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Language in the colonization of Central Africa, 1880-1900

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In the colonization of central Africa along the Congo (Zaire) and Ubangi rivers in the last two decades of the nineteenth century whites recruited workers irrespective of the problems that would arise from their ignorance of European languages and of the problems they would have in communicating with each other. If a potential worker knew some English, French, or Portuguese, as was frequently true of those recruited on the west coast, it was to his advantage; he got a better position and was paid more. (Linguistic competence was not, of course, rewarded for its own sake. What counted was the work that the African could do, the role he could play.) ^{The bilingual} He naturally was more valuable to whites than someone who knew only his own or some other African language. But the linguistic factor, it must be emphasized, was never a deciding one in a person's being hired for general work. There is no evidence whatsoever that restricted linguistic competence ever put an African at a disadvantage in recruitment. All that mattered was a person's willingness to work under the contract set by the white recruiting agent.

Whites obviously believed that communication sufficient for the basic needs could be effected in one way or another. Every record of caravan trips from the coast to Stanley Pool (Malebo) and every appointment of a white to a position of leadership and responsibility soon after arrival in Africa is evidence of this fact. There was no "breaking-in" period for Belgian or French officials, for example. (Some whites, of course, sought to familiarize themselves with

Congolese languages through vocabularies that slowly became available, frequently on the ocean voyage to Africa.) ^{whites} They assumed responsibility as soon as they arrived in the field, wherever that might be. A survey of the biographies of a number of Belgian officers who went to the Ubangi region in 1892, for example, reveals that in many cases only two months had elapsed from the time they left Belgium to the time they took on duties in the field (Samarin 1982). ~~In the case of Jules Flamme, who assumed responsibility for a company of Bangala soldiers at Nouvells Anvers (Mankanza) on January 1, 1900, this period of time was reduced to one and a half months (Flamme 1908:51).~~ These officers would have had to learn the lingua franca of the Force Publique, Bangala (now called Lingala), as well as to learn how to communicate with various ethnic groups in the area.

Because whites in the 1880s and 1890s were moving about too frequently, because they were coming into contact with a wide variety of languages, and because they were overcome by a host of daily tasks, they could not acquire fluency in any of the indigenous (that is, ethnic) languages. In this generalization a number of differences are slighted over. Traders and missionaries, for example, may have stayed in one place longer than officers and representatives of the governments. And the similarities between all of the Bantu languages would have simplified learning something of a second or third after having learned one. Nonetheless, by and large whites in central Africa, excepting Protestant missionaries perhaps, did not concern themselves with the vernaculars if they could use the lingua francas. The Protestant commitment to the vernaculars is illustrated in ^{George} Grenfell's comment about language study at Lukolela: "Till the language is mastered (more than a mere colloquial acquaintance is necessary) not much real work can be done. It is impossible in a country like this to get interpreters who are able to do more than talk about the simplest every-day things, and then but very imperfectly" (Missionary Herald 1888:469).

What whites could not do, their workers, many of them from distant lands, accomplished.

They were, after all, the ones who came in closest contact with the indigenous populations, and it was they who executed the will of the whites. This African intermediary could be anyone, but anyone (1) who shared a language with the white, (2) who enjoyed a certain amount of trust, and (3) who could be presented to others as representing the white. A soldier was eminently qualified for this role, but it could just as well be, and very frequently was, the white's personal servant. Known as boy in colonial parlance, he usually was indeed a child, less than an adolescent (Picard 1896:160). ~~(Intermediaries are discussed in Samarin 1984.)~~

Whites gave the orders, blacks did the work. Out of this work — in this work context — emerged the lingua francas that are today known as Kituba (or Munukutuba), Lingala, and Sango. They were new languages, created by Africans working together; so they were among the first of Africa's work languages.

Colonial competence

Competence in the use of African languages was variable among whites. Some applied themselves to acquiring enough to baragouiner their way through palavers, whereas others depended heavily on their interpreters. The impression they liked to leave with their fellow countrymen in Europe was that they got along very well. Coquilhat was one of these. In his memoirs, writing of the time when he recruited the first Bangala workers, he said: "... j'appris à parler couramment la langue, ce qui augmenta considérablement ma popularité et me donna la faculté de me mettre directement en rapports avec les personnes que je désirais entretenir. Dès ce moment, je connus tout ce qui se passait" (Coquilhat 1888:513). What makes us doubt his assertion is that he attributes great fluency to himself at a time when he had not been in the area for long enough to have mastered even a modest conversational knowledge. Besides, he was, by his own statements, also learning Swahili, Kiteke, and Kilolo at the same time. ~~(We deduce from what he says that this Bangala language is different from Lobangi.)~~ This is

really too much to believe.

