

# **Aspects of Multilingualism in the Lingala Zone of Congo**

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## **Abstract**

To approach the analysis of multilingualism, it is necessary to distinguish the functional, symbolic, institutional, policy-related (political), and geographical aspects of each language in a multilingual system. It is then possible to see how the languages function systematically, with respect to each other in a national or regional context. Each of the languages involved in the Congo system is analyzed according to this template. Benefits of this approach, implications for the work of bilingual evaluation, and general language program planning are discussed. See *Langue et Dialecte au Sud du District d'Epena* (SILESR 2004-007) for a related paper by this author.\*

## **1. Introduction and Background Information**

The practical and immediate problem facing us is the evaluation of Lingala bilingualism as it impacts potential ethnic language programs in a large area of Central Africa—in particular, Congo and Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo). The general and larger problem is understanding the systematic nature and motivation for multilingualism in the nations where we work—to the end of planning effective programs that have some relation to our hosts' priorities.

In this paper I want to explore the notion that multilingualism constitutes a kind of synchronic system on a regional and national level. When we understand the forces at work in the overall system, we can better explain the function and meaning of particular phenomena such as Lingala proficiency for group x in location y. My approach is to start with a discussion of key aspects of multilingualism in the Congo context and finish with specific implications for our surveying and planning. These reflections are the result of one year spent in Lingala learning and doing survey-related research in the Congo.

### **1.1 Background information**

The People's Republic of Congo is divided into linguistic and ethnic halves. The southwestern half of the nation (from Brazzaville south and west to the Atlantic coast) is occupied by the large ethnic group Kikoongo. From Brazzaville to the coast, the Kikoongo speak a chain of closely related languages, but are unified by a pidginized version known as Munukutuba, which serves as a lingua franca for the southwestern region.

The south is heavily populated and is served by a railroad and road network. North and east of Brazzaville, the savannah and rainforests are inhabited by a variety of ethnic and linguistic groups, whose total population is a fraction of that of the south.<sup>1</sup> The northern groups are related Bantu peoples, but speak nonmutually intelligible languages and use Lingala in varying

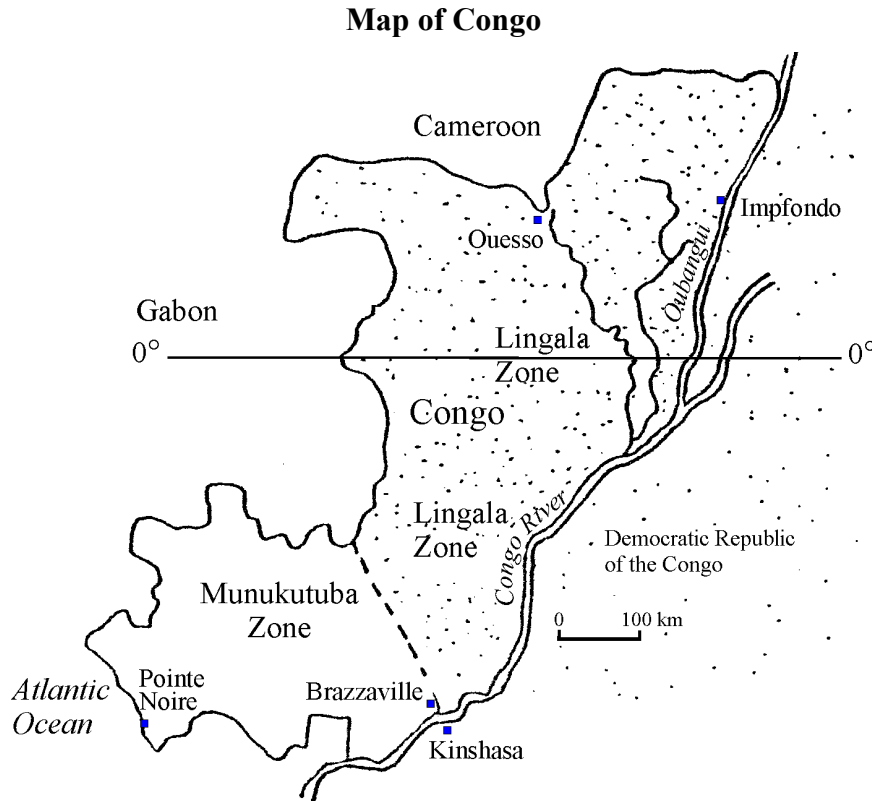
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\* This paper was originally presented at the inaugural SIL ILAC (International Language Assessment Conference) in Horsely's Green, England, in 1989. I wish to thank Dr. Ted Bergman of SIL International for having the vision to pursue publishing this kind of work electronically after it languished for so many years. The 1989 version has only been slightly revised.

