

# Linguistic Problems in Ngbandi

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To say that it is imperative for a missionary to master the languages of the people among whom he works may seem on the surface both trite and superfluous. Yet the tragic facts indicate that many of us continue to make such mistakes as asking our house servants to *get into* the soup instead of to *bring in* the soup, asking people if they don't want to sit on a stick forever when we think we're asking them if they don't wish to live in heaven forever, or preaching that our people must give birth to two children in order to enter the kingdom of God while we think we are telling them that they must be born again. If we are guilty of the first mistake we may laugh it off as being humorous, but I wonder how many of us in our saner moments would be as willing to laugh off the other two mistakes when we discover we have made them repeatedly. Yet it is only the use of one wrong tone or the wrong choice of an "insignificant" little affix that may have made the difference between what we thought we said and what we actually did say.

It is of equal importance or even greater importance that we learn the tribal language and learn it well because it is the key to the native mind and culture. As Daniel G. Brinton has put it, "Even with a willing narrator, it is impossible to acquire a true understanding of a religion without a knowledge of the language in which its myths and precepts are couched".<sup>1</sup> An intimate knowledge of the religion of the people among whom we work is basic to an understanding and effective presentation of the gospel to them. We can get this intimate knowledge only through their mother tongue.

To beg off from spending time learning the tribal dialect on the basis of the argument that eventually these tribal languages will be replaced by the *lingua franca* or the official government language is based on wishful thinking, not on sound facts. A. L. Kroeber<sup>2</sup> makes this significant statement: "While populations can learn and unlearn languages, they tend to do so with reluctance and infinite slowness, especially while they remain in their inherited territories. Speech tends to be one of the most persistent populational characters". While it is possible that the mother tongue of various tribes may eventually be replaced by the *lingua franca* or possibly by the language of the dominant tribe in a given area, history of languages indicates, as Kroeber affirms, that this is done with reluctance and infinite slowness. In other words, we should not look for it to happen in our generation, nor are we to let this possible trend be a stumbling block to our mastering the most efficient tool in carrying out our God-given ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel G. Brinton, *Religions of Primitive People*. New York, London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1897, page 32.

<sup>2</sup> A. L. Kroeber, *Anthropology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1948, revised, page 221.

Having made these general observations of the importance of the tribal languages, we may consider one of the languages found in the Belgian Congo, namely Ngbandi (popularly called Mongbandi or Mongwandi by most whites in the region). In our limited treatment of this language in this article we will divide the material into two parts: first, Ngbandi in the general linguistic picture of the Congo-Ubangi region, and second, the complexity of the tonal system of Ngbandi.

## I. Ngbandi in the General Linguistic Picture of the Congo-Ubangi

By the Congo-Ubangi we mean roughly the region in the northwest corner of the Belgian Congo which is bounded by the Congo river on the south, the Ubangi river on the west and north, and the Uele and Itimbiri rivers on the east. This region is distinctive, linguistically speaking, for here we find the meeting of two great language families, the Bantu and the Sudanic. (The latter probably consists actually of a number of language families.) An imaginary line dividing these two families would zig-zag back and forth along the 3 degree N. latitude between the Congo river on the south and the Ubangi river on the north. The Sudanic languages lie to the north of this imaginary line.

### A. The Ngbandi and the other Sudanic Tribes in the Ubangi

In the northern half or two thirds of the Ubangi region mentioned above there are three main languages, the Ngbaka (also called Gbaya), the Banda, and the Ngbandi. In addition to these three main Sudanic languages are found a small tribe of Fulu, narrow strips of the Ngbaka Mabo extending into the Congo from French Equatorial Africa on the west and north, and a few sprinklings of other Sudanic speakers.

The Ngbaka (Gbaya) tribe is the only one of the three main tribes which populates a single geographical area. The Belgian ethnologist G. Hulstaert states that on looking at the linguistic map one would say that the Ngbaka landed in the middle of the other tribes, much as a bomb would land, and scattered the other tribes around them. We find the Ngbakas surrounded by "pockets" or areas made up as follows: five Banda areas, two Ngbandi areas, one Fulu area, and one Ngombe (Bantu) area.

