

Aspects of Multilingualism in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*

Helena Lopez Palma

helena.palma@udc.es

Abstract

The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a multilingual country where 214 native languages (Ethnologue) are spoken among circa 68 million inhabitants (2008). The situations derived from the practice of a multilingual mode of communication have had important linguistic effects on the languages in contact. Those have been particularly crucial in the rural areas, where the relations between the individual speakers of different micro linguistic groups have contributed to varied degrees of modification of the grammatical code of the languages. The contact that resulted from migratory movements could also explain why some linguistic features (i.e. logophoricity, Güldemann 2003) are shared by genetically diverse languages spoken across a large macro-area. The coexistence of such a large number of languages in the DRC has important cultural, economical, sanitary and political effects on the life of the Congolese people, who could be crucially affected by the decisions on language policy taken by the Administration.

Keywords:

Multilingualism, languages in contact, Central-Sudanic, Adamawa-Ubangian, Bantoid, language policy

1. Introduction

This paper addresses the multilingual situation currently found in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The word ‘multilingualism’ may be used to refer to the linguistic skill of any individual who is able to use with equal competency various different languages in some interlinguistic communicative situation. It may also be used to refer to the linguistic situation of a country where several different languages coexist. Those languages may be used in a monolingual mode of communication among the native speakers of a sociolinguistic group, or as a multilingual mode of communication among the individuals of different linguistic communities.

When used with the second of those meanings, the word ‘multilingualism’ describes a prominent sociolinguistic characteristic of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country where 214 languages are spoken among 68,008,922 inhabitants (2008)¹. But the simultaneous coexistence of a large number of different languages is not only found in the DRC. It is also a

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¹ The linguistic data has been taken from *Ethnologue* (www.ethnologue.com), and the population data from the US Census Bureau (www.census.gov).

common sociolinguistic situation in other Sub-Saharan African countries: in Cameroon, 279 languages are spoken among 18,467,692 inhabitants (2008). In Chad, 132 languages are spoken among 10,111,337 inhabitants (2008). In the Republic of Congo, 62 languages are spoken among 3,903,318 inhabitants (2008). And in the Central African Republic (CAR), 69 languages are spoken among 4,434,873 inhabitants (2008). Multilingualism, thus, seems to be a generalized sociolinguistic state in Sub-Saharan Africa.

But how does one live in a country where so many languages are spoken? What is the cognitive cost of using a multilingual mode of communication for the individual speaker of the different languages? What is the linguistic effect on the languages in contact?

A multilingual mode of communication poses considerable intellectual demands on the individual speaker, who may need to multiply the referential lexicon and/or the syntactic code in order to communicate with the members of other linguistic groups.

The simultaneous coexistence of a large number of languages in a country has also important cultural, economical, sanitary and political effects on the life of its inhabitants, who will be crucially affected by the decisions taken by the government on language policy. And for any government, the management of the challenges posed by a multilingual state would be such a difficult task that the language policy would necessarily have to be taken as a crucial issue.

Multilingual situations may also have important linguistic effects on the languages in contact. They may cause the mixing of the linguistic codes of different languages, resulting in lexical borrowing and the spreading of some grammatical features among those languages.

The individual multilingual behavior is more salient in urban areas than in the rural ones, and when the multilingual mode of communication is practised in cities, it seems to have less permanent effects on the languages in contact than when it is practised in villages. The city of Bukavu could be taken as an illustration of the urban multilingual mode of communication. Bukavu is a multiethnic city on the border with Rwanda. Goyvaerts (1997) reports the complex linguistic use in Bukavu, where over 40 languages are spoken among its 240,000 inhabitants. Out of those 40 languages, 4 neutral *linguae francae*, Swahili, Lingala, Indoubil and French, seem to be used for interlingual communication.

Rural multilingualism in the DRC has taken place due to the simultaneous coexistence of micro linguistic areas, which are associated to small communities of people related by family bonds. Some of those micro-linguistic groups migrated far away from the geographical area where the original group lived. And such migrations led to the fragmentation of the linguistic group in dialects, some of which became isolated in small islands surrounded by other linguistic groups. It also contributed to the spread of linguistic features from one group to another, playing, thus, a significant part in the creation of a macro linguistic area in central Africa (Güldermann, 2003).