<sup>1</sup> *Géographie de la République Populaire du Congo*, pp. 18–19.

degrees for interethnic communication. Transportation is difficult in the north and east, with many places accessible only by air or river.

This paper focuses on the Lingala-speaking peoples of northern and eastern Congo and the Lingala half of Brazzaville.



## 2. Aspects of Multilingualism

When a child grows up in the northern part of Congo, he not only learns one, two, or three languages, but also the functions, contexts, and meanings associated with each language learned. For the majority of children in the current generation, the number of languages to be learned is three: the village or ethnic language, Lingala, and French. No individual or social group has equal competence in all three languages; rather, according to the characteristics of the individual or group, there is a distribution of usage and competencies in each language. This ranges from near-unilingual ethnic-language speakers to individuals who can and do function at a high level in all three languages. To the extent that many functions and meanings are established at the national or regional level, multilingualism constitutes a system in which individuals and groups participate. We can approach the analysis of trilingualism in the Congo by examining each language in the system with respect to the following categories.

### 1. communication/functional aspects

What are the exclusive communicational functions fulfilled by each language in the system? How does each language enable communication where otherwise there would be none?

## 2. symbolic aspects

What symbolic or convention meaning does each language in the system convey? What are the connotations and associations attached to the usage of each language?

## 3. institution/domain aspects

Which social domains or institutions are associated with which language(s)?

## 4. policy/political aspects

What explicit policies, edicts, decrees have been formulated by national, regional, or local political bodies with regard to each language? What implicit policies or conventions are in force? What organizations exist explicitly for the promotion or study of each language?

## 5. geographical aspects

What is the geographical extent or limit of each language in the multilingual system?

## 2.1 French

### 2.1.1 *Communication Aspect*

French serves the vital communication function of uniting the two halves of the country, which are ethnically and linguistically distinct. That is, it enables inter-regional communication. In addition, French enables communication with the international community and provides an appropriate medium for technical development.

### 2.1.2 *Symbolic Aspect*

There are definite associations of status, prestige, and sophistication attached to French usage. It speaks of an individual's education and ambition. In general, the Congolese are proud of their reputation for a superior level of French usage and their strong historical ties with France. There is, as well, an inherent negative symbolic element related to foreign domination and oppression, which becomes especially important in the context of defining national identity in a post-colonial era. The extreme attractiveness of French is held in check by this negative factor.

### 2.1.3 *Institutional Aspect*

Because of the particular history of French colonization in Congo, a majority of important social and political institutions are conducted in French. For example. French is used in:

1. the military
2. civil service; government meetings; documents
3. the professions
4. university
5. primary, middle, and secondary education
6. print media (newspapers) and journalism
7. big business; banking

It is instructive to observe that these same institutions in neighboring Zaire are conducted largely in Lingala.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the institutionalization of French for all levels of education in Congo has considerable impact on the overall system with regard to Lingala. Lingala is by default relegated to noninstitutional roles in all but a few cases.

#### ***2.1.4 Policy Aspect***

French is the “official” language of Congo by governmental decree. In a real sense, this policy is just a formalization and legitimization of historical usage patterns. The use of French avoids aggravating ethnic and regional tensions and, at the same time, provides an established written medium for record keeping and documents.

#### ***2.1.5 Geographical Aspect***

French usage has no pertinent geographical component except that the urban centers of Brazzaville and Pointe Noire would have higher levels of French usage and competence, by virtue of the concentration of civil servants and formal institutions.