The Banda language group is composed of six dialects: Mbanza, Ngbundu, Mono, Gobu, Togbo, and Langbase. The Mbanza is the largest dialect.

The Ngbandi are divided geographically into three areas. Two small ones are found on the south border of the Ngbaka area but the main Ngbandi population is found to the east and occupies the entire east end of this Sudanic speaking Ubangi region, even extending into the Uele region. Taken together, these three areas occupied by the Ngbandi cover a geographically larger area than that occupied by either the Ngbaka or Banda. The Ngbaka, however, are the most numerous.

Hulstaert states that Ngbandi is the most important language of the Ubangi. He gives no particular reason for this but states that it is the best known and learned as a second language by members of other tribes.

## B. Relationship to the *lingua franca*

The *lingua franca* in this region is Lingala. In the eastern end of the area under consideration a dialect of the *lingua franca* known as Bangala is spoken. These are Bantu languages. It appears that the language was originally spoken by the Bangala tribe located on the Congo river. They were a trading tribe and as a result Bangala (or Lingala) became a trade language used for trading purposes on the many tributaries of the upper Congo river. The most interesting thing about this *lingua franca* is that it was adopted as a trade language by the Sudanic tribes in northern Congo. It would be interesting to know the degree to which they adopted it voluntarily and to what degree it was imposed on them by white influence or other factors. At any rate, it seems that it must have met with some opposition. As a whole, it is only the men who speak the *lingua franca*. Very few women or children speak it fluently. One probable factor may be the carry-over of tribal jealousies and the men not wishing the women to learn the language since it would facilitate their marrying men of other tribes. This argument is probably the one most tenaciously held and most frequently set forth but its validity can only be tested by a study of the spread of Lingala as a *lingua franca* among Bantu speaking tribes as over against its spread in these Sudanic tribes. I would like to propose a second argument for its only partial adoption in the Ngbandi, Ngbaka, and Banda tribes and that is the structural dissimilarity of the two language families. The Bantu languages consist basically of words or word stems of two or more syllables. They make considerable use of inflexion by means of suffixes and prefixes. The nouns for example are divided into classes according to the single-number prefix and this set of prefixes is replaced by another set of pluralizing prefixes. Suffixes and prefixes are both basic to verb inflexion. The Bantu words are invariably accented on the penultimate (next to the last) syllable. There is tone in a two-register system, but for the most part it seems to be of lexical importance only, making differences in meaning between a few words, but it is not of grammatical importance. The Sudanic languages in the Ubangi, on the other hand, consist basically of monosyllabic words, that is, most of their "words" in simplest form consist of one syllable. They make very little use of affixation. In fact, the Ngbandi language, judging from my present analysis, will probably have no elements which need be considered as prefixes or suffixes. Accent or stress does not exist. The tonal system is extremely well developed, there being three registers of tone plus glides. These tones are not only lexical but also morphological (of grammatical importance) as will be seen later in this article.

This hypothesis that the Lingala, the *lingua franca*, was and is hampered in its spread into the Sudanic tribes because it belongs to the Bantu language family is further shown by the tendency for it to become considerably more simplified the deeper it penetrates into Sudanic territory and farther away from its Bantu stock. For example, instead of the variety of pluralizing prefixes depending upon the noun class, the Bangala dialect of the *lingua franca* lumps nearly all nouns into one class and prefixes the *ba-* pluralizer. Other examples could be cited from verb inflexion.

Finally the hypothesis is strengthened by a practical experiment resulting when we sent six Sudanic-speaking students to a normal school taught in a Bantu language near Coquilhatville, Belgian Congo. It was observed that these men had about the same difficulty in learning this Bantu language as American missionaries. This was true even though all of them had a fairly good command of the *lingua franca* spoken in our area.

### C. Relationship to French

French is the official language of the Congo and is taught in our schools. All missionaries in the educational and medical work under the colonial government's program must be able to speak it fluently.

Insofar as Ngbandi and French are concerned, I shall not attempt to give any comparison of the two in terms of structure. Obviously, there is a small amount of borrowing of vocabulary taking place from the French into the Ngbandi.