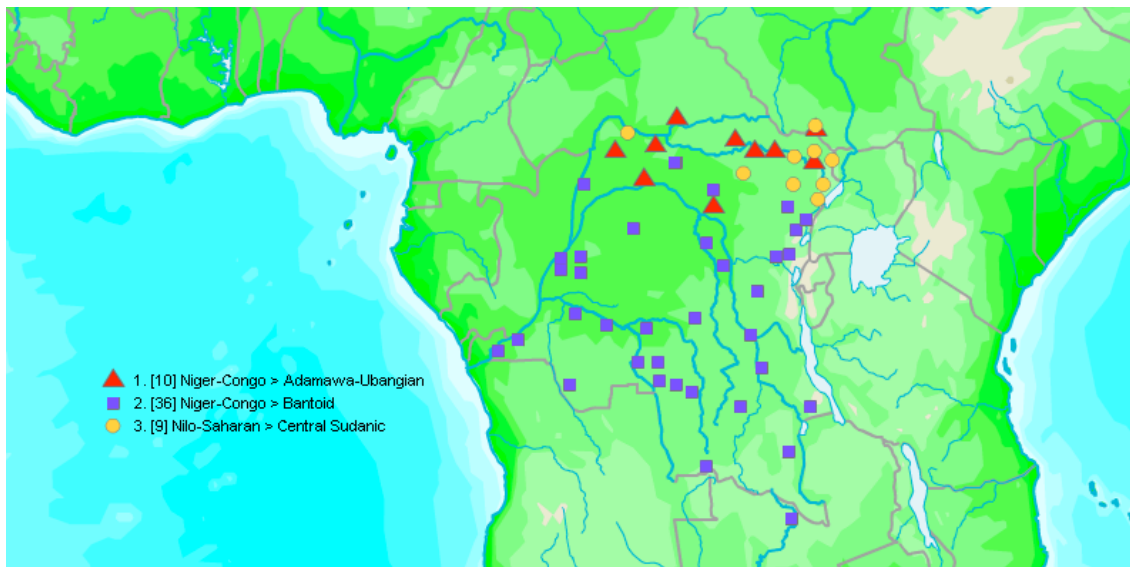
In what follows, we will first briefly describe the genetic affiliation and the geographical distribution of the languages spoken in the DRC. We will then consider two different aspects of multilingualism in the DRC: the effect that multilingual situations have had on the grammatical code of the languages in contact, and the official position taken by the administration regarding the Congolese multilingual reality. For the first aspect we will focus on some contact situations between Central Sudanic, Adamawa-Ubangian and Bantoid speaking tribes, which have been caused by migratory movements along the northern part of the DRC over a large period of time. For the second aspect we will consider all the languages that are currently spoken in the DRC.

2. Genetic affiliation and geographical distribution of the languages of the DRC

The 214 native languages spoken today in the DRC have been classified, with the exclusion of French, in 3 groups, which belong to 2 genetically distinct families: the Bantoid (Guthrie, 1948; Nurse and Philippson, 2003) and the Adamawa-Ubangian (Bouquiaux and Thomas, 1980; Boyd, 1995) groups of languages, which are two genera of the Niger-Congo family (Greenberg, 1966; Bender-Samuel and Rhonda, 1989) and the Central Sudanic group (Tuckner and Bryan, 1956; Greenberg, 1966; Tuckner, 1967), a subfamily of the Nilo-Saharan family (Greenberg, 1966; Bench, 1995; Bender, 1997; Ehret, 2001).

The Adamawa-Ubangian and the Central Sudanic languages are spoken in the northern zone of the DRC, while the Bantoid languages are spoken in a wider geographical area all over the country. In the following WALs (World Atlas of Language Structure) map, we represent the geographical distribution of those 2 families of languages²:

Figure 1: Map of the distribution of the Niger-Congo and the Nilo-Saharan families in the DRC



Of the three groups, the Bantoid group has the largest number of speakers in the DRC. In tables 1, 2 and 3 we summarize the number of speakers and the geographical distribution of the Bantoid, the Adamawa-Ubangian and the Central Sudanic groups.

² Data from *Ethnologue*.

Table 1: *Niger-Congo > Benue-Congo > Bantoid*

| Family | Genus | Language | Number of speakers | Where | Comments |
|----------------|--|--|---|---|--|
| Niger-Congo | Bantoid (36) | Bemba | 300,000 in DRC (2000). 3,300,000 in Zambia (2001) | Near southeastern border of Katanga Province. Possibly in Zimbabwe. | Language of wider communication. Distinct from Bembe (Bembe) of Congo-Brazzaville |
| | | Bila | 40,000 (1993 SIL) | Orientale Province, Ihuri District, Irumu Territory | Lexical similarity 94% between dialects. About 25% of men, 10% to 15% of women have routine proficiency in Congo Swahili, older adults have none. |
| | | Bobangi | 50,948 in DRC (2000). Population total all countries: 118,752. | Equateur Province, east of Congo River from Bolobo to Mbandaka. Also spoken in Central African Republic, Congo. | |
| | | Bolia | 100,000 (2000) | Bandundu Province, north of Lake Mai-Ndombe. | |
| | | Bushoong | 155,137 (2000). | Kasai Occidental Province, Mweka and northern Ilebo territories. | |
| | | CHLUBA | 6,300,000 (1991). | Used throughout Kasai Occidental and Kasai Oriental provinces. | National language. 700,000 second-language speakers. |
| | | Ding | 155,000 (2002). | Bandundu Province, Idiofa Territory, on the Kasai River. | |
| | | Enya | 15,000 (2000). | On Lualaba River from Kisangani upriver to Kongolo, Orientale Province, Ubundu Territory. | Lexical similarity 67% with Mituku, 54% with Lega-Shabunda, 50% with Lega-Mwenga, Bembe, Buyu, and Zimba, 47% with Nyanga, 40% with Lengola, 30% with Komo and Lingala. Fishermen. |
| | | Hunde | 200,000 (1980) | Nord-Kivu Province, Masisi and Rutshuru territories. Apparently none in Uganda. | |
| | | Kanyok | 200,000 (1991) | Kasai Oriental Province, Mwene-Ditu Territory, between the Bushimate and Luembe rivers. | |
| | | Kete | 8,400 (2002) | Kasai Occidental Province, northeast of Mweka. | |
| | | Kiluba | 1,505,000 (1991) | Katanga Province, Haut-Lomami District | |
| | | KONGO | 1,000,000 in DRC (1986) | Bas-Congo Province. Cataract dialect in Bas-Congo Province and around Mbanza Manteke, Fiofi north of Boma, and scattered communities along the Congo River from Brazzaville to its mouth. Also spoken in Angola, Congo. | National language. Fiofi is also spoken by the Buende and Vili peoples. SVO (for Dzamba) |
| | | Lebo | 13,588 (2000) | Orientale Province, Banalia and Basoko territories | |
| | | Lega | 400,000 (1982) | Sud-Kivu and Maniema provinces, Shabunda and Pangwi territories. | |
| LINGALA | 2,037,929 in DRC (2000). Second-language speakers together with Bangala in DRC: 7,000,000 (1999). Population total all countries: 2,139,202 | Widely used in Bandundu, Equateur, and Orientale provinces, except the southeast of Orientale. Also spoken in Central African Republic, Congo. | National language. Variation in communities. | | |