Whites in general could make proud claims about their linguistic competence, because they had very low opinions of African languages and a limited view of what communication in African languages amounted to. To start with, they made a distinction between speaking and understanding blacks. The latter was especially difficult if not incomprehensible, because it was such a "langue personnelle et presque incompréhensible dont usent les indigènes entre eux" observed one and because blacks deliberately altered their speech out of mistrust for whites, observed another (La Belgique Coloniale 1896:292; Picard 1896:160). Speaking was easier because of the restricted vocabulary. Dr. Cureau, observing that the most complete dictionaries had about 500 words, attributed to African languages about 2,500 to 3,000 "idées distinctes" including all those words that one could derive by affixation (Cureau 1912:82). Another estimate was even lower. Because of the Africans' limited needs and rudimentary sentiments, many whites believed, 300 words was more than necessary in communicating with Africans (Vauthier 1900:214). Whatever they thought the total vocabulary of Africans might be, whites certainly were satisfied with a minimal one in accomplishing what they wanted. With three little vocabularies in the languages of the Upper Congo, one person declared, a voyager had all the indispensable elements for making himself understood by natives (Chapaux 1894:569). Linguistic helps put together in the nineteenth century consisted of lists of words, occasionally with phrases that a person might find useful. Whites must have thought that the languages had no grammar, or that the grammar was revealed in the way they, the whites, put words together. In any case, it was true as late as 1925 that whites, with the exception of missionaries, as one observer remarked, were still learning African words but not African grammar (Torday 1925:198).

Whites would not have devoted themselves with any seriousness to the acquisition of vernaculars, because there quickly emerged three lingua francas that permitted them to have

contact with a certain number of the indigenous peoples: varieties of Kikongo, Bangala, and Sango. Because these were new languages, they would have had to be learned by the indigenous peoples; but because they were based on indigenous languages and were greatly simplified, they were not difficult to acquire.

The role of French

The role of European languages in the period with which we are concerned was very limited. On the west coast some Africans had acquired a certain proficiency in Portuguese, English, or French, a fact that made them very useful to whites. Some of these persons were quite young. It was reported, for example, that at Buanza, in the Lower Congo, there were children of 10 years who had been employed as errand-boys (commissionnaires) at Portuguese, English, and French trading posts who spoke these three languages "easily" (Sand 1895:22). These multilinguals could serve as at least the first link in the communication chain whites had to establish with indigenous peoples. They were precious to whites, but they were few. However, they were not needed in large numbers during the period when whites were getting settled in central Africa. Although they were useful in any number, in many situations only one was sufficient.

Schools, operated by missions, were conducted both in French and in some African language. There seems to have been a difference between what took place in the French Congo and what came to be the Belgian Congo. At French missions on the coast French was used (and even Portuguese) (Sand 1895:22). On the Ubangi River, at Sainte Famille some French was taught. According to one observer in 1900 the children at the mission had learned enough to act as interpreters with the local natives; according to another in 1905 children were learning "a little" French (Chapiseau 1900:192; Challaye 1909:73). Although there is not much information about what actually happened in French mission schools, we certainly know the

attitude of the Apostolic Vicar of the Ubangi, Mgr. Prosper Augouard. For him the two "essential colonial ideas" were the creation of indigenous labor and the diffusion of the French language, a sentiment that was repeated by the explorer Jean Dybowski, by whom work was defined as culture du sol. For Mgr. Augouard the teaching of French was the principal, indeed, the only way of winning Africans over to whites (De Witte 1924:299; Dybowski 1912, cited in De Witte 1924:43; cf Bobichon 1912:22). The missionary attitude was this: "Les enfants nous sont envoyés pour que nous leur apprenions à aimer la France et à en parler la langue" (Bulletin de la Congrégation [CSEI 1902:706]). This policy was different from that of the first superior of the Holy Spirit Congregation, who conceded that natives would have to be taught in their own crude (grossier) speech, since their lack of education made a more elevated language incomprehensible to them (Eschbach 1874:164).

