‘Official Language’: the Case of Lingala

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1. *Introduction*

The history of Lingala, one of the dominant lingua francas of Zaire, illustrates the way a number of different forces interact in the life of a language in a modern political state. Although its history parallels in some ways that of other national languages of the world, it stands apart in one important respect. This is best stated in the negative: It does not owe its existence to a particular natural speech community whose language was adopted by others as a second language. If this had been the case, its history would parallel in at least one respect, for example, that of Hindi. What assigns Lingala to a different type of language is that its speakers came into existence at the same time that it became a linguistic reality. The language and the speech community evolved together. In this respect Lingala's history is similar to that of some other new languages in the era of colonialism — those that emerged as pidgins, e. g. Sango in the Central African Republic and Tok Pisin in Papua New Guinea.

The fact that Lingala arose in a colonial context is of capital importance, and no full account of its history is adequate unless it looks at all the facets of colonization. Such a history will describe what whites, along with their African auxiliaries, were doing and also how the indigenous peoples responded to the presence and activities of these foreigners.

This complex history is adumbrated in the present study by the examination of Protestant mission work. What we see is that although Protestants

came to the Congo with a fairly explicit linguistic policy, they adapted themselves on the one hand to a changing linguistic environment and, on the other hand, to colonialist schemes for the development of the colony. Protestant linguistic history is not, however, important in itself (unless one were studying mission activities for their own sake). It is certainly no more important than that of Catholic missions. It is worthy of consideration both because it is part of Zairian history and because it contributes to the study of all standardized language histories.

2. *Origins*

The history of Lingala is reflected in the names it has been known by. In the nineteenth century it was called Bangala, being associated in the minds of whites with the so-called Bangala people of the Middle Congo, who were being recruited into the workforce. Codification of the language in the twentieth century, first by Catholics, led to the new name, Lingala, adopted by Protestants. But linguistic politics internal to Protestant missions identified a northeastern variety of the language as Bangala. In this study the original designation for the emerging language is ignored.

The origin of Lingala is understood best by taking into account the way the Zaire (formerly Congo) River was penetrated by the colonial forces from 1882 onwards and the way whites recruited (or impressed) the riverine peoples into the workforce. An alternative view assumes that it was already a trade language on the river when the whites arrived. Its only basis is that riverine peoples were traders and would naturally have created a trade language. This view is to be rejected on the ground that linguistic similarity between the riverine languages eliminated a need for a lingua franca. Moreover, trade is insufficient in itself to explain the emergence of a lingua franca. One can argue more convincingly for multilingualism in indigenous, precontact times. Through repeated or extended contact with each other many of the riverine inhabitants learned each other's languages.¹

It is difficult to determine what is the first reference to a lingua franca. On 23 October 1888 George Grenfell, one of the pioneering English missionaries, wrote that "their language [the Bangala's! W. S.] is now the common medium of intercourse for more than five hundred miles of waterway" (*Missionary Herald* 1888: 49). This sounds very much like a reference to a lingua franca. The problem lies in identifying who the

¹ I have come to this conclusion through my study of the colonization of the central Zairian basin. Fr. G. Hulstaert, the most knowledgeable linguist of this area, for his own reason, also believes that Lingala originated in the period of contact (Hulstaert 1940: 38).

Bangala were. This was a generic term that was loosely used by whites of several different riverine peoples around the bend of the Congo River (Hulstaert 1974). Since there were Bobangi settlements in that area (Harms 1981), the term could easily have referred to their speech. Indeed, we have a statement from Aaron Sims, a missionary with the Livingstone Inland Mission, writing at Leopoldville, in which he said of the Bobangi's language, "... if I speak this dialect, [I] shall be understood anywhere" (*Missionary Herald* 1887: 429, 433).