Table 1: *Niger-Congo > Benue-Congo > Bantoid*

| Family | Genus | Language | Number of speakers | Where | Comments |
|--------|-------|----------------|--|--|---|
| | | Lunda | 222,000 in Zambia. 178,000 in Angola. Population total all countries: 400,000. | Southern and southwestern Katanga Province, Luulaba District; extreme south of Bandundu Province, Kahemba Territory. | |
| | | Mbole | 100,000 (1971) | Oriente Province, southwest of Kisangani. | Close to Mbole. Lexical similarity 67% with Enya, 55% with Lega-Shabunda, 50% with Nyanga, Lega-Mwenga, Bembe, Buyu, and Zimba, 40% with Lengola. |
| | | Mituku | 50,948 (2000) | Oriente Province, Ubundu Territory, west of Luulaba River. | Lingala is increasing in use. |
| | | Mongo | 400,000 (1995) | Southern half of Equateur Province and northeastern part of Bandundu Province. | |
| | | Nande | 903,000 (1991) | Nord-Kivu Province, mainly in Beni and Lubero territories. | |
| | | Ngombe | 150,000 (1971) | Equateur Province, extensive area along both sides of Congo River, primarily in Mongala District and in adjacent parts of Southern Ubangi and Equateur districts. Binja is in Orientale Province, Aketi Territory. | |
| | | Ntomba | 100,000 (1980) | Bandundu Province, northeast of Lake Tumba. | |
| | | Nyanga | 150,000 (1994) | Nord-Kivu Province, Walikale Territory, Wanyanga Collectivité. | Many also use Congo Swahili. Literacy rate in second language: 20% to 30%. Agriculturalists: rice, beans, greens, manioc, tomato, onion, banana, avocado, papaya, pineapple, mango. |
| | | Sengele | 17,000 (2002) | Bandundu Province, west of Lake Mai-Ndombe. | |
| | | Songe | 1,000,000 (1991) | Kasai Oriental Province, between Sankuru and Luulaba rivers, mainly in Kabinda Zone and eastward into Kongolo and Kabolo territories of Katanga Province. | |
| | | Tabwa | 250,000 in DRC (1972). Population total all countries: 310,000. | Katanga Province, on Lake Tanganyika, south of Moba. Also spoken in Zambia. | |
| | | Talinga | 30,890 in DRC (2000) | Nord-Kivu Province, Beni Territory, Butalinga County, within the boundaries of the Virunga National Park, up to the Uganda border. | Congo Swahili is the lingua franca in the area. The name "Talinga" is used in Democratic Republic of the Congo and "Bwisi" in Uganda. |
| | | Tetela | 750,000 (1991) | Northern Kasai Oriental Province. | |
| | | Yaka | 700,000 in DRC (2000). Population total all countries: 900,000. | Bandundu Province (400,000), Popokabaka and Kasongo Lunda territories. Also spoken in Angola. | Kituba is the lingua franca. |
| | | Yansi | 100,000 (1997). | Bandundu Province, Bulungu Territory, Loange River area. | 75% of the speakers have routine proficiency in Kituba. |

