Administration of the test

The least credible part of the research is the design and administration of the final SRT. Here are a few comments:

1. Although 706 subjects were tested, nothing is said about them — nothing, not even where they were tested, and the rural preliminary sites are not fully identified.
2. It would seem also that no attempt was made to test a sample of the immigrant population, mostly Muslims, of whom there are tens of thousands, a large part of whom live in Bangui.
3. One also wonders whether Karan’s subjects were interviewed in private or with bystanders around.
4. Although the tests were administered by members of the “SIL regional survey team” (p. 56), we are not told who they were — whether white expatriates or (more likely) Central Africans.
5. A discussion about the way scores differed between the test administrators would have been appreciated. (I found that for the same simple test with respect to Gbeya ideophones, the results I got were quite different from those of my Gbeya assistant [Samarin, 1971].) There must have been quite a bit of variation, given the subjective nature of the testers’ judgments, who were asked to discriminate any deviation from the tape-recorded sentences with respect to “omissions, order changes, added word or phrase, wrong word substituted, a mangled word, repetition of a word or phrase, a correction, or restart” (p. 58). What, for instance, is a “mangled word” and how was it expressed in French in training the assistants? Would some of them have considered a contracted word like mbrâmbrâ in repetition of sentence 14 a mangled word? Obtaining more than random scores from a team of interviewers in these circumstances was, in my opinion, somewhat Quixotic, because the test administrators would

14. For more on this elite and what I call their contrived Sango, see Samarin (2000a).
have to keep all these constraints in mind impartially (considering an error of each category of equal value) while evaluating an utterance immediately after it was given, not from a tape-recording.

A perfect repetition received three points, one with one “mistake” two points, one with two mistakes one point, one with three or more mistakes no points (p. 58), no matter the seriousness of the errors from a linguistic point of view, because, writes Karan, “what really counts in SRTs is not a verbatim, error free, repetition of the sentence, but rather repetition of the sentences with only one or two errors per sentence” (p. 49).

A careful study of this work leaves me incredulous: its conclusion is unfounded — it does not demonstrate that if a subject performs poorly on the SRT, he or she “has less of a grasp of Sango” (p. 66). A poor performance can be explained by other factors. I should believe that young people do better in the test than older people; and educated persons better than the uneducated, possibly because they are more familiar with Bangui speech, and are also more at ease in a test situation. In the latter case, for example, experience in having to take *dictée* in French taught them to memorize quickly.

**Social correlates of the alleged proficiency in Sango**

As might have been expected, Karan seeks to establish with regression analysis the nonlinguistic correlates of the scores, of which there are twelve (p. 64). Of these he found that (a) age, (b) having spent some time of their life in Bangui (69), and (c) education (pp. 72, 83) were important factors in predicting competence in Sango, that is, “have a large effect on Sango competency” (pp. 65, 66, 95). The highest scores occur in the second decade (i.e., in the 20s). As for residence, the “subjects’ place of actual residence is a strong factor in predicting SRT results.” This is seen in the fact that the means SRT score for those living in Bangui is over 33, for other “urban areas”(most of which are just administrative towns) is 28, for those living in rural areas 24 (pp. 69, 70). A “rural area” is not defined (the so-called “urban areas” outside Bangui are in rural areas), and one would like to know if the subjects were tested in their rural villages. If so, how far from urban centers? And was there a school in or near the village? As with age, Karan concludes that Sango is “spreading out from the main urban area, Bangui, to the other urban areas, and then to the rural areas” (p. 69). Since this phenomenon has been found in other investigations of language spread, it would not be surprising if this were true for Sango, at least in recent years, but this is not a fact that is demonstrated by Karan’s study. In any case, as my own research on the spread of Sango from its inception...
to the 1950s reveals, it was spread first by colonialism: for example, by the military occupation of the territory and the use of porters and forced labor from the indigenous populations.

My own conclusion, I repeat, is that Karan’s study reveals, at best, that the scores are correlated with the ability to take a test. Consider my own experience, nowhere else reported. I found in testing a group of Gbeya men who were literate in Sango as to whether a list of ideophones had high or low tones (and Gbeya ideophones have only either one or the other regardless of length) that the best scores were those of the few who had had some public school education as children. In other words, the others, despite a Bible school education in Sango as adults, were less able to take a test. It is therefore surprising that Karan is puzzled by the fact that schooling correlates highly with SRT results (p. 74)

Karan’s is no sophisticated study of language spread; even published works have not been wisely used — e.g., he might have availed himself of Diki-Kidiri (1981) and compared the case of Sango with that of Wolof (Wioland, 1993). Moreover, Karan does not seem to have learned much more from his research. In the first place, there is no final argument in favor of the SRT, and except for an occasional remark, there is no critical analysis of his own data. For example, since the test sentences were supposed to have been listed in increasing order of difficulty (and the subjects were so informed), one would have expected the best scores at the beginning, the worst at the end. Was it not assumed that most subjects would have done badly with sentence 14? — ge tî guengö na kötä légë ayo aliŋbi ndurü na kilometre balë mbârâmbârâ na ndö nî mbârâmbârâ (here of going prep big road, subj-be long subj-be equal near top det prep kilometer ten seven prep det seven) ‘Going from here to the automobile road is about seventy-seven kilometers’ (ignoring the syntactic anomaly of ge tî guengö ‘here to go’). What, then, were the scores for this sentence? And what patterns of correlation were established between the scores and independent variables?

In the second place, Karan’s study lacks information that could easily have been obtained and correlated with his scores: self-evaluation on the part of all subjects on a scale of very good, good, fairly good, and not good, easily expressed in Sango nzônî mîngi, nzônî, nzônî kêtê ‘little good’, nzônî âpe ‘not good.’
References

Bouquiaux, L., M.


Wenezouï, M. See Dechamps-Wenezouï above.