Whatever may have been the role of Lobangi (also known as Kibangi) in the emergence of Lingala, certain it is that the English Baptists used the "trade language," as it was eventually known by missionaries, and recognized as a "mixed" language, in making themselves understood at the various places where new sites were being sought and that, as one of the pioneers wrote in his history of Baptist missions, "it stood us in good stead during our early days among the Monsembe people" (Weeks 1913: 48). This mission, founded in 1890, was located on the right bank of the river, not far downriver of the white establishment of Bangala, subsequently named Nouvelle Anvers (and, since independence, Mankanza). In support of Weeks' statement we have that of W. H. Stapleton, one of his colleagues, that when missionaries arrived at Monsembe, they found its inhabitants speaking a "miserable *patois* of Kilolo and Kibangi" (*Missionary Herald* 1892: 226). Since Protestant missionaries had already begun the study of these two vernaculars they might have been able to ascertain the lexical sources of the speech they found at Monsembe. Describing it as a miserable jargon indicates that they saw it as different from the vernaculars. Stapleton may have been remarking on the way the local people spoke, not so much on the fact of mixture. There had been sufficient contact with the colonizing forces for the inhabitants of Monsembe to have adopted a certain manner of communicating with foreigners. Whatever this jargon was, it certainly was not indigenous to the village. Weeks went on to study the local language, which he called Boloki (or Boleki), and conduct his missionary work in it. He said of it: "The language here is the same as that spoken (with possibly slight dialectal differences) at Bangala [the administrative post], and therefore opens up to us a large and powerful tribe of the finest people on the Upper Congo. Bangala, or Iboko, is a very thickly populated district" (*Missionary Herald* 1891: 210).

The history of Lingala has been difficult to trace, because it seems to resemble so many of the area's languages. But according to one estimate, based on comparisons of twentieth-century dictionaries, Lobangi is the one language that has the most cognates with contemporary Lingala (Knappert 1979). This study, however, would have been more convincing if it had tried to determine the sources of words in nineteenth-century

wordlists. Modern dictionaries have been enriched with words from several different vernaculars.

An alternative view is that Lingala is a sort of pidgin or 'broken' Lomongo with an admixture of riverine speech, e. g. Loleku and Lobangi (Hulstaert 1940: 37, 38, 43, 67, 69, 70). Unfortunately, the assertion is not supported by adequate linguistic evidence. Nonlinguistic facts are also needed: We would like to know the extent to which speakers of Lomongo were in the workforce of the Belgians in the nineteenth century, when the language was being created. Such information is lacking.

In the following chronicle of Protestant missionary work it should be remembered that other vocabularies of Lingala were available to whites in the nineteenth century, such as that prepared for the Compagnies des Produits de la Sangha et de la N'Goko, possibly dating from between 1895–1897, and the work of Wtterwulghé [sic], which appeared from at least 1899 to 1904 in several editions.

3. Vernaculars

Although Protestant missionaries seem to have had recourse to the emerging lingua franca for specific practical purposes, their policy was to learn the vernaculars and to base their missionary work on them (e. g. *Missionary Herald* 1890: 266). This meant that they sought to preach in the vernaculars and to publish religious works in them as quickly as possible.

The history of the Baptist Missionary Society confirms what Stapleton wrote: "It is one of the rules of the Mission that a man should serve a term on probation in order that he may shew whether or no he has ability to learn the language and aptitude for missionary work and life before being accepted on the Staff" (Stapleton to Baynes, 24 March 1902, BMS correspondence). In 1887 Michael Richards, writing from Lukolela (*Missionary Herald* 1887: 283), says that he is spending two hours per day on the Kiyansi (Kiyanzi) language, another name for Lobangi, and R. D. Darby that "our main efforts are directed to the language"; he said (*Missionary Herald* 1888: 463) that "more than a mere colloquial acquaintance is necessary" because interpreters talk only "about the simplest every-day things." Apparently the number of languages the missionaries encountered did not daunt them. C. J. Dodds says (*Missionary Herald* 1896: 453) that at Yakusu they would have to acquire three or four different ones to reach the people in the area, in addition to Swahili.

Since the Baptists started in the Congo by working among the Bakongo, they set themselves to learning Kikongo. In 1887 the Baptist Missionary Society published William H. Bentley's 718-page dictionary and grammar of Kikongo. This was followed in 1899 by the publication of John Whitehead's work on Lobangi.