Table 2: *Niger-Congo > Adamawa-Ubangian*

| Family | Genus | Language | Number of speakers | Where | Comments |
|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------|--|---|---|
| Niger-Congo | Adamawa-Ubangian (10) | Barambu | 25,570 (1990). | Oriente Province, Poko Territory, between the Bomokandi and Uélé rivers. | Extinct in Sudan in 1975. |
| | | Dongo | 5,000 (1971 Welmers). 2,900 (2000). | Oriente Province, east of Watsa. | |
| | | Ma | 4,700 (1977 Voegelin and Voegelin). | Oriente Province, north of Niangara, close to Kapili River. | Closest to Dongo. |
| | | Mba | 14,000 to 20,000 (1977 UFM). | Oriente Province, Banalia Territory, Banjwade area. | Bilingualism in Congo Swahili. Vigorous. Children have difficulty with Congo Swahili. Perhaps 45% of children are in school. SVO, SOV. |
| | | Mondunga | 2,500 (1977 Voegelin and Voegelin). | Equateur Province, 8 villages in Lisala Territory. | |
| | | Mündü | 2,800 in DRC, 23,000 in Sudan. Population total both countries 25,800. | | Closest to Mayoogo and Bangba. Bangala is the lingua franca, but people have difficulty understanding it. There is intermarriage with the Avokaya and Baka, and bilingualism in those languages. Some bilingualism also in Bangala and Arabic. Literacy rate in first language: 10% to 15%. Literacy rate in second language: 25% to 50%. |
| | | Ngbaka | 1,000,000 in DRC (1999). | Equateur Province, Gemena Territory and surrounding area, 850 villages. Also spoken in CAR, Congo. | Dialect differences are minor. Many do not speak Lingala. All ages. Vigorous. |
| | | Ngbandi | 250,000 in DRC (2000 SIL). 75,000 monolinguals. Population total all countries: 250,294. | Equateur Province, Mobaye and Yakoma territories, extending into Orientale Province, Bondo Territory. Also spoken in CAR. | Vigorous. Some speakers of other languages use it for trade in border areas. All domains. Oral use in some churches. Oral literature. Positive language attitude. 70% have routine proficiency in Lingala; 10% can speak French. |
| | | Nzakara | | Oriente Province, northwestern part of Bondo Territory, on the border with the Central African Republic. | |
| | | Zande | 730,000 in DRC. Population total all countries 1,142,000. | Far north of Orientale Province, Bas-Uele District. Also spoken in CAR, Sudan. | The speech of the Zande in Sudan is fairly uniform except for the Mbomu, Sueh-Meridi, Bile, Bandiya, Bamboy, Bomokandi, Anunga. Agriculturalists. SVO, VSO. |

Table 3: *Nilo-Saharan > Central Sudanic.*

| Family | Sub-family | Genus | Language | Number of speakers | Where | Comments | |
|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|---------------------|---|--|---|
| Nilo-Saharan | Central Sudanic | Bongo-Bagirmi (1) | Bagiro | 12,000 (1984). | Equateur Province, Nord Ubangi, east of Bosobolo in Bosobolo and Mobaye territories. | Most are bilingual in Lingala, Sango, Mono, or Gbanziri. Lingala comprehension is limited. | |
| | | Lendu (2) | Lendu | 750,000 (1996). | Orientale Province, Ituri District, Djugu Territory, west and northwest of Lake Albert. | Bilingualism in Swahili. | |
| | | Mangbetu (2) | Ngiti | 100,000 (1991 SIL). | Orientale Province, Irumu Territory, south of Bunia. | | |
| | | | Mangbetu | 620,000 | Orientale Province, Rungu, Niangara, Poko, Watsa, Wamba, and northeast corner of Banalia territories. The Popoi group is in Banalia Territory, and the Aberu group is in Wamba Territory. | Perhaps 50% know Bangala, another 10% have low proficiency. Popoi and Aberu are in Swahili-speaking areas. | |
| | | | | Asua | | Orientale Province, Rungu Territory, Ituri Forest, among Mangbetu groups Maele, Meje, Aberu, and Popoi. | Not inherently intelligible to Mangbetu-Meje speakers. Some Asoa learn Mangbetu-Meje. Mangbetu men sometimes take Asoa wives, but Mangbetu women do not ordinarily marry Asoa men. A pygmy forager group. Hunter-gatherers. |
| | | | Mangbutu-Efe (3) | Efe | 20,000 (1991 SIL). | Orientale Province, Mambasa, Watsa, Irumu, and Djugu territories. | They live among the Balese and trade with them. A pygmy forager group. Forest, savanna. |
| | | | | Lese | 50,000 (1991 SIL). | Orientale Province, Watsa, Djugu, Irumu, and Mambasa territories. | Congo Swahili (Kingwana) and Bangala are the lingua francas, but their use is somewhat limited. |
| | | | | Mamvu | 60,000 (1991 SIL.) | Orientale Province, west and southwest of Watsa in Watsa Territory | |
| | | | Moru-Ma'di (3) | Avokaya | 25,000 | Orientale Province, Faradje Territory, close to Sudan border | Closely related to Logo. There is intermarriage and bilingualism with the Baka and Mundu, especially near Maridi. Some speakers are bilingual in Zande. |
| | | | | Logoti | 210,000 (1989 SIL). | Orientale Province, Faradje Territory and Watsa town. | Closely related to Avokaya and Omi. |
| | | | | Lugbara | 840,000 | Orientale Province, Aru Territory. | |

3. Multilingual practices found among micro linguistic areas of Northern DRC formed by migratory movements

In this section we will study the characteristics of the mixed linguistic situation found in the northern area of the DRC, where two genetically distinct families of languages are spoken: Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan. We will consider 3 types of sociolinguistic situations resulting from different interrelations among the individuals of the ethnic groups speaking those languages:

(a) the relation of contact among some neighbor groups, as instantiated by the Bantoid Bila language, in contact with the Central Sudanic Mangbutu-Efe group;

(b) the relation of symbiosis, as illustrated by the cooperative relationship established between groups of farmers and groups of foragers;

(c) the relation between fragmented and isolated languages and other languages of the surrounding majority groups (the Mba language from the fragmented Adamawa-Ubangian genus, isolated among Central Sudanic and Bantoid languages).

