

## DEFINING THE KITUBA LANGUAGE FOR A TRANSLATION PROJECT

Kituba, or lingua franca Kikongo, is spoken in the two Congos (Leopoldville and Brazzaville). Some people are convinced that it is just an insignificant pidgin, not worthy to be considered a language, having no grammatical structure. Others say that it might be all right for commercial and trade purposes, but it is certainly inadequate to convey the Word of God. Still others refuse to admit that it even exists as a means of communication among the local population, or else they are oblivious to the need to evangelize the segment of the population that cannot be reached by the local tribal languages.

Some missions are using the language as a means to reach people in areas where there are Africans of many different tribal language backgrounds. The New Testament, the Psalms, and other books of the Old Testament have been produced by them and have been used for many years; however, people of adjacent areas disagree with the type of language used in the publications, and acceptance of other literature in general is discouraging.

Such was the situation concerning the Kituba language for many years. This confusion of opinion and refusal to accept the language led to a recommendation by an inter-mission literature committee, in consultation with the American Bible Society, to define the language and the problems involved. The result of a study of the situation was to lead to a revision or retranslation of the Bible, and the setting up of language policies for the production of Christian literature acceptable to the entire area.

The work of defining the language with regard to these problems was assigned to my wife and me. This present article outlines our work: the approach used in arriving at a definition of the language situation, our findings, and the results of the work bearing on plans for the future.

### **Preparations for the linguistic investigation**

After a year of French studies in Belgium (to give us greater facility in the major European language of the area), we spent ten months in an African village to assimilate as much knowledge about African ways as we could and to make a linguistic study of the tribal Kikongo language. This tribal language is the main linguistic base of Kituba. We have had repeated occasion to appreciate immensely this period of orientation.

We then determined the areas in which Kituba is used, in order to draw up an itinerary for a survey trip to key regions. Then, in order to assure an efficient and meaningful survey, we set up an outline guide of grammatical items that we wanted to elicit in each area. This guide consisted of some 1,300 sentences and phrases which were designed to illustrate a wide range of grammatical constructions. There was also a list of 500 words, which included the 200 words of the Swadesh list<sup>1</sup> plus others that we considered

<sup>1</sup> A 200-item reference list of meanings of things, situations, and events for which it is postulated that every community of human beings has words.

high frequency words—among these were 100 kinship terms entered on a genealogy chart. By obtaining the same material in all areas, we wanted to make an immediate comparison of the materials possible.

### **The survey**

In October 1960, we began the trip to contact ten representative areas. By carryall truck, we reached the five areas of the Lower Congo and the former French Congo (Leopoldville, Matadi, Boma; Brazzaville and Pointe Noire). The Kwango-Kwilu areas were reached by air through the services of Missionary Aviation Fellowship.

At each place we solicited the help of local leaders (often the pastor) in choosing competent informants. We used French as the basic language of the work. Each crucial phrase or sentence was couched in French in an illustrative situation of everyday life in order to produce the normal Kituba equivalent. Each response was noted in a notebook, and for four informants the sessions were also recorded on tape.

Since the prepared material was only a guide, the investigation often went beyond it to fill out the whole pattern of the language at a given point. At each successive place of investigation, when the responses in Kituba were different from previous areas, we also checked the acceptability of previous responses.

This survey trip was concluded in October 1961. A later check of the grammar from spontaneous narrative and conversation agrees with the grammatical pattern described. Thus, the controlled acquisition of grammatical information through the outline guide allowed us to gather quite complete materials in a minimum amount of time (30 to 40 hours with each informant), while not distorting the information sought.

To make this material manageable for analysis, we typed every sentence, phrase, and word on a separate card. The words were filed in a dictionary file, the sentences and phrases into a grammatical file. Cards of a different colour were used for each area for quick identification.

Following a month of analysis, we wrote up a grammatical sketch organized around the parts of speech. Lists and tables are given to bring out any differences of usage from area to area. This is followed by a large number of sentences (the original ones elicited) illustrating the grammatical point being discussed.

An on-the-scene observation of the language in all areas finally gave some concrete information about the language, dispelling many opinions based on hearsay and unchecked suppositions. The following are our main observations.

### **Origin of the language**

The Kituba language began its development—most probably in the Lower Congo of the former Belgian Congo—as a pidgin language (nobody's mother tongue or native language). It is not an artificial language, as many a layman avows, because it is not an invented language; it arose spontaneously under the pressure of practical circumstances. It was the means of communication between the local Kikongo-speaking tribal people and Upper Congo, Lingala- or Bangala-speaking, strangers. Very early contact

is thought to have been made between these peoples through the slave-trade traffic in which they took part. Later, in the early days of the Belgian colony, more intertribal contact was possible as regular commercial trade routes were established. Then Africans, foreign to the Lower Congo, settled there permanently; and Kikongo-speaking people from the Lower Congo moved and settled in the commercial centres of the interior of Leopoldville Province. White traders and administrators also adopted the language as a convenient way to communicate with their African workers and subjects. Thus Kituba grew and spread as a trade or commercial language to the French Congo and out into the Kwango-Kwilu districts of Leopoldville Province. There must be at least one and a half million people constantly using this language.

This account of the origin of the language is based on historical facts and general observation. We feel that it will be substantiated by a more detailed study to be made at a later date.

### **Development of the language**

As each successive generation in the commercial centres grew up, it was predominantly bilingual—knowing the tribal language of parents for use in the home, and Kituba for other contacts. With the passage of time, however, this bilingual situation has been shifting in favour of Kituba. For many, Kituba has become the major language, and indeed, for an increasing number of young people, the first and sometimes only language they know. Many even have to learn the tribal language of their parents as a second language in the local schools, or they are sent to rural village relatives to be exposed to it.

Such a development is crucial for a pidgin language. For it thereby passes from a pidgin status to a full-fledged language. It is true that a language at this stage usually lacks the stability, depth of vocabulary, and grammatical complexity found in tribal languages; however, a language will continue to develop all the linguistic resources that it needs to express any concept that its speakers require, as long as it remains a means of communication.

### **Conclusions**

- (1) Kituba is widely used in all the areas we visited.
- (2) There are Africans who have learned Kituba as their first language and many others as their major language of daily communication—thus Kituba is more than a pidgin language.
- (3) It has a well-developed grammatical system and a vocabulary capable of dealing with a wide range of topics. It is certainly adequate for the Scriptures.
- (4) Kituba is similar enough from area to area to permit a united programme of Bible translation and Christian literature.
- (5) The language has developed considerably in the last decades. This is observable in the difference between the speech of the younger and the older generation. We were able to describe the trend of linguistic development. The Bible and other Christian literature should be revised to follow this trend in order to give an up-to-date flavour to the text.
- (6) There is a considerable gap between the Kituba used by missions of the Kwