



Working Papers in Educational Linguistics (WPEL)

Volume 2
Number 2 *Fall 1986*

Article 3

10-1-1986

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**LANGUAGE POLICY AND USE IN ZAIRE:
Issues, Influences and Directions**

Nora J. Hunt-Johnson

Introduction

The territorial boundaries which form Zaire were drawn some 100 years ago when Europe was establishing its African colonies. Since then, the country has been ruled by a Belgian monarch, a colonial regime, and presently, a Zairian autocrat. Each ruling individual or group has had to grapple with the problems entailed in governing a vast territory inhabited by peoples of tremendous linguistic and ethnic diversity. While their political philosophies, strategies and goals have differed, their language policies reflect common concerns and patterns. All those holding power in Zaire have felt a need to control language usage within certain contexts in ways they thought would best serve their aspirations for the country's development.

The language policies and practices of those in power have often varied, but they have always had important influences on the languages spoken in Zaire. This is especially true of the four national languages and the official language, French. These language policies, whether proposed and carried out before or after independence, have been characterized by a pattern of inconsistency. By and large, they

have not followed well-laid plans but have reflected the realities of governing a vast territory inhabited by diverse peoples, and the often conflicting motives of both those in power and those in a position to effect change. We shall see that although some good proposals for language planning have been put forward over the years, the country's rulers have invariably opted for the most expedient course. This tendency has typically been motivated by a concern to minimize conflict among the diverse groups and to maintain the status quo. In the end, language policies in Zaire have yet to be based on planning which takes account of the actual linguistic situation in the country, i.e. exact number of languages spoken; number of people who speak each language; extent of dialectal diversity within languages; the amount of bilingualism and multilingualism among Zairians; and the desires and best interests of the majority of the population (Ndoma 1977: 123).

Forces shaping language usage in Zaire have always been stronger than any power which has sought to control them. In considering language policy and usage in Zaire from the pre-colonial period to the present, we see a variety of forces creating, developing and disseminating a number of lingua francas even while the colonial language, French, was ostensibly chosen for primary usage in Zaire. This paper will examine these forces and their effects in light of the language policies that have been instituted in Zaire.

Pre-Colonial Period

Historical forces shaping ethnic diversity
and language usage in Zaire

A vast country situated in the center of Africa, Zaire is a land of equatorial rain forests, savannah, and highlands, rich in natural resources. It has an extensive system of waterways, the largest and best known of which is the Zaire River, formerly the Congo; most of these rivers drain into the Atlantic Ocean, at the country's westernmost boundary (Roth 1979: 108-110).

The diversity which characterizes Zaire's natural environment is also evident in the country's inhabitants. A 2,000 year process of immigration, internal movement and mixing, and adaptation to the physical environment has produced a situation today in which there are an estimated 250 different ethnic groups in Zaire, ranging in size from a few thousand to 2.5 million.

Traditionally, these groups were not fixed entities. The early inhabitants of Zaire were mostly Bantu-speaking peoples who had migrated from the north. They lived together in small groups, usually organized on the basis of kinship, and survived through rudimentary agriculture, hunting, gathering, and fishing. When the land they were working became infertile, the groups moved on. Between the second millennium A.D. and the 19th Century, two sets of non-Bantu peoples entered the savannah north of the rain forest. Some came as small

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groups, like the Bantus before them, and others were conquerors. With their arrival, the Bantu speakers in the savannah either moved out or were assimilated. These processes of infiltration, movement and conflict created a mosaic pattern in the distribution of Zaire's inhabitants such that communities which shared the same ethnic name or were otherwise closely related were sometimes scattered among alien groups (Roth 1979: 9-11).

By the 1500's, some groups had organized themselves into large scale polities or small states. In some cases, these states combined to form kingdoms. The Kongo Kingdom in the western part of Zaire, near the coast, came into being in the 15th Century and lasted until the 16th (Roth 1979: 12-20). Another kingdom, the Luba, was founded at about the same time and covered a large portion of the grasslands south of the tropical rain forest of the Congo basin. The formation of these kingdoms led to the development of some of the more widespread contact languages. As early as the 19th Century, the inhabitants of the Luba Kingdom, the BaLuba, had developed a colloquial common language for intercommunication. Now known as Tshiluba, this language is one of four in Zaire which are today the official national languages. Of these, Tshiluba is considered the only truly indigenous Zairian language; the other three, KiKongo, Lingala and Swahili developed through contact with groups from outside of Zaire (Polome 1963: 5).