The northern zone of the DRC is an extremely heterogeneous area, both linguistically and culturally. Among the facts that could help us understand why does this area have such a diverse population could be the inherent beauty of this obscured zone. The DRC is a country with a varied and rich ecological and geological environment. The equator line divides this country into two halves. To the north lies the rain forest belt, which extends from West Africa until the Great Rift Valley. The savanna grasslands roll northwise from the rain forest into Sudan, and into the CAR. The Congo River basin has traditionally been the main route of communication in this country.

The diverse microenvironments found in the DRC are the habitat of rare flora and fauna specimens. The unique richness of this land has attracted immigrants from different parts of Central Africa, as well as foreigners from Europe and America. Some of the immigrants entered as refugees escaping from famine or from the attacks of their enemies. Some others were aggressive warriors who ambited the wealth of the land. And some others were merchants in search of fortune.

It is believed that the first immigrants to arrive were Central Sudanic tribes (Tuckner and Bryan, 1956), who settled first in the Ituri-Aruwimi forest area. Some of those Sudanic tribes (Mamvu, Mangbutu, Ma'di-Moru) would have entered through the northeastern area of the DRC pushed by the attack of rival tribes or by the hard living conditions imposed by the desert. Some of those groups encountered the Pygmies (named 'Efe' in the Central Sudanic Lese language), who are believed to be the original inhabitants of this area. The Pygmies were living as hunter-gatherers in mobile camps scattered in the depths of the forest (Turnbull, 1965; Cavalli-Sforza, 1986; Bahuchet, 1992, Grinker 1994), and the Sudanic incomers established a collaborative relation with them (Mangbutu-Efe). The Sudanic immigrants found in the forest a natural protection against their enemies and a fertile and attractive land to live in, and settled in the vicinity of the forest. Some of those Sudanic tribes divided up into small groups and moved further in the northwest direction until they reached the Ubangi-Uele River Basins.

To this area there also came some other more aggressive Sudanic tribes, like the Mangbetu. They invaded zones in the north savanna and expanded their influence into neighbor tribes, which acted as satellites for the Mangbetu expansion.

Later, about 1,000 BC, Bantu farmers immigrated into the Northeastern area coming from the Southeast³. They were mainly farmers who dwelled in stable villages they built by the rivers and brought into the forest the agricultural techniques, which they used in their gardens, as well as the use of iron and pottery. The settlement of the successive tribes of Sudanic and Bantu farmers did not suppose the extinction of the Pygmies. One important reason for that was that the knowledge the Pygmies had of the forest proved to be of great help to the farmers. The two groups, Pygmies and farmers, soon established a symbiotic relationship, which has lasted for centuries. The farmers introduced the Pygmies to the fire, the arch, spears, nets (Turnbull, 1965), and they provided the Pygmies with vegetables, salt, soap, and pans for cooking. The Pygmies provided the farmers with meat, honey, and herbs for medicinal purposes, or, during the colonial period, ivory and red rubber. They also worked for the farmers helping them in building their houses or at their gardens, or even helped the farmers to fight against their enemies. Pygmies made use of the innovations and artifacts brought by the farmers but did not set to produce them.

The third group of immigrants was the Adamawa-Ubangian tribes. They came from West Africa around 1,000 BC in a great West-to-East migratory movement that took place in central Africa. They moved eastwards from the Atlantic coast until they reached the basin of the river Bahr-el-Ghazal (Bouquiaux and Thomas, 1980). They went along the savanna, north of the border of the equatorial rain forest. The Ngbaka-Sere-Ngbandi peoples were at the advancing edge of that migratory movement. They settled in today's Sudan, between the river Bahr-el-Ghazal and the White Nile River. Another group, the Zande-Nzakara, settled in the south of the Ngbaka-Sere-Ngbandi, in Sudan territory and on the border with the DRC.

Around 1000 AC some Nilotic invasions came from the north and forced the Ngbaka-Sere-Ngbandi to move towards the south. The Ngbaka-Sere-Ngbandi tribes took different ways. The Sere people became fragmented into small groups, which dwelled in the basin of the river Lol (Bahr-el-Ghazal), Sudan, and of the river Ubangi-Mbomou. Some Sere people remain today south and north the river Uele, among the Zande majority.

The Gbanzili went further south and got into the forest, where they met the Pygmies with whom they established contact. Gbanzili and Pygmies became a symbiotic unity and the Pygmies accompanied the Gbanzili in their further migrations.

Around 1,800 AC the Avongara, a Zande speaking group, crossed the Mbomou River and entered the territory between the Uele and the Mbomou River. They conquered a wide area of the north savanna and imposed their language and their culture to the tribes they found already settled in the area they invaded. Zande spread as a lingua franca and a large number of tribes adopted it as their mother tongue. This situation changed during the colonial period, when the Zande territory was divided up between the Belgians, the British and the French. As a consequence, the Zande nation lost its former importance and the use of the Zande language receded.

³ Tuckner (1967) reports that in his prehistory Czekanowski (1924:568) proposes three migration zones in central Africa:

- 1) The Nile and Great Lake area. The invasion swept from Northeast to South.
- 2) The savanna lands north of the forest belt, where the movement was from West to East.
- 3) The forest belt itself, where the last migrations were from Southwest to Northeast.