The Belgian policy favored the use of African languages. This was observed by one writer, who supported this remark by adding that whereas not one civil servant spoke a native language in Brazzaville around 1900, in the Belgian Congo "tous les Blancs parlent une langue indigène jusqu'à un certain point" (Torday 1925:201). Even though we can consider the statement as being exaggerated and inaccurate to some degree, it probably suggests a fundamental difference in linguistic practice and policy in the two colonies. I am inclined to believe that the little this writer had observed of the Free State was of whites using Bangala and vehicular Kikongo. This is seen in the statement that for some whites "il suffit d'un vocabulaire restreint, une sorte de sahir commercial, pour entrer en relations avec les indigènes," the reason being that blacks have limited needs (Vauthier 1900:214). At Catholic missions French was not apparently an important part of the program of schooling. The one ^{Nouvelle Anvers} at Bangala, for example, was well endowed but as late as 1899 the languages that were taught were "celles des Bangala et des Babangi [sic]" (Thonner 1899:17-18). ~~was not spoken at Mpombu, where the mission was located, nor in the villages inland of the river. On the other hand, he~~

had a low opinion of the river language (that is lingua franca Bangala), which he did not consider a true language. (With respect to what was said above about whites and vernacular languages, we can note that in this remark about "real Bangala," Fr. De Boeck observed that "Les blancs ne s'y fatiguent pas..." This was in 1902.) (Van den Bergh 1955:6).

Language policy under the Belgians is a subject that requires a great deal of study. One view at the moment is that "Belgian Catholic missionaries were strongly opposed to the use of French or any other modern European language by Africans" (Yates 1980:262). It is argued that Africans were prevented from learning French in order that missionaries might be able to keep better control over them. Similarly, it is argued by another that in Katanga, at any rate, French was carefully rationed for Africans and Swahili was encouraged as "an effective, protective barrier against free communication [between blacks and whites]" (Fabian 1986:136). Although future work might require a revision of some aspects of these interpretations of the history of Belgian Congo, we are obliged to grant that French did not have an important role in the education that Congolese were getting in the Force Publique and in mission schools.

That whites, including missionaries, were not all agreed about language policy will be seen in the following statement by the pioneer missionary, George Grenfell, of the Baptist Missionary Society. In 1895, ~~in response to a letter from J. S. Dennis, who was writing on Christian missions and social progress,~~ Grenfell had this to say:

In addition to developing the self-reliance and resourcefulness of a more or less skilled body of artisans, the missionaries, by teaching them a civilized language and bringing them into contact with the literature and civilization of the world, have placed them in a position of great advantage, as compared with those among whom mission work has been carried on exclusively in the language of the country. From a distinctly religious point of view, it may be debateable

as to whether it is advantageous or not to teach a new language, but from a social point of view the gain is very distinct. ...

Where the native tongue is alone the vehicle for instruction and communication, the maintenance of the old trading monopolies of the head men, of the wide-embracing institution of slavery, and the despotic cruelty of the chiefs, is secured for a much longer period than is possible where the people are enlightened through the medium of a civilized language, and thereby enabled to realize that they constitute part of the civilized world (Hawker 1909:389-390).

Summary

In communicating with their workers whites at first used coastal Africans who had acquired some proficiency in one or more of the European languages. Outside of these few intermediaries, most of whom were themselves workers of one sort or another, workers were not put together into workforces on the basis of linguistic skills. The personnel of expeditions and of stations were ethnolinguistically very diverse. Whites in general, missionaries excepted, did not seem to become competent in indigenous languages and favored the lingua francas that emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century. These new languages emerged out of the communication that was effected by expatriate blacks with indigenous peoples on the Congo and Ubangi rivers. Although they were called trade languages by whites, it was the total work context that led to their birth. As indigenous peoples learned these languages, whites had contact with them, either directly or through their bilingual underlings, in these languages. Work was supervised and skills taught by these work bosses (kapitas). Two of the lingua francas, Bangala and Sango, became the principal languages of the militias. The colonial language, French, played a less important role, and less for the Free State than for the French Congo.