The first known contact between any Zairian peoples and outsiders after the first millennium was with Portuguese explorers who landed at the mouth of the Congo River in 1493. This event was the start of

relationship between the Kongo Kingdom and the Portuguese which would last until the middle of the 17th Century. Dealings between the two groups primarily revolved around the exchange of ivory and slaves who would work for missionaries and lend technical assistance. The need to communicate led to the development of a contact vernacular known as Fiote. According to Polome, this language was a simplified form of a Kongo dialect. Over the years, its lexicon was renewed through numerous borrowings from other vernaculars spoken in southwest Zaire. Today the language is commonly referred to as KiKongo (also known as Kituba) and is primarily used in the regions of Bas Zaire and Bandundu.

Another of Zaire's national languages to develop as a result of foreign penetration is Swahili. It was brought to the eastern part of Zaire during the latter half of the 19th Century by Afro-Arab slave traders from Zanzibar and other areas on the East African coast. Originally used as a trade language, Swahili is today the second most widely spoken lingua franca in Zaire and is the principal language of wider communication of the eastern regions of Haut-Zaire, Kivu and Shaba (Bokamba 1977: 183).

In summary, the pre-colonial period was a time when Zaire's inhabitants were widely scattered about the vast territory, living together in small groups based on lineage ties. Ethnic boundaries were fairly elastic due to the processes of immigration, assimilation, and movement. While many languages were spoken, perhaps as many as 700, by one estimate, contact with the Portuguese in the west and Afro-Arabs in

the east had already given rise to two language of wider communication, Kikongo and Swahili (Yates 1980: 258). In addition, the existence of at least one of the large political entities known as kingdoms led to the development of an indigenous lingua franca now known as Tshiluba. Lingala, Zaire's fourth national language would emerge as a dominant lingua franca during the Leopold era.

The Colonial Period

Zaire's colonial history may be divided into two periods: The Leopold Era, from 1885 to 1908, when the country was recognized as the Belgian King's personal possession and known as the Congo Free State; and the time from 1908 to 1960 when the country was ruled by the Belgian government and called the Belgian Congo. In this section, therefore, Zaire will be referred to as either the Congo Free State or the Belgian Congo, depending on the time frame.

The Leopold Era - 1885 to 1908

During the latter part of the 19th Century, when the European powers were attempting to divide the various African territories among themselves in a peaceful manner, King Leopold II began to cast a desiring eye on the Congo. The territory's interior had been unexplored, and hence uncoveted, until the explorations of Scottish missionary David Livingstone were made known to the Western world in the 1870's. European occupation of Africa was well underway by that time, and Leopold saw the Congo as an opportunity to expand his domain. Since no one contested his claim to the territory, he was able

to gain sovereign rights to the Congo through the Berlin Act of 1885. The act was passed during a conference held by thirteen European nations to settle disputes over the exploitation of Africa (Roth 1979: 29).

In return for his rights to the Congo, Leopold promised, among other things: to guarantee freedom of trade within the Congo Free State to people of all nationalities; to suppress the Afro-Arab slave trade; and to work toward the improvement of the condition of the indigenous population (Roth 1979: 29). These rather altruistic objectives were not, of course, among Leopold's major goals in assuming control of the Congo.

As stated above, the Congo Free State was Leopold's possession and did not belong to Belgium until 1908. Because most Belgians were not interested in joining the King's African venture, Leopold was forced to enlist the aid of other nationals to settle the Congo. Non-Belgian traders, army officers, missionaries, company agents and plantation holders made up at least forty percent of the white population in the Congo Free State (Yates 1980: 260). They came to the Congo for various reasons: missionaries, most of whom were either Flemish Catholics from Belgium or Protestants from Britain, were there to proselytize to the natives; other Europeans aimed to enrich themselves through mining and plantation agriculture. Many would have joined Leopold in claiming that they had come to Africa to bring civilization and, in so doing, to better the lives of the native population.

The multilingual character of the Congo Free State's inhabitants and settlers necessitated some sort of official language policy. It was natural for Leopold, a native French speaker, to declare his mother tongue the Free State's official language. Use of French was in keeping with his desire to "Belgianize" the Congolese. For Leopold and the Belgians, Belgianization required that Belgian values of hard work, efficiency, stability, and sobriety be instilled in the Congolese. The means to this instillation of values and ethics required that the Congolese have at least a rudimentary knowledge of French to permit communication with the European settlers. In this way, the Congolese would become "civilized" and the Free State an economically productive entity (Yates 1978).