## **2.2 Lingala**

### ***2.2.1 Communication Aspect***

Lingala serves as an interethnic lingua franca throughout all of Northern Congo. This is a crucial aspect of the force and attraction of Lingala. Regardless of the absence of education and adequate French, Lingala can be learned and spoken by anyone who needs to communicate beyond his ethnic group. There is high lexical, syntactic, and discourse congruence between Lingala and the various ethnic languages—which makes Lingala easy to learn. The language which forms the basis of Lingala (Bobangui) is in the same linguistic subfamily as many of the language in question.<sup>3</sup> The functional necessity of Lingala can be seen as closely tied to the number and size of ethnic groups in a given area. Populous spread-out groups like the Teke would not need Lingala except on their borders. This would be true also of the Mbosi of the Cuvette Region. Lingala usage is reported, moreover, to be stronger in the distant Sangha region where there are numerous smaller ethnic groups. The functional need seems to determine strong usage, even though the area is far from the zones of Lingala influence.

### ***2.2.2 Symbolic Aspect***

Lingala use has strong connotations of Africanism, nationalism, and loyalty to the state that are important to understand. To speak Lingala is to identify with the nation-building process and political development of the country. In asking people about their usage of Lingala, I was often told: “Of course, I speak Lingala. I am Congolese!” or “Of course, it is our National Language!” People consider it “their” language, even if it is not their mother tongue, and they do not have a high degree of fluency. Lingala use is also associated with the thriving popular culture centered in Kinshasa and Brazzaville. The Lingala music coming out of the twin cities

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<sup>2</sup> Bwantsa-Kafungu, pp. 10–11.

<sup>3</sup> Dzokanga, Adolphe, pp. 6–7.

is an entire genre unto itself and is widely influential.<sup>4</sup> It is important to recall that these conventional associations are distinct from the communicative necessity for Lingala in some contexts. Together, these two associations of Lingala (Africanism/nationalism and popular culture) make it very attractive to young people and others who want to identify themselves as progressive and loyal to the state and Africa.

### ***2.2.3 Institutional Aspect***

In sharp contrast to the situation in former Zaire, Lingala has almost no institutional component in the Congo. If we associate institutions with Lingala, we find that they are informal and popular institutions. Examples include: church and popular politics where Lingala is used to address large heterogeneous groups. River trade and travel another traditional domain of Lingala usage. There is some Lingala television and radio journalism originating in Brazzaville, but no print journalism and very little literature on the Congo side of the river. There are several Lingala translations of the Bible available—even one in what is called “Haut Fleuve” Lingala, a regional variety spoken in north and northwest Zaire (Oubangi Region) and in the Likouala region of Congo.

### ***2.2.4 Policy Aspect***

Lingala is one of two “national” languages of the People’s Republic of Congo. The other, Munukutuba, plays a similar lingua-franca role in the Kikoongo southern half of the nation. The fact that Lingala has official status in the Congo’s linguistic policy demonstrates the traditional (already established) importance of Lingala in (at least) certain sectors of society. Lingala had a long history of usage before Independence in 1960 that dates to the colonial penetration.<sup>5</sup> The Congolese government has wisely capitalized on the natural attractiveness and momentum of Lingala to create a symbol of national unity. Lingala’s official status is evidence, as well, of the political will that exists to have African languages used in the nation’s institutions. The “Institut National de Recherche et d’Action Pédagogique” has a “Service des Langues Nationales,” which is charged with the promotion of Lingala and Munukutuba. The Government recognizes the need to support and promote these (largely oral) national languages, if they are to become literary and institutionalized.

### ***2.2.5 Geographical Aspect***

There is a keen awareness among many Congolese that the homeland of Lingala is in Zaire. You hear comments such as, “The real Lingala comes from Zaire,” or “The real Lingala is in the Bible” (which, of course, originates in former Zaire). This is especially true as you get farther away from Brazzaville-Kinshasa—where there is little difference. Congo shares almost 1,000 km of border with Zaire—entirely within the Lingala zone.<sup>6</sup> The border which follows the Congo and the Oubangui rivers, is quite open, with a considerable flow of people and goods back and forth.

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<sup>4</sup> Dzokanga, Adolphe, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Bwantsa-Kafungu, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Géographie de la République Populaire du Congo, p. 3.