Tuckner (1967:x) further reports Colonel Bertrand's brief summary of the invasion of this area: "Towards the end of the Neolithic Age, in the 16th Century, the Momvu spread, following a direction roughly Ruwenzori-Chari. To the east, a mixing with the Shilluk-Dinka invaders produced the Bari-Logo group, while to the west, a mixing with West African influences gave birth to the Makere. Two invasions descended upon this grouping of tribes: the Sudanic wave (Bangba-Mayogo-Mundu, etc.; the Bwaka of Ubangi belong also to this group) and the Bantu, who were the next to arrive".

What were the effects that those migratory movements had on the linguistic code of the languages spoken by the individuals of the different ethnic groups?

One of the effects was the spreading of grammatical features among genetically different groups of languages. The individuals from different ethnic groups would hold sporadic encounters with other individuals from other groups or would make more permanent relationships, such as intermarriages, during their long migratory journey, and through those relations, they would contribute to spreading some salient features of their native language. That could have been the case of logophoricity, which is a feature shared by the languages spoken over a large area of central Africa (Güldemann, 2003).

Another effect was the modification of the grammatical code of one of the languages that were in contact. That modification could range from a partial to a total one. Bila may be taken as an illustration of a partially modified grammatical code, while the languages spoken by the different Pygmy groups may be taken as an illustration of a deeper modification of the grammatical code of one of the languages in contact.

3.1. Contact with the neighbors

Bila (D.32) is a Bantoid language spoken in an area geographically contiguous to the one where the Central Sudanic Mangbutu-Efe languages are spoken. Bila has nominal and verbal morphological systems that differ in some respects from the Bantoid ones. Those differences affect both the nominal and the verbal categories.

Bantoid languages have a system of noun genders, usually referred to as classes, with overt class markers on the noun. The number of genders ranges between 5 and 20. The system of gender assignment is semantic and formal, but the different genders are non-sex based. The genders are usually numbered in singular/plural pairs as 1/2, 3/4, etc. Genders are represented by morphological segments that are prefixed to the noun stem. The modifiers of the noun formally concord with the class prefixes of the noun. The same morphological segment standing for the class of a noun is spread and prefixed to any of its modifiers. Concord also affects the verb: the gender prefix of a noun acting as subject or as object is copied as a prefix on the verb.

Kutsch Lojenga (2003) reports that Bila does not have the typical noun classes of Bantoid languages. It only has petrified segments of such system. The gender system in Bila just differentiates between animate and inanimate entity-denoting nouns. The inanimate referring nouns only have one form for singular and plural. The animate referring nouns have two forms: one for the singular and another for the plural. The plural has the prefix *ba-* while the singular may have either a nasal consonant prefix, or no mark:

| (1) | Singular | Plural |
|-----|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | <i>nkpá</i> 'person, man' | <i>ba-kpá</i> 'people' |
| | <i>nbila</i> 'bila man' | <i>ba-bila</i> 'bila people' |
| | <i>emá</i> 'mother' | <i>b-emá</i> 'mothers' |

| | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>èpà</i> 'father' | <i>b-èpà</i> 'fathers' |
| <i>míkí</i> 'child' | <i>ba-míkí</i> 'children' |
| <i>m-ekálí</i> 'sister' | <i>be-kálí</i> 'sisters' |
| <i>m-elóko</i> 'brother' | <i>b-elóko</i> 'brothers' |

Another difference between Bila and Bantoid languages affects the verbal derivative forms. Bantoid languages have verbal derivational affixes that are valency-changing categories. The most common are causative, applicative, stative, reciprocal, reversive and passive. In Bila, only the causative derivation affix seems to be productive. It also has a reciprocal derived form, but it has no passive derivative verbal form. Below are some examples of the causative derivation in Bila, which is marked by the verbal extension morpheme *-ís-*.

- (2) a. *beló*
bel- ó
root- INF
'to be angry'
- b. *belísó*
bel- *ís-* ó
angry CAUS-INF
'to make someone angry'
- (3) a. *kákálá*
kákál-á
dry INF
'to dry' (intr.)
- b. *kákálísó*
kákál-*ís-* ó
dry CAUS-INF
'to dry (something)'

The reciprocal derivation is marked by the verb extension *-án-*, or *-ón-*:

- (4) a. *é'ká*
é'k-á
'to hear'
- b. *é'káná*
é'k- *án-*á
hear- RECP-INF
'to agree'

- (5) a. *dongá*
 dong-á
 ‘to disturb’
- b. *dongáná*
 dong-án-á
 disturb-CAUS-INF
 ‘to fight one against the other’

Considering that Central Sudanic languages do not have a nominal gender system, nor do they have a derived verbal passive form, this reduction in the number of genders found in Bila, as well as the reduction in the number of derived verbal forms may have been influenced by the contact between Bila speakers and their Central Sudanic Efe-Lese neighbors.

3.2. A symbiotic relationship between farmers and foragers

In the extreme case, the modification of the grammatical code of one of the languages in contact would have been so important that the original code of the language would seem to have been lost. The languages spoken by different groups of Pygmy foragers may illustrate such a case.