Although the constraints of the Berlin agreement did not allow the King to force European settlers to use French, Leopold did all that he could to encourage French usage in schools, the army, factories, and mines. Officials in the administration, army officers and representatives of commercial enterprises were told to speak as much French as possible in their dealings with the Congolese. In this way, natives might acquire the rudiments of French. The government also tried to diffuse French usage through the school system: the Education Act of 1890 and the 1906 Concordat between the Vatican and the colonial government required that a certain amount of French be taught to Congolese school children. A consideration of missionary influence during the Leopold era and the great forces of multilingualism will help to explain the expansion of Congolese lingua francas and why

French did not take hold, despite the King's desires.

The role of missionaries in education

There were five kinds of schools in the Congo Free State by 1908: state-owned but Catholic missionary-operated colonies scolaires established by the 1890 Education Act; state-owned and -run vocational schools; mission schools which trained a certain percentage of students for state employment in return for annual government subsidies; and schools owned by commercial companies. Most Congolese children in school at this time attended independent non-subsidized Protestant mission schools (Yates 1980: 258).

French was a required subject in the colonies scolaires and vocational schools from the time of their establishment. By an agreement between the colonial government and the Vatican, signed in 1906, subsidized Catholic schools were also required to teach French. The 1906 Concordat gave each subsidized mission and school the right to establish its own curriculum, as long as Belgium's two national languages, French and Flemish, were included (Yates 1980: 259). The only institutions where French was used as a medium of instruction were vocational schools training clerks.

Missionaries, especially Catholics, did not pay much attention to government stipulations regarding French in the curriculum. They considered French antithetical to their goal of converting the Congolese to Christianity. Mastery of a European language, they argued, would make non-religious ideas accessible to the Congolese and

provide them with the skills they needed to find employment in the towns that were growing up as a result of the colonial economy (i.e. outside of the missionaries' sphere of influence). As the missionaries saw it, urban life was conducive to immorality and a drain on the Congolese manpower they needed to carry the message of Christianity throughout the land.

While Protestant missionaries disagreed with Catholics on a number of issues, they shared many of the same views on the negative effects of French. However, Protestants were not as easily able to ignore government policy. In the first place, they were considered foreigners by the Belgian administration and therefore incapable of properly Belgianizing the Congolese population. Secondly, they did not have the favored status that Catholic missionaries enjoyed by virtue of the strength of the Parti Catholique in the Belgian parliament. Leopold was dependent on the parliament to finance his Congo venture, which was not initially a profitable one, and he could ill afford to displease those holding the purse strings. Consequently, Catholic missionaries in the Congo were allowed a fair amount of freedom while Protestants felt compelled to abide by the colonial government's language directives.

According to Yates (1980), it was due to the Protestants that Catholics taught any French at all; when they did teach the language it was usually to compete with the Protestants for converts. This rivalry grew up as the colonial economy began to flourish and the Congolese became cognizant of the material advantages they could gain by

acquiring an education, skills, and knowledge of French. Catholic missionaries were aware of this growing consciousness and afraid that in failing to teach French they might lose ground to the Protestants. However, whenever the likelihood of losing converts seemed less great, Catholics invariably ceased teaching French (Yates 1980: 263).

The influence of Flemish Belgians and British Protestants

Another factor militating against the teaching of French was the missionaries' inability, reluctance or refusal to speak French themselves. As stated earlier, many of the Catholic missionaries were Flemish-speaking Belgians. A number of them did not know French or spoke it poorly as a second language. Others were averse to speaking French, an attitude which reflected many years of linguistic struggle between Walloons and Flemish Belgians. Debate over the Belgian language question was an issue throughout the colonial period and continues to be argued in Belgium to this day. Although the Education Act of 1890 and subsequent legislation declared Flemish to be a second official language of the colony, French retained its dominant position in government and commerce. However, Flemings did as much as they could to ensure that French was excluded from the realms of religion and education (Ndoma 1977: 143-169).

French was also a foreign language for the British Protestants. When they first established schools in the Congo, some British Protestants taught English to their students as well as the Congolese vernaculars. Afraid that the diffusion of English in the Congo might

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lead to the formation of English colonies within the State, the government threatened to supervise the Protestant curriculum if Protestants persisted in teaching English. It was not until the early 1890's, then, that Protestant mission schools began to include French in their curriculum (Yates 1980: 264).