The linguistic influence of Zaire is most strongly felt along the border; that is, along the Congo and Oubangui rivers. The point of strongest influence is Kinshasa-Brazzaville. Lingala flows from Kinshasa to Brazzaville and from Brazzaville to the parts of northern Congo that are not adjacent to Zaire. This mode of diffusion could be more accurately called social than geographical. In areas such as Ouessou in the Sangha Region and the Teke lands in Plateau Region toward Gabon, one would expect to find weaker Lingala usage because of the geographical distance from Zaire.

## **2.3 Ethnic/Village Languages**

### ***2.3.1 Communication Aspect***

Each village language (*patois*) serves as the medium of communication for an ethnic group or subgroup, which may vary in size from several hundred in a few villages to tens of thousands throughout an entire region (Teke).

### ***2.3.2 Symbolic Aspect***

Ethnic language usage for the current generation of Congolese has strong associations of identity, roots, belonging, intimacy, and ethnicity. These associations continue despite declining ethnic language use in some contexts. In one ethnic community close to Brazzaville, Lingala usage extends even into the homes of younger married couples, while the ethnic language is increasingly reserved for ethnic cultural functions and visits to older family members.<sup>7</sup> This illustrates that the current situation is changing—at least in the urban context. The children of these young couples may have a passive knowledge of the ethnic tongue, but their first language will be Lingala.

A village language can have a slightly perjorative connotation in contexts where technical sophistication and education are in focus. For example: high school students in a regional centre (who come from a language group we are familiar with) found the idea of reading and writing in their village language undesirable. Their comment was: “that would be good for our older mamas and papas.” They had a hard time seeing their village language as a vehicle for ideas and learning. That is the real function of French and the idealized function of Lingala in the current multilingual system. In addition, the association of ethnic language usage with tribalism is a possibility.

### ***2.3.3 Institutional Aspect***

The only institutions supporting *patois* usage are the family and the traditional social structures and lifestyle of the language group. The stability of the traditional social structures and lifestyle, therefore, becomes a key indicator of the group’s likelihood to retain strong patterns of ethnic language usage. In general, isolated groups have stronger ethnic language use than groups located on major transportation routes or groups close to Brazzaville or regional capitals.

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<sup>7</sup> Related to me by a man from the Teke community at Mfilou near Brazzaville.

### 2.3.4 Policy Aspect

There is no explicit policy on ethnic language (*patois*) usage in the Congo. At the linguistics department of Marien Ngouabi University in Brazzaville, there is a “Centre Pour l’Etude des Langues Congolaises” (CELCO) whose charter is to document and study the Congolese languages—but not necessarily to promote them.

### 2.3.5 Geographical Aspect

Of the three languages in the multilingual system, the village languages are the most geographically bounded. Each *patois* is limited to the zone where it is spoken, and there is little territorial expansion of a language group or situations where one *patois* is exchanged for another. This identification of geography and language is the distinctive component of the *patois* in the system. With large language groups like the Teke, who occupy considerable geographic space, one might expect to find ethnic language usage stronger in the center of the language zone, but weaker at the edges where Lingala would be used with neighboring ethnic groups.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.4 Summary

We can see that the current pattern of trilingualism in northern Congo exists in a network of functional, sociopolitical, and geographical forces. The lengthy French colonial presence in Congo has assured French a future in the formal institutions of the country. Because these institutions already function acceptably in French, there is considerable inertia to overcome in converting them to Lingala. It is also very expensive to create or modify educational (and other) documents in a language without a strong literary tradition. There is not much available, and everything has to be done from scratch. Even a limited goal, such as implementing Lingala for the first few years of elementary education, can be very difficult. Given the current economic difficulties and the resulting priorities, the process of replacing French with Lingala in key social institutions promises to be a long one. Nonetheless, this institutionalization of Lingala is what is implied by the government’s decision to pursue Lingala as a national language. Overall, French usage should continue to increase as education levels increase, since this is the primary mode of diffusion.

Lingala, on the other hand, is learned whether or not one goes to school. It is seldom taught but always learned! Lingala is strongest:

1. along the border with Zaire,
2. along major tributaries of the Congo like the Sangha, and
3. in Brazzaville.

The government has succeeded in making Lingala a symbol of participation in the nation-building process, and there is a popular desire to know Lingala. It is diffused through contact with Zaire along the border (geographical diffusion), through the social influence of Brazzaville on the rest of the country, and through administrative and political influence. In one isolated village, a school teacher related that village children learned Lingala from his children and the children of other government officers.