The Livingstone Inland Mission, starting at Stanley Pool (Malebo) at about the same time as the Baptists (but taken over by the American Baptist Missionary Union in 1884), was no less committed to the vernaculars. Dr. A. Sims was the pioneer at the Pool. By August 1884 he was engaged in translating one of the Gospels into Kiyanzi, as he called the language; on 8 March 1885 he reported that he had finished the Kiteke dictionary to the letter 'S' and planned to take one or two boys to England (or America — it is not clear) to complete the dictionary and his translations — mentioning also his knowledge of Swahili; on 31 May 1887 that he was translating the Gospel of John into Kiteke and “in a month [trusted] to begin a little speaking among these difficult people” (Sims, ABHS 86).² But he was not alone among the LIM/ABMU missionaries, all of whose time — he wrote on 29 January 1889 — was occupied with the mission's steamboat the 'Henry Reed' and “the language of the upper river” (Sims, ABHS 86).

Important for the use and spread of language was printed material. The Protestants were the first to establish a press in the Congo. By 1890 the one at the Baptist station at Bolobo had been in “constant use” already for two years (*Missionary Herald* 1890: 266). At this time material had been published in Kiteke, Kikongo, and Lobangi. The other missions were not behind in translations: the American Baptist Missionary Union at Bolenge with the Psalms in 1893 and the Gospel of John in 1898, possibly in Kilolo (Stonelake 1937). This was apparently on the English Baptist press, because Thomas Moody, one of their missionaries at Irebu, said in 1897 (*Baptist Missionary Magazine* 77: 411), “We are greatly helped by our English Baptist brethren,” who had already printed the four Gospels and 181 hymns in Lobangi. In other words, Lobangi was being used at Irebu as was the English Baptist literature. And since the language of Irebu was similar to that of the Equator (Sims, 3 May 1890, ABHS 86), we can assume that there too material of the Baptist Missionary Society was being used in Lobangi. In the meantime translation was going rapidly in the 'Lifoto' language at Upoto, also known as Bopoto (Wilson 1940: 164).

4. *Protestant Councils*

One of the factors that inhibited the use of Bangala amongst some missionaries was its very nature, being, as it was fully recognized, what

² These must have been serious works, nonetheless, because Chapaux (1894: 569) said that Sims “a publié trois petits vocabulaires des idiomes du Haut-Congo; ces vocabulaires contiennent tous les éléments indispensables au voyageur pour se faire comprendre des indigènes.” It would appear that the lingua franca was not one of these languages, an indication not only of Protestant linguistic policy but also of the limited role that the 'trade language' still played.

was called a 'mixed' language that characterized a marginal element in the population — foreign African workers and the soldiers who were getting an increasingly bad reputation — and for only certain uses, being indeed called a trade language by most Europeans. Even as late as 1921 Lingala was considered an "imperfect off-shoot of the Ngala [language]" (Conference 1921: 101, where its use is also characterized). Mountmorres (1906: 113) reported that one missionary of the Congo Balolo Mission had told him that "he would rather leave the country than have it taught in his schools." Stonelake (1937: 8) records that Bangala "was always thought to be the poorest of the trade languages, and some of the missions at first refused to have anything to do with it, because it had no prepositions, no perfect tense, and was meagre in construction and vocabulary." From all this it is understandable that many missionaries considered this "mongrel speech" unsuitable for Scripture (A. W. Banfield, Boma, 10 April 1916, BFBS/ESC).

The second Congo Protestant Council, held in Leopoldville in 1904, took no resolutions that would suggest the abandonment of the twenty-year old policy of using vernaculars, notwithstanding the fact that two papers were read on the subject of language. Indeed, the veteran and much-respected missionary, John Whitehead, proposed in his paper that "If there is to be anything done of value in *preparation* for the *future* work more must be done in the way of *unification*. The smaller languages must be swallowed up by the larger. The Mission occupying each large district should settle at the earliest date the permanent language" (Conference 1904: 50, italics in original). He recommended, for example, that Lobangi be used "from the Pool to Bumba or even Basoko ..."

It would appear therefore that at least the Baptist Missionary Society still believed, as it did five years earlier (*Missionary Herald* 1891: 319), that Lobangi was a viable riverine language for common use.

In 1911 the Conference of Congo Missionaries "decided to take joint action in the preparation of a Bangala grammar (Slade 1959: 202 ff.)," but apparently nothing was done by the conference of 1918 or even 1921 (the latter of which was the eighth such conference).