Contributions of missionaries
to the expansion of the lingua franca

From the very beginning of European occupation, missionaries were involved in studying, mastering and teaching Congolese languages. By 1908, a number of dictionaries and grammars had been prepared, many of them sponsored by the government. Later, missionaries would devote themselves to the translation of doctrinal, liturgical and biblical texts, moving from a descriptive treatment of the languages they encountered toward prescriptive control and imposition (Fabian 1983: 173-174).

Unlike Leopold, missionaries did not believe in westernizing the Congolese. Their goal was to Christianize the population, something they felt could best be achieved by communicating with the people in their mother tongues, or at least in the Congolese languages of wider communication. Protestants believed in using the mother tongue of their congregants and generally learned the language spoken by the greatest number of people living near the mission station. They had a very low opinion of the lingua francas, such as KiKongo, considering them to be as foreign and offensive to many of the Congolese as they

were to Europeans (Yates 1980: 270).

Catholics, on the other hand, were much more likely to use a lingua franca in proselytizing, even when the language was not well known. Their reasons for doing this were practical. Some missionaries were reluctant to learn new local languages when moved to different missions, or they wanted to make use of instructional materials such as catechisms and prayer books that had already been prepared in the lingua francas. Another factor contributing to Catholic use of lingua francas was the heterogeneity of their early congregations. Among the first Catholic converts were Congolese who had resettled in unfamiliar areas after being saved from the Afro-Arab slave trade by the colonial army. Other early converts were urban workers and members of the army. Since these people came to the towns from a variety of ethnic groups, the easiest way for missionaries to communicate with them was by means of a lingua franca (Yates 1980: 268-69).

European goals in the Congo and the forces of multilingualism

As stated earlier, Leopold tried to develop the Congo Free State through a process of Belgianization and hence encouraged French usage. However, it should be noted that he did not want the Congolese to speak French; the Belgians were not seeking, as their French colonial contemporaries were, to open African minds to European culture and mode of thought. Their motives were far more practical. What they required, simply, were natives who would work in mines and factories, on the plantations, and a few who would occupy higher status positions

in the missions, schools, and government. Since a large number of Congolese intellectuals might pose a threat to colonial power, colonial policy was designed to keep the number of well educated Congolese to a minimum.

In any event, Leopold's desire that the Congolese population have at least a rudimentary facility with French was not fulfilled. As mentioned, the multilingual character of Europeans coming to the Free State often led to the use of a lingua franca for communication with the native population. In the case of Lingala, the development and expansion of one lingua franca not only follows the regional usage patterns established by the others, but is the direct beneficiary of a colonial institution—the army (Yates 1980: 267).

Lingala, like KiKongo and Swahili, was first a trade language. It developed prior to 1880 through commercial transactions carried on between the speakers of several closely related Bantu languages in the northwestern part of Zaire. When European explorers came to this area in the late 19th Century, they adopted this language for use with the natives and helped to contribute to its expansion along the Congo River. The ethnic groups whose intercommunication had created Lingala were lumped together by Europeans and called the "Bangala". Serving as militia, servants, and interpreters, the Bangala accompanied explorers throughout much of the country and, in this way, helped to spread Lingala. The Bangala also constituted a majority in the Free State's army, and for this reason, Lingala became the language of the army. Today, Lingala is widely spoken in Kinshasa, Zaire's capital city, and

in the Equateur region. It is considered by many Zairians to be the most extensively spoken language in the country (Bokamba 1977: 183).

Demise of the Congo Free State

Leopold's control of the Congo came to an end in 1908, when Belgium annexed the territory and renamed it the Belgian Congo. Abuses committed against the Congolese had been legion during Leopold's rule. Because state and company representatives collecting rubber and ivory were paid by commission, atrocious methods were frequently used to increase production. The stories of how white men used to have people's hands cut off when their work was found wanting are still recounted by contemporary Zairians. Reports of such incidents in the European press, and the ensuing international outcry against Leopold led to Belgian annexation of the Congo. What made this action palatable to Belgians was an awareness that the territory was finally turning a profit (Roth 1979: 31-32).

Leopold's linguistic legacy to the Belgian Parliament was not the one that he would have preferred. His attempt to make French the language of the Congo had failed due to the multinational makeup of the Europeans who joined his African venture, and because of the missionaries' tendency to ignore state directives on language policy for education. As a result, when they assumed power in the Congo, Belgian authorities found a situation in which the use of four, largely regional, lingua francas had greatly expanded, while only a very small Congolese minority could speak French.