Pygmy foragers speak languages that are similar to the languages of the farmers with whom they hold a symbiotic relationship. The different groups of foragers that live scattered throughout the forest belt, from the Ituri forest to Cameroon, even though they form a cultural and ethnical homogeneous group (Cavalli-Sforza, 1986), do not speak today the same language. That seems a remarkable fact considering that they have substantially preserved the way of life they had some 2000 or 3000 years ago⁴.

Ever since Stanley met the Pygmies, anthropologists and linguists have been puzzled about what could have been the original language of the foragers, if they had one of their own. Some scientists have been skeptical about the existence of an ancestral common Pygmy language (Johnston, 1908; Van Bulck, 1952). Others, overwhelmed by the cultural and ethnical affinities among the geographically distant groups of Pygmies (Baka in Cameroon; Aka in the CAR; Twa, Mbuti (Sua, Efe, Asua) in the DRC), were convinced that the different groups of Pygmies should have been linguistically related at some time, and sought linguistic evidence that would prove the earlier relationship among Pygmy groups (Smith, 1938; Turnbull, 1965; Vorbichler, 1966/67; Schebesta, 1977).

Some phonetic data seems to favor the last view. In a contrastive study of the phonetic system of Efe and its related Central Sudanic languages, Mamvu and Mangbutu, Vorbichler (1966/67) showed that Efe has some phonetic features that are not shared by the farmers’ languages, such as a hard glottal stop /ʔ/, a soft glottal stop /ɔ/, or a retroflex realization of the phonemes /r/, /d/. Below we illustrate the articulation of the postvelar phoneme /x/ in Efe, Lese and Manvu.

⁴ The persistence of the Pygmies’ way of life after 2,000 or 2,500 years or even more contact with farmers is a remarkable phenomenon. Cavalli-Sforza (1986) suggests that the survival of the Pygmies’ foraging cultural tradition has to be associated to the survival of the equatorial forest itself, which has acted as a natural refuge for the hunting-gathering culture. Another important motivation for conservatism is the attractiveness of the hunting and gathering seminomadic way of life compared with the sedentarism of the farmers. Moreover, the mode of cultural transmission contributed to the lack of acculturation. All the skills of the hunter-gatherer life are learned very early in life and that may leave an indelible imprint.

- (6) ɔʔa (Efe) (hard glottal stop)
 ɔ'a (Efe) (soft glottal stop)
 ɔxa (Lese) (fricative)
 ɔqa (Manvu) (explosive)
 'to talk' (Vorbichler, 1966/67:262-263)
- (7) ʔagya (Efe) (hard glottal stop)
 xaya (Lese) (fricative)
 qaya (Mamvu) (explosive)
 'guinea fowl' (Vorbichler, 1966/67:273)

More recently, Bahuchet (1992) has presented important vocabulary data that support the hypothesis of a common language for all Pygmy groups in the forest belt of central Africa. The test data for that hypothesis is the shared specialized forest vocabulary of Bantoid Aka (CAR) and the Ubangian Baka (Cameroon). Aka and Baka, although not mutually intelligible today, share more than 20% of their vocabulary, 88% of which is specialized vocabulary related to forest knowledge. It includes words that refer to flora and fauna, animal behavior, tools, techniques. Bahuchet proposes that Aka and Baka originated from the same ancestral population, which he reconstructs as the *Baakaa people⁵. In Bahuchet's view, their common vocabulary is remnant of the language spoken by both groups before they borrowed, respectively, the Bantoid and Ubangian languages.

3.3. Fragmentation and isolation

Finally, some languages have become so geographically dispersed that it may be difficult to determine the direction of the borrowing among the languages in contact. That is the case of the Ubangian languages, the eastern branch of the languages of the Adamawa-Ubangian genus. The Ubangian group is extremely fragmented (Boyd, 1995). There are some islands of Mba speaking people living among some Central Sudanic tribes in the Uele basin, and some other small Mba groups are living among Bantoid people by the Ituri River, north of Kisangani. Some Ngbaka speaking tribes live among Central Sudanic people north of the Ituri River. There are also some small groups of Sere speaking people, who live among Zande majority.

4. The official view of multilingualism

What is the official view sustained by the different administrations on the multilingual reality of the Democratic Republic of the Congo? The coexistence of a large number of diverse native languages in the DRC has been an important challenge to the successive administrations that have governed this huge territory, for whom the language policy has been a critical issue.

But probably because the language policy has not been comparatively considered a priority as urgent as other more vital national concerns, or probably because the problems posed by multilingual societies are extremely difficult to solve, the different administrations seem to have, on the whole, obviated the multilingual reality of the country.

⁵ Bahuchet relates the *Baakaa proto-language to the geographical area inhabited today by the Mbuti.

Perhaps the most direct evidence of the lack of commitment on the part of the administration to the multilingual situation is the fact that the Constitution only gives an official status to five languages out of the 214 that are currently spoken in the DRC (Ethnologue, 2005): French, which is the official language of the administration, and four native languages – termed as ‘national languages’ in the Constitution –, namely Lingala, Congo Swahili, TshiLuba, and Kongo.

Why does a country with 214 native languages decide to adopt a non-ethnic language as its official language? What is the reason that out of the 214 native languages only those four have been chosen as ‘national languages’? What are the consequences of that language policy?