It is curious that the Protestants did not build solidly on Stapleton's *Suggestions for a grammar of 'Bangala,' the 'lingua franca' of the Upper Congo, with dictionary*, published at the English Baptist press at Yakusu in 1903, but possibly in press since 1898 (*Missionary Herald* 1898: 255). (Note the way the language is treated typographically, symbolizing its sui generis nature.)

5. Governmental Impetus

What seems to have pushed Protestant missionaries toward adopting Bangala for use in schools and in translations was the inquiry by the

Belgian government during the war years on what was called the Official Native Languages. According to Fabian, whose work (1986) discusses it in detail, the Governor General sent out on 17 May 1917 sixty copies of the printed questionnaire (varying slightly depending on the people being addressed): fifteen for missionaries, twenty for administrators, and twenty-five for heads of private firms; missionaries and educators were given twice as many questions about language.

The turning point for Lingala among Protestants came at the 1921 conference, where D. Christy Davies made a report on 'Congo official languages' (Conference 1921: 100–105). He argued strongly in favor of using and improving what he called both Lingala and Mangala. His remarks are summarized as follows, the numbering of the arguments being added here.

Although "the early pioneers did wisely in deciding to learn" the vernaculars, the missionaries were "no longer in the pioneering days" and should adopt methods appropriate to the new needs. (1) "There is far more interpenetration of the tribes than formerly ..." By this he obviously meant that people of different ethnic groups were meeting each other in different places. (2) "There is a strong tendency towards more active co-operation in educational policy" among the missions with respect to literature and training schools. (3) Having sermons from visiting missionaries without interpreters would give the native churches "a greater 'esprit de corps'." (4) In the great centers of industry "hundreds of children are born who will know Lingala as their mother tongue." (This was an insightful and prophetic recognition of the Lingala 'creole' speech community that was to emerge.) (5) Trade and travel are leading to the "obliteration of the distinctively local and tribal."³ (6) Lingala "has come in like a flood," taking possession of more than a quarter of the whole Congo. He therefore concluded, approving the purpose of the Official Native Languages inquiry, by recommending that the Conference appoint a Lingala committee "to co-ordinate the Lingala language and to do [the] best for its improvement and enrichment." What he aimed for was obviously not only the codification of the language, but also its elaboration — in effect, calling for all the steps towards making it a standard

³ Fabian (1986) makes a strong case for the difference between the 'indigenist' and 'assimilationist' policies with respect to the use and development of vernacular and vehicular languages in the Congo in the twentieth century. No such difference seems to have characterized Protestant mission policy in the Congo River areas in the nineteenth century, and, indeed, this is the first and only such argument I have found in the Protestant literature until 1921. But the idea may have been in circulation, for Dan Crawford, a Plymouth Brethren missionary is reported to have said in 1899 that "If we live little local lives in the matter of a pet dialect, time will punish us, and that speedily, for all the minor lingos must go under" (Slade 1959: 202–203).

language. Although his arguments were those that would find a hearing among missionaries, he had been influenced by governmental involvement in linguistic matters. This is evidence that missionaries had now become involved in the linguistic politics of the colony.⁴

It is still not clear when Bangala began to be seen as one of the 'official' languages, but the fact is important to our present story. That is, we must try to understand what it was in the colonial context that led missionaries to think of the language as having assumed this role. It would appear that contemporaries of that period only meant that officials used this language (e. g. BFBS/ESC, 10 April 1916, p. 22). Someone in the Heart of Africa Mission reported (BFBS, July 1918, p. 42) that "All the Government work with the natives is carried on in the Welle Province by means of Bangala alone. All the legal work ... in both Provinces is done entirely in Bangala." From this same mission in 1931, then called the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade, N. P. Grubb wrote (BFBS, 30 October 1931): "[the language] is backed by the Government who use it as the official language between themselves and the natives, and are beginning to print Notices, Orders etc. in Ngala. They have also made it lately the official language over a still larger area where previous Ngwana [i. e. Swahili] was the language." (Such arguments in favor of publications in the northeastern variety of the lingua franca must be seen in terms of competition between the missions for the limited resources of the Bible Society, especially since the Heart of Africa Mission did not seem to have its own press.)