The Belgian Congo: 1908 to 1960

The period during which the Congo was under the sovereignty of the Belgian parliament was a time when language issues in the colony were hotly debated. There were arguments about the value and danger of the spread of French among the Congolese. The government, missionaries and linguists discussed the question of choosing a national language for the country. Conflicts arose regularly between Flemings and Walloons over the formers' rights to use Flemish in the colony. Missionaries wrangled with one another over the classification and standardization of the Congolese languages (Polome 1968).

Language policies for education were changed a number of times in response to these various debates, but for the most part the lingua francas and local vernaculars were emphasized much more than French in the schools. While the government declared both French and Flemish to be official languages, they did not make great efforts to diffuse either of them among the Congolese population. They preferred to pursue a much more practical course in governing the state, making use of the existing lingua francas and trying not to have to make major decisions about language which might be controversial. Missionaries, for their part, continued to believe that the use of French was ineffective for evangelization and generally inappropriate to their goals. The attitudes and practices of both missionaries and the government did much to influence the spread of lingua francas and to keep French usage limited to a small number of Congolese.

Language policies and their relation to colonial administration

The Colonial Charter of 1908, which served as the fundamental law of the country during the colonial regime, designated French and Flemish as the colony's official languages but did not put constraints on the use of other languages. Flemish Belgians had demanded that Flemish be given co-official status with French lest they be made to feel like foreigners in their own territory. However, French retained its preeminent position in colonial government affairs, and the use of Flemish continued to be confined, for the most part, to native speakers. While most Flemings found French dominance difficult to accept, they let the Walloons persuade them that it was asking too much of the Congolese to learn two European languages. The burden of becoming familiar with Flemish as well as French could be a hindrance to Congolese evolution, it was argued; accordingly, Flemings reluctantly sacrificed their language rights for the sake of the colonial "civilizing enterprise" (Ndoma 1977: 165).

For all practical purposes, French was the language of the central administration and colonial law. Because the government had a limited number of expatriate personnel and a territory eighty times the size of Belgium, it invariably employed the most efficient and readily available language for communication. Records were kept in French, but official documents were translated into the four regional lingua francas. At the lowest level of administration, all communications and transactions were carried out in the local vernaculars. Thus, there was a hierarchical structure of administrative language usage, a pyramid

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in which French was used at the pinnacle, Lingala, Swahili, Kikongo and Tsiluba in the center, and the hundreds of vernacular languages at the bottom.

Debate over French diffusion through education

To understand why most Congolese did not come to speak their country's official language it is necessary to consider European attitudes toward the spread of French among the Congolese. Many colonialists were of the firm opinion that Congolese who knew French would consider themselves above manual labor and entitled to the sorts of privileges and rights reserved for Europeans. To have all Congolese study French was to risk creating a generation of declasses and anarchists, and to foster an anti-colonial outlook among the populace (Yates 1980: 272). What the colonialists feared, of course, was a large number of the Congolese who would be able to communicate with one another in French and to act in concert against the government.

Views like these and the missionaries' strong opposition to the widespread dissemination of French among the indigenous population led to a limited number of Congolese learning French. Those who did become known as evolues, which literally means developed. As the Congolese intellectuals, they would eventually constitute an indigenous elite and the group agitating most for independence. Foreseeing this possibility, the colonial government worked actively to implement a policy of education in the vernacular.

A 1924 report on the coordination of mission curricula expressed

this shift in language emphasis explicitly by stating that native languages should be used for teaching, and only Africans in urban centers, living in close contact with Europeans, ought to be taught French. In 1929, the government decided that most subsidized schools no longer should be obligated to teach Belgian national languages. According to the Education Code of that year, French was to be provided as a subject in the upper grades of primary schools, and in both schools educating primary school teachers and urban vocational schools. As in the Leopold era, the only schools where French was used as the medium of instruction were those preparing clerks (Yates 1980; Polome 1968).

In 1948 a new curriculum was instituted in missionary schools. At the primary level, instruction was to be in the local vernacular or, if possible, a regional lingua franca. In any case, the lingua francas were to be required subjects. No European language was to be taught in rural schools, but French could be taught in urban primary schools. In the newly established six-year secondary schools for the Congolese, French was to be the medium of instruction while Flemish was to be taught there as a second language starting in the tenth grade.