We shall let a word of warning suffice here with regard to any attempted appraisal of Ngbandi (or any other "primitive" language) as over against French (or any other European language). Just as we are tempted to be egocentric and ethnocentric, we may also be tempted to be "lingua-centric". That is, we feel our mother tongue is superior to other languages and especially those of non-literate peoples. While cultures may be classified as simple or complex, or any shade between, it is impossible to do so with languages according to modern anthropologists. Kroeber<sup>1</sup> states: "No clear correspondence has been traced between type or degree of civilization and structural type of language ... it is impossible to rate one speech trait or type as inherently or objectively superior to another on any basis like that which justifies the placing of a metal culture above a stone culture".

Let us approach, then, these tribal languages as being equally worthy of being learned and mastered as our own, since it is the tool that shall bring the message of salvation to another people.

## II. The Complexity of the Tonal System of Ngbandi

Tone plays a very important role in Ngbandi as it does in all the Sudanic languages. It strikes the European or American as being extremely difficult to master and this probably accounts largely for the temptation to neglect the tribal languages and to be content with the use of the *lingua franca*. To the speakers of an Indo-European language, the inflexional affixes of the Bantu seem more "tangible" than do the tones of the Sudanic languages. The obvious reason for this is that, though intonation is extremely important in English and other European languages, it is basically not of lexical and grammatical importance. Nevertheless, these tones need not be such mysterious and "intangible" entities. Their mastery is only a matter of ear training and patient drill, and in this the assistance of recordings or a recorder can be of inestimable value.

For this brief treatment of tone we shall mark them as follows: low (˘), high (ˊ), and mid, unmarked.

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, page 229.

## A. Lexical or Phonemic Tone

1. Many words are distinguished from each other by tone alone. The consonants and vowels are identical. The following are a few examples:

- |                      |                                |
|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. wà "where?"       | 1. ye "to sing"                |
| 2. wa "to construct" | 2. yé "to like, agree, desire" |
| 3. wá "fire"         |                                |
|                      | 1. yà mbi "my wife"            |
| 1. kwà "work"        | 2. ya mbi "my stomach"         |
| 2. kwá "hair"        |                                |

2. Present data indicates that in continuous speech the Ngbandi personal pronoun /a/ "he, she, it, they", which precedes the verb and refers back to the subject noun, is assimilated by the vowel final of the preceding word, which vowel is lengthened. However, the tone of this personal pronoun, which is variable according to verb aspect, is not assimilated but occurs on the lengthened preceding vowel, causing a glide if the tone of that preceding vowel is not identical. The same process occurs with the initial /á/ "they, them". The following examples will help to illustrate and clarify the process. The identical vowels written together signify a long vowel.

<i>Spoken in Isolation</i>		<i>In Continuous Speech</i>
zò à gwè "a person went"	becomes	zòò gwè
Nzàpa à yé àlà "God loves them"	becomes	Nzàpaà yéé là
ili àlà "name of them"	becomes	ilí là

3. There are also tonal glides in Ngbandi in addition to those formed by the above process. Just what the relationship of these is to the long or short vowels is still a problem. Present data seems to indicate that there can be quick glides on short vowels. If further research on the field proves this to be so, it will obviously make the system more complex than if glides always occurred on long vowels, since we could explain the long-vowel glide by saying that it is a cluster of two identical vowels each carrying its particular register tone.

## B. Morphological or Grammatical Tone

Speaking non-scientifically, we might say that tone in the Ngbandi added to the subject pronouns and to the verbs helps make up for the inflection by prefixes and suffixes in the Bantu languages. We shall here attempt to describe how sets of tones on the personal pronouns preceding the verb, combined with sets of tones on the verbs, plus in a few instances the addition of particles (at least tentatively so classified), determine the aspect of the verbs. The following eight aspects of verbs have been found: (1) ordinary complete, (2) remote past complete, (3) ordinary continuative (may be formed in three different ways), (4) historical continuative, (5) anticipatory, (6) subjunctive, (7) infinitive, and (8) imperative.

We shall first list the pronoun sets, then the verb sets, mention the particles used in some of the aspects, and finally show how these are combined to form the eight aspects.