What is curious is that although participants at the conference of 1921 talked about cooperating with the government — for example, toward the compilation of a "standard dictionary" — the missionaries seem to have felt that it was they who should 'fix' the language before something was imposed on them. When they studied the vernaculars, they set out to discover the grammars and learn the vocabularies of given ethnic groups, but when they came to Lingala, they obviously believed that they were creating something that was not quite there. And another fact of Protestant linguistic work in Lingala was that it was going on independently of what the Catholics were doing, a fact that is not strange, of course, in the light of the largely hostile relations that characterized Catholics and Protestants of that era.

⁴ At this conference, when it was said that Franck, a Belgian official, "had urged Lingala" as a common language at Bolenge in 1911 (cited in Samarin 1986: 151), there must have been some error. Louis Franck, if this was the same person, was *Ministre des Colonies* from 21 November 1918 to 11 March 1924 (personal communication, Fr. François Bontinck, 4 April 1987).

6. *Linguistic Work*

A certain number of scripture translations preceded Protestant codification of Lingala. The Gospel of Luke was published in 1908, not followed by anything else until the Gospel of John in 1925 (Coldham 1966). The latter was done by two Congo Balolo missionaries, a significant fact, given that they worked in the area being intensively developed by Belgian colonialism. It is obvious from the characterizations of subsequent translations that missionaries were faced with the problem of deciding just what the language was. The language of the Acts of the Apostles, published in 1931, is described as "A union form of Riverine Ngala," based on Stapleton's 'Suggestions for a grammar of Bangala.' The word 'union' suggests the recognition of several local varieties of the language along the river.) The New Testament appeared in 1942, having been undertaken by Guthrie in 1937 if not earlier, and the whole Bible in 1970.

In spite of decisions made at the Conference of Protestant missions, linguistic work progressed very slowly. In the meantime the language was becoming known as Lingala on the river and Bangala in the northeast. Although it was reported to R. Kilgour of the British and Foreign Missionary Society that a "tentative grammar [was] being circulated along the River as a result of the labours of the Riverine missionaries" (W. J. Platt, 3 September 1932, BFBS), it may have been the work of D. Christy Davies, although Malcolm Guthrie may have had his own grammar as well. The minutes of the Lingala-Bangala conference at Yalembe (26 October 1932) include the following:

Agreed that the Rev. D. Christy Davies be asked to prepare for the press the 1931 Lingala Revised Grammar & Vocabulary while on furlough in England, with the Uelle Bangala Notes and vocabulary added. ... Agreed that having received a good report from some members of the Conference the 'Suggestions for the Lingala Revised Grammar' supplied by the Rev. M. Guthrie of Kinshasa, Mr. Davies be asked to incorporate in the Lingala/Bangala Grammar such portions as commend themselves to his judgment.

I have found no record of the publication of Davies' work. Instead, there is the grammar and dictionary of Guthrie published in 1935.⁵ The preface to this work mentions an earlier conference in 1931 at Yalembe where "all known work on Lingala Grammar and Vocabulary" was used for discussion, and where Guthrie was appointed editor of the task of rearranging and editing the material, using Stapleton's grammar and a revision by Longland.⁶

⁵ On leaving missionary service M. Guthrie taught in the African section of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, where he eventually became its head.

⁶ The names of only four persons are given by Guthrie as having participated in this conference: J. H. Marker, D. C. Davies, W. H. Edwards, and A. B. Palmer.

7. *Linguistic Divergence*

It has been seen that Protestants responded, although rather slowly, to the increasing number of people they could reach in the riverine lingua franca, notwithstanding their reservations about it as a language. They were faced with some other facts. The form of the language spoken in the northeastern part of the colony, in what was called the Wele (or Uele) District, diverged considerably from the riverine form, due to the fact that it was used amongst speakers of non-Bantu languages. Moreover, the missionaries of that area, working under the Heart of Africa Mission, did not practice the collegiality that characterized those on the Congo River. They went ahead with their own Gospel of Mark, published by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1916, the New Testament in 1928, and the Bible in 1955 (Coldham 1966). They had argued convincingly with the Bible Society that their people did not understand the riverine variety of Bangala (e. g. 12 August 1905, BFBS/ESC, p. 40). These missionaries probably did not have the support of those in the Middle Congo, who would have considered the northeastern variety hardly more than a jargon, far from worthy of Bible translations. Guthrie says as much in the preface of his grammar and dictionary of 1951: "Ce bangala n'est pas une langue proprement dite ..."