The trend toward educating the rural population in the vernaculars, while giving a small number of the Congolese access to French, was rationalized on the grounds that those living outside the city were primarily farmers and had no need for a European language. In addition, it was argued, the Congolese would learn more quickly if they received instruction in their own tongues. As in the Leopold era,

Catholics often neglected to teach French, even when required to do so.

Although the colonial period saw an increasing emphasis on the use of the lingua francas in schools outside of urban areas, there was a lot of debate within the colonial establishment about the viability of the four regional languages as efficient media of communication (Yates 1980: 276). Questions regarding these languages were raised about the extent of their diffusion, comprehension by the Congolese population, and adequacy as media for education. However, since no agreement could be reached on these matters, either within the government or among the missionaries who had done so much work on Congolese languages, language policies continued to reflect a lack of thoughtful planning.

Efforts toward organized linguistic development in the Congo

As pointed out earlier in this paper, missionaries made tremendous contributions to the study of language and culture in the Congo. In the early years of colonial rule, they devoted themselves to developing vocabularies and grammars. Translations of Biblical and other religious materials were followed by efforts to classify and standardize languages. Missionaries sought to make grammatical and lexical "improvements" in languages such as Tshiluba, Swahili and Lingala so that they could be raised to the level of cultural languages and used for literary functions. Such "improvements" were considered necessary to eliminate the assumed deficiencies and vulgarities of the languages. The missionaries also strove to create standard versions of

the lingua francas since each one had a number of dialects. According to Fabian, such interventionary measures also suited the colonial establishment's desire to make the vernacular languages suitable as media of supraregional communication in the domains of commerce, industry, administration, and education (Fabian 1983: 180).

In addition to work being done on language unification development, some efforts were made toward instituting linguistic planning in the Congo under the auspices of the Commission on African Linguistics. Established by Belgian authorities in the late 1940's, the Commission tried to coordinate and evaluate the progress of the various language unification and development projects then underway. Commission members generally supported the maintenance of linguistic pluralism and the continued development of the Congolese cultural languages. According to Polome, although the Commission made careful studies and offered intelligent suggestions to the Minister of Colonies, most of their proposals were ignored (Polome 1968: 27).

The question of a national Congolese language was first debated in 1933 as the result of an article written by E. de Jonghe, an internationally known ethnologist. De Jonghe felt that multilingualism in the Congo was a hindrance to Congolese progress and that they would be much better off, both socially and culturally, if they could embrace one indigenous national language. Since Lingala, Tsiluba, Kikongo and Swahili had already been spread fairly widely, De Jonghe stated, the government would do well to encourage their harmonious development with a view to eventually choosing one of them as the national language.

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While other experts agreed that it was in the best interests of the Congolese to have one national language, they disagreed on which language ought to be chosen.

Positions taken on this issue were often politically motivated. Although most of the experts involved claimed that their preoccupation with the national language question was primarily based on a concern for the advancement of the Congolese masses, there were often other considerations. To illustrate this point, Polome cites the example of De Jonghe, who advocated the selection of Tshiluba as the Congo's national language. It was a language in widespread use in the Kasai region, spoken by a number of homogeneous Congolese groups who were "endowed with a very high vitality". De Jonghe also expressed his conviction that "the colonial government must have all the control levers at its disposal with regard to the evolution of a national language". To this end, he was fearful that the spread of a language like Swahili, spoken both outside and within the Congo's borders, might threaten the integrity of the colonial territory (Polome 1968: 30).

The debate over the choice of a national language was not resolved during the colonial period. Experts offering suggestions could not agree among themselves, and their efforts and proposals could not compete with the strong linguistic forces at work in the Congo. By the end of the Second World War, use of the lingua francas had expanded considerably, especially in urban areas where large numbers of people from diverse ethnic groups were living together and using a lingua franca to communicate. It was easy to see the impracticality and

impossibility of ousting one lingua franca in favor of another. Throughout the colonial period, it was increasingly recognized that to single out one Congolese cultural language was likely to invite a violent reaction from Congolese elites with vested interests in the languages not chosen. Consequently, the Belgian authorities "carefully abstained from any direct intervention in the touchy matters of regional planning of different linguistic policies" (Polome 1968: 33). Preferring to avoid conflict, they left this difficult task to the missionaries, and ultimately to the Congolese who assumed positions of power in the country after independence in 1960.

Independence and Beyond

When the Congo gained its independence from Belgium in 1960, it faced a tremendous number of serious problems. Many groups were vying for power in the new nation, and they tended to split along ethnic and tribal lines. Power struggles led to a bloody civil war lasting until 1965. In that year, Joseph Mobutu, a colonel in the army, took control of the government through a coup d'etat and created an authoritarian regime.