That official decision seems to aim at promoting those languages that would ensure the most effective means for interethnic and international communication. French was adopted as the official language after Independence (June 30, 1960) by the president Kasavubu. Since then, most governments made important efforts in making French the official language. Lingala, Swahili, TshiLuba and Kongo are widely used for inter-ethnic, as well as international communication. They are used as *linguae francae* by people who speak a different first language, who are, thus, able to communicate among each other in equal terms. Each of them is spoken in a different area (Heine 1972).

TABLE 4: TITLE? THE “NATIONAL LANGUAGES”

| Language | Genus | Number of speakers (Ndolo, 1992) | Area |
|---------------|---------|----------------------------------|---|
| Lingala | Bantoid | 37,46% | Kinshasa, Equateur, Bandundu, province Orientale |
| Congo Swahili | Bantoid | 27,49% | Lumbashi, Katanga, Kivu, Mariwma, South-East of the province Orientale (Kisangani, Beni...) |
| TshiLuba | Bantoid | 19,30% | Kasai, Bandundu |
| Kongo | Bantoid | 15,75% | Bas-Congo, Bandundu |

The official treatment of those four native languages as ‘national languages’ seems to be a recognition to the geographical expansion of those languages, which were used as a medium of communication among different tribes already long before the colonial period. Those languages were further supported by the immigrant international community, who found in their use a possible solution to the problem of communicating with the native multilingual African population.

But why has French been preferred to any of those four national languages for the official communication? During the Belgian colonial period, the colonial government attempted to promote Lingala as the official language of the Belgian Congo, but they failed in doing so. The colonial authorities mistakenly overestimated the importance of Lingala and did not take into account the real linguistic situation of the country. After the country’s independence, French became the only official language. That solution not only avoided the problem of having to decide which language to select and, hence, to favor with an official status one among the 214 native languages, but it was also thought it would contribute towards the development and stability of the newly independent country.

It was believed that using French as the official language could have many advantages for the country and for the general population. One immediate advantage would be in international communication. Expressing the official communications in the ONU in French could enable the government of the DRC to have a more intelligible and direct communication with the representatives of the governments of most nations, who have more familiarity with French than with the national languages.

Another important advantage would be in the area of high education and science. Being fluent in French, the population could have immediate access to the latest international scientific

and cultural literature. People would not have to wait until that literature was translated into their vernacular language.

A further advantage would be in the area of human rights. Using French may be a protection against the potential linguistic discrimination of a group in power, whose members may speak a particular native language not spoken as a first language by other ethnic groups. It may also grant that people from different ethnic groups may have the same opportunities.

However, the French prominence linguistic policy maintained by the governments also had many drawbacks. One negative consequence is that it affected the growth of literature in national languages (Mputubwele, 2003, Mbelolo 1972).

Most vernacular languages are oral and do not have a written literary tradition. Setting a written literature, rooted in the oral traditions of the country, is a hard enterprise that requires the collaboration of educated Africans and the ethnical communities that are the holders of the traditions. But national languages are not as prestigious as French (Chaudenson and Rakotomalala, 2004), and most educated Africans have a very limited knowledge of their own native language, which they hardly speak or write. Therefore, very few educated Africans set to the enterprise of fixing the ethnical identity by means of a literature written in a national language.

The efforts made by the governments did not succeed in generalizing the use of French among the native population. French is still spoken by a minority of educated Africans, and is used in the areas of the executive, judiciary and legislative, education, the media and international relations and business. At the national level, the majority of the people speak one of the four national languages.

Kongo, Lingala and TshiLuba first began to be used for trade and communication between the various ethnic groups of central Africa long before the Europeans first came to this continent, while the expansion of Swahili is attributed to the Arab slave trade and the Arab influence in eastern Africa. During the Belgian colonial period (1908-1960), those languages were instrumental in making contact possible between the colonial authorities and the various people.

Belgium fixed French as the official language for the colony, and French was used in trade and business. However, its use was largely restricted to Europeans. It was not used in schools for the education of indigenous children. For communicating with the indigenous population, the colonial government favored Lingala over the other national languages. That choice was due to the extension of Lingala over the Congo River, which was a crucial route of communication used for the transport of goods. Lingala, the mother tongue of the Bangala people, was used by many riverside populations of the Congo River, from Kisangani, in the Oriental Province, to Kinshasa. On the other hand, Swahili was rejected for its association with Arab slave traders.

After independence, the national languages were introduced in some institutions for higher learning and universities. Of the national languages, Lingala has expanded considerably. The reason for that expansion could be that it had already been chosen by the colonial administration as the language for the army, the police and the colonial agents. Moreover, president Mobutu used Lingala, his mother tongue, for communicating with the people. Popular music has also contributed to the expansion of Lingala, since almost 90% of Congolese popular music is sung in Lingala.

5. Conclusions

We have considered some sociolinguistic effects found in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, which may be attributed to the multilingual mode of communication practised in this

country. In particular, we have examined the influence of multilingualism on mixing the linguistic codes of the languages in contact, and the contribution of multilingualism to the spreading of linguistic features over different genetic families spoken in a macro-area. We have also considered some of the political actions taken by the administrations to solve the extremely difficult problems that arise in countries with multilingual societies.

Abbreviations: CAUS causative; INF infinitive; RECP reciprocal

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