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<sup>8</sup> This is admittedly speculative and needs verification.

Ethnic/village languages are threatened linguistically where they happen to co-reside with areas of Lingala dominance. I know of two ethnic groups where Lingala is currently used in at least some homes, indicating an advanced shift towards the trade language. One is in the Teke community at Mfilou near Brazzaville, where Lingala is used between some young married couples, even though they share a mother tongue. The other case involves Mbonzo speakers from Impfondo, a regional capital adjacent to Zaire. One parent reports that when he speaks to certain of his children in the ethnic language, they answer him in Lingala. I assume this is not an isolated phenomenon among the Mbonzo.

In summary, the functional, symbolic, political, and geographical factors indicate that the present trilingual system is not likely to change dramatically. Rather, the trends which are in evidence will continue, with the paradigm of nation-building providing additional impetus to the spontaneous spread of Lingala.

### **3. Implications of this Analysis**

#### **3.1 Evaluating Lingala Bilingualism**

This brings us back to the original problem of evaluating Lingala bilingualism. This kind of inquiry gives us no help in direct measurement of Lingala proficiency, but it does give us the framework for asking questions about where we might need to do direct measurement. What are some of the other benefits of looking at the big picture of multilingualism?

1. It gives us some landmarks when faced with widespread idealized reports about universal Lingala competence. These reports are very difficult to evaluate when we do not know the language ourselves.
2. It brings into focus the powerful nonfunctional forces at work in the system. The political and symbolic aspects create a strong attraction for Lingala in the emerging generation. These forces will mold tomorrow's proficiency levels. We would be naive to miss these forces while entertaining our own ideas about the preeminence of mother tongues.
3. Knowing *why* Lingala spreads and *how* Lingala spreads gives us the perspective we need to ask and answer interesting questions during our surveys and research.
4. Looking at all the languages helps us not to over-focus on a single problematic (from our point of view) language in the system. For example, the level of French and Lingala competence among educated youth in remote settings may be very similar. This is an unexpected result. As long as French remains the language of education, it restrains the advance of Lingala.

Our current allocations in Congo support these observations. We work only in groups that are large or isolated, even though the assessments made at the time did not look at Lingala as a global issue. Knowing why Lingala usage is strong in some areas and weak in others, and knowing the forces controlling the rate and direction of diffusion should give us the confidence to pursue those programs where marked decrease in ethnic language use is not in evidence. In general, good data on language usage patterns should give us the clues we need. Where these clues are inadequate, an instrument, such as SLOPE, can be employed to clarify the situation.

### 3.2 General Planning and Strategy

Even more significantly, this inquiry into the functions and meanings of multilingualism clarifies the political and social importance of the national language issue for our hosts. In the People's Republic of Congo, neither the colonial language, French, nor any one of the diverse ethnic languages can serve the functional and symbolic need for a national language, that is, one that corresponds not to the reality of a foreign power (however helpful or prestigious), nor to the known securities and rivalries of the ethnic groups, but to the new reality of nationhood and statehood. For a few ethnic language groups the transition to Lingala is quite advanced. For many others, it will be a long process with strong ethnic language-use patterns continuing indefinitely, even as French and Lingala grow in importance. In any case, we need to empathize with our hosts' felt need for an institutionalized, literary, and supra-ethnic national language. At the same time, our research and training give us realistic ideas about the obstacles and time frames involved.

While we proceed with the work of identifying and serving those who will really benefit from our main business and historical mission, we should try to help our hosts with what they see as important. It is no accident that we have in Congo a full-time literacy specialist assigned to each of the national languages, as well as a translation project in one of the national languages. This involvement is more than symbolic. We are responding to real needs for basic literacy expertise and literature development in the case of Munukutuba and needs for orthography standardization, literacy, and scripture-in-use work in the case of Lingala. It must be reassuring to our hosts that we understand the urgency of their concerns in this area.<sup>9</sup>

Looking at these various aspects of multilingualism and seeing them in the light of the nation-building context bring into sharp relief the reasons why such an approach is needed. This kind of analysis is indeed an important perspective to complement our other efforts in evaluating multilingualism.

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<sup>9</sup> These comments are not intended to represent the official Central Africa Group policy.

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