Although much of what Mobutu has done in his twenty years as President may be severely criticized, most people would concede that he deserves credit for restoring order to the Congo and helping to create a sense of national unity among the people. His philosophy of "authenticity", which advocates a revolution based on traditional Zairian ways and beliefs, and a corresponding reaction to imported

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ideologies, has done much to help Zairians overcome feelings of inferiority and to instill pride in themselves and their country (Bokamba 1976: 25). Authenticity has also had an important influence on language policy and planning in the post-colonial period. However, it has not been powerful enough to eliminate French as Zaire's official language, nor to move the country any closer to choosing one of the four national languages as its replacement.

French use and instruction

The six-year secondary schools established in 1948 were modeled after schools in Belgium. These institutions were created in response to Congolese demands for better educational opportunities and a higher level of French instruction (Ndoma 1977: 203). The new schools had exactly the same curriculum and requirements as those in Belgium, and all courses were conducted in French (Polome 1968: 25). Graduates of these metropolitan style schools, the evolues, were generally able to secure white collar jobs in towns. As the number of Congolese intellectuals grew, so did their expectations for a standard of living approaching that of the Europeans. Since the Belgians were loathe to give up anything to the Congolese, the evolues became increasingly aware of colonial exploitation. It was this group of Congolese, then, who rallied support among the populace for an end to colonial rule and became the Congo's new elite after independence.

During the colonial period, and for some time thereafter, most evolues felt very strongly about the importance of learning and

speaking French. As Ndoma points out, use of French was a means for the Congolese to affirm their equality vis a vis the colonizers, and to establish the support networks necessary to achieve independence (Ndoma 1977: 204). However, when the time actually came to encourage widespread Congolese involvement in national politics, evolues often resorted to the expedient course of making appeals based on ethnic ties.

Considering the political turbulence that shook the country during its first five years of independence, it is not surprising that little attention was devoted to matters of language policy or planning. One reason that French was retained as the Democratic Republic of the Congo's official language was because, though not understood by the Congolese masses, it was the only common language of the elite. The new elite favored keeping French as the official language not only for its value as a language of intercommunication, but also because it represented authority, status and prestige, things which had traditionally been reserved for Europeans. Furthermore, French was the language of education in the Congo and hence the only means by which the new nation believed it could gain access to the tools of science and technology needed for its continued development and future standing among the nations of the world.

The use of French in the government and schools has not gone unquestioned in the years following independence. A strong movement demanding the reaffirmation of Zairian culture and languages has been evident for some time. One of the manifestations of this force is the

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President's Program of Authenticity. Another is the continuous problem of ethnic rivalry. It is interesting to note that his sense of ethnicity was largely fostered by colonial processes: the Belgian administration always insisted on assigning ethnic identifiers to the Congolese. They often erred in doing so, but the ethnic identities thus created often stuck. Urbanization, presently a serious problem in its own right, also contributed to the shaping of ethnic consciences. People with shared languages and cultures have been forced to join together for mutual support and have formed ethnic-based associations (Roth 1979: 39). Here again, we see the desire for unity represented by a single language overwhelmed by the forces of multilingualism.

Movement toward the use of Congolese languages

Despite the government's official language policy, a number of Congolese intellectuals in the early years of independence already favored adopting an indigenous national language and teaching the major Congolese languages in the schools (Bokamba 1976: 36). The education reforms of 1961-63 designated French as the medium of instruction at all levels of formal education, which meant that Congolese languages would, at least officially, disappear from the schools. This situation was increasingly viewed with alarm by many Congolese who feared that their children were losing touch with their cultural roots. In addition, there was a growing awareness that the difficulty of mastering French impeded the learning process of many children.

In 1974, a group of Zairian linguists were given President

Mobutu's blessing to meet and discuss linguistic issues facing the country and to propose a national language policy. Like the Belgian linguists who had tried to advise colonial authorities some 30 years before, the Zairian linguists agreed that indigenous languages should be taught and promoted, but they could not reach a consensus on which one should be singled out for official use. They concluded their meeting by stating that a decision on the national language could not be made without a proper scientific investigation of the matter, i.e. a language census. They suggested that French be retained until such work was accomplished, for to do away with it immediately would create chaos.