1. Pronoun tone sets:

	Set 1	Set 2	Set 3	Set 4
"I"	mbi	mbi	mbí	mbi
"you"	mɔ̃	mɔ	mɔ́	mɔ̃
"he", "she"	lò	lo	ló	lò
"we"	è	e	é	é
"you"	ì <sup>1</sup>	i	í	ì
"they"	àlà	àlà	àlà	àlà

Note: Only the regular subject pronouns are listed. There is also a pronoun used after a noun subject and a set of quotative pronouns. However, their tones act in the same way as the above.

2. Verb tone sets:

The verbs are divided into classes according to tone set A. There are eight such classes according to available data.

Verb Class	Example	Tone Set A	Tone Set B	Tone Set C
1. Sing.	là "lay"	low	low	mid
Plur.	là	high	mid	mid
2. Sing.	ma "hear"	mid	mid	mid
Plur.	má	high	mid	mid
3. Sing.	yé "like"	high	mid	mid
Plur.	yé	high	mid	mid
4. Sing.	fɔ̃nɔ̃ "walk"	low-low	low-low	low-mid
Plur.	fɔ̃nɔ̃	mid-high	mid-mid	low-mid
5. Sing.	dili "answer"	mid-low	mid-mid	low-mid
Plur.	dili	mid-high	mid-mid	low-mid
6. Sing.	sigí "go out"	mid-high	mid-mid	low-mid
Plur.	sigí	mid-high	mid-mid	low-mid
7. Sing.	indo "move"	high-mid	mid-mid	low-mid
Plur.	indó	mid-high	mid-mid	low-mid
8. Sing.	hingà "know"	high-low	mid-mid	low-mid
Plur.	hingà	mid-high	mid-mid	low-mid

3. Particles:

The following particles are used in aspect formation: na, ndo, ndó, and ngɔ. The function of these particles will be seen below.

4. Aspect formation:

*Ordinary completive:* Pronoun tone set 1 plus verb tone set A.

Examples: mbi là "I lay down"; è má "we heard".

<sup>1</sup>The vowel of this pronoun is nasalized, but publication of this paper was not delayed in order to procure the necessary technical symbol.

*Remote past completive:* Pronoun tone set 1 plus verb tone set A plus ndo.

Examples: mō fōnō ndo "you walked long ago".  
è yé ndo "we agreed (or liked) long ago".

*Ordinary continuative No. 1:* Pronoun tone set 2 plus verb tone set C plus ngɔ.

Examples: lo la ngɔ "he is lying down"; alá fōnɔ ngɔ "they are walking".

*Ordinary continuative No. 2:* Pronoun tone set 4 plus na plus verb tone set C plus ngɔ.

Examples: mbi na gwɛ ngɔ "I am going"; i<sup>1</sup> na sɪgi ngɔ "you are going out".

*Ordinary continuative No. 3:* Pronoun tone set 3 plus ndo plus verb tone set A.

Examples: mō ndo là "you are lying down"; é ndo má "we are hearing".

*Historical continuative:* Pronoun tone set 3 plus ndó plus verb tone set B.

Examples: ló ndó là "he was sleeping (lying)";  
Yakobo ndó ye lò mái "Jacob was liking him much".

*Anticipatory:* Pronoun tone set 3 plus verb tone set B.

Examples: ló ma "he will hear"; i<sup>1</sup> fōnɔ "you will walk".

*Subjunctive:* Pronoun tone set 3 plus verb tone set A.

Examples: é là "we would lie down"; mbí hìngà "I would know".

*Infinitive:* Verb tone set C plus ngɔ.

Examples: la ngɔ "to lie down"; hìngà ngɔ "to know".

*Imperative:* Verb tone stem A in the second person singular. Study of the formation of the second person plural is incomplete, as is that of the other persons if they exist at all.

Example: ga "come!"

It is hoped that the reader has gained some insights into the problems resulting from the existence of several relatively distinct tribal languages, a *lingua franca*, and the colonial government's language all in one area. It is hoped too that by this fragmentary insight into one of the tribal languages, one may realize something of the problems involved in analyzing such a language. It cannot be done by the missionary in his spare time or be treated as his hobby. This task of language mastery is an important and basic one in the overall responsibility of Christian missions.

<sup>1</sup> The vowel of this pronoun is nasalized.