Nothing more will be said about the northeastern variety of Bangala. Missionaries in that region determined the future of the language, as far as missionary work was concerned, by adopting their own translations. But there were social forces also at work in the heart of the colony that led to the increasing importance of the riverine variety. What is known as Lingala has always been associated with that which was spoken at important centers along the great river.

8. *Other Factors*

The Protestant factors in the history of Lingala can be summarized as follows: commitment on the part of the earliest missionaries to vernaculars, eventual recognition of the usefulness of Lingala to reach a growing number of people in linguistically diverse localities, divergence on the part of later missionaries with respect to the use of the northeastern variety of the lingua franca, differences in resources for publishing material in Congolese languages, lack of collegiality on the part of newer missionaries, competition for the resources of the Bible Society, attitudes towards the variation in the language, views about language standardization, isolation from other linguistic efforts, but influence from perceived pressure in official circles for the language.

It has been made clear that this study only supplements the as yet unwritten history of Catholic work. This in turn will be incomplete without a description of official colonial linguistic policy. One such description (Yates 1980) has to be considered, for it argues that although Belgian policy desired the diffusion of French in the colony, the goal was frustrated by missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, who believed that European languages were secularist and worldly, leading Africans away from religion. Missionaries, she claims, did not want Africans to get employment outside the mission orbit. Such an argument, if valid, must certainly lead to the conclusion that missionary education was done predominantly in the vernaculars and in the lingua francas. My own research leads to no such a conclusion. French was encouraged by Catholic missionaries in their many schools, whose pupils far outnumbered those of the Protestants. (No support is given for the statement that "The majority of the 46,000 Congolese children in school in 1908 were in non-subsidised Protestant mission schools" [p. 259].)⁷ And while it is understandable that missionaries were concerned with the demoralization that they witnessed in the growing detribalized centers and workplaces, it is not to be understood that most of them were opposed to what was clearly understood at that time as the civilizing value of work under white supervision. "The readiness of men to engage for service," one Protestant wrote, "is a most hopeful prospect for the future of the Upper [Congo] River" (*Missionary Herald* 1889: 51). In 1890 Mrs. Bentley at Lutete used a miniature telegraph line to train young telegraphists, in preparation for the time when the railway would require such workers (Guinness 1890: 526). Her husband, when the railway had been completed to Stanley Pool, argued for the education for "the legion of native boys" who had served the laborers on the railway, pointing out that "they, too, are anxious to learn and to qualify for such posts [as foremen, clerks, etc.]" because of the more attractive positions and pay (W. H. Bentley, *Missionary Herald* 1898: 246). In other words, he was explicitly advocating educating them for the kinds of jobs they had seen in the construction of the railway. Finally, when Aaron Sims wrote that "It is our duty to use inland labour [as opposed to bringing in West Coast expatriates! W. S.] to develop the country" (Sims, 3 September 1890, ABHS 86), he was obviously thinking of the advantages of work as a civilizing force for all the people, not just those who stayed within the Protestant mission orbit. Yates' thesis is indefensible. The explanation for the absence of a wholesale francophonic policy among missionaries is more complicated than she suggests.

⁷ This appears to be an error, for in a subsequent publication (Yates 1982: 135) she says, again without documentation, "By 1908, more than 46,000 Congolese attended school."

French was gaining ground, there are those who believe, in years immediately before independence, even at Lingala's expense (Hulstaert 1940: 33). Such observations, of course, will have to be supported by facts.

Independence has unleashed new forces in the life of Lingala. Although a large number of people are being trained in French and are getting university education abroad, social and political developments have led to the indigenization of language. Lingala is far from being standardized and implemented by deliberate governmental policy, but its life is being vitalized by use in the media. It is there that what Hulstaert called "la langue vivante" is experiencing its elan. But the history of Zaire suggests that language planners will be long in recognizing this language as the real language. Not until there is a true populist literature in the language will the somewhat artificial literary Lingala be unseated.⁸

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