The Zairian government responded to the gradualist approach suggested by the linguists by re-introducing Zairian vernaculars into the schools as the medium of instruction in the lower grades. This action fit well with the ideals espoused by the doctrine of Authenticity. However, according to Ndoma, this action was taken precipitously, without any serious planning. Consequently, the policy in effect today "lacks essential elements and can only be partially implemented" (Ndoma 1984: 176). The situation thus created is one in which the goals of Authenticity and the desires of those promoting the use of Zairian languages in all activities are in conflict with the harsh realities of the political, social, and economic conditions of the country.

Today, Zairian children often receive primary level schooling in one of the four national lingua francas. French is introduced as a

subject in the upper grades. By the time students enter secondary school in the ninth grade they are taught exclusively in French. Because there are no training programs to prepare teachers of African languages, many Zairians do not believe that teaching Zairian languages constitutes professional activity, and students do not take lessons in them seriously. As Ndoma (1984) points out, the situation is worse for Zaire's minority languages, which generally have very low status and receive little attention in the schools. Instructional materials in the vernaculars are scarce at the primary level and non-existent at the higher ones. In short, it would seem that up to now, the Zairian government's effort to promote an indigenous language policy has not met with success (Ndoma 1984: 177).

Many Zairians feel that their country's interests would be better served if one of their own languages were chosen as the official one. While the four national languages have gained prestige since independence and are widely used, French has retained its position at the pinnacle of the language pyramid in Zaire. It remains a status symbol and continues to provide access to economic opportunities and social mobility. As in colonial times, it is the language which distinguishes the elite from the masses and helps to maintain the distance between them (Yates 1980: 277).

In practice, the use of French as a medium of instruction has had a disastrous effect on education in Zaire. A scarcity of qualified French teachers and the lack of reinforcement at home has created a situation in which only a small minority of Zairian students are able

to gain the level of competency they need in this language to pursue higher studies successfully (Bokamba 1976). There are only a few job opportunities for the miniscule percentage of Zairians who manage to accomplish the Herculean feat of acquiring a university degree; the prospects for the vast majority who are weeded out of the system are very dismal, indeed.

There are a number of forces at work in Zaire which have gotten in the way of systematic language planning and practices since independence. They are likely to continue to exert influence into the foreseeable future. In many ways, the obstacles are the same as those which existed during the colonial period: political considerations; ethnic rivalries; the interests of the elite versus those of the masses; and the ruling power's need to control society and maintain the status quo. In addition, the problems of limited resources, both human and financial, also make it virtually impossible for anyone in Zaire to carry out sensible language policies.

Conclusion

The question of choosing a national language is an exceedingly complex one. Since a language census has never been taken, no one really knows how the Zairian people feel about the issue. Until their language behaviors and preferences can be measured, it would be difficult to single out one of the four regional lingua francas as the national language. The government is not in a strong enough position to take a stand on the matter and to impose a decision (Ndoma 1984). If

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Mobutu were to choose Lingala, the language he prefers using, he would probably not be able to survive the reaction that would come from those who speak Tshiluba, a group which has always constituted a source of opposition and a threat to his power. The President would also face hostility from Swahili speakers who live in the metal-rich Shaba region, an area which saw a secessionist movement soon after independence and was the scene of rebellion as recently as 1984.

Despite Mobutu's attempts to dampen ethnicity and foster national unity, divisions between peoples within Zaire continue. He himself is as guilty as anyone of rousing these sentiments through his program of Authenticity. In fact, it can be argued that Mobutu does not want Zaire to be completely unified: as long as there is friction there can be no concerted action against his rule. If he really promoted unity through a national language he would be inviting his own downfall.

Aside from these considerations, it must be noted that Zaire, like so many other developing countries, is suffering from tremendous economic ills. The World Bank and the IMF have placed restrictions on government spending and considerably reduced the portion of the budget which may be allocated for educational expenditures, i.e. those activities necessary for language reform. In a situation like this any government would have difficulty in making the kinds of changes that ought to be made in Zaire.

Although language planning has been postponed for now, there is reason to be hopeful that the Zairian government will one day be able

to develop and implement a coherent language policy. Such a policy will reconcile the conflicts between the colonial legacy of French use and the demands for a truly Zairian identity. In the absence of governmental action, forces will continually shape language usage leading to the loss of some of the minority vernacular languages and the increasingly wide use of the lingua francas and/or French. Some rational policy would smooth this process and help to avoid the conflicts which will otherwise be inevitable. A precondition for such foresight and planning is a more stable economy and a government with a genuine concern for the needs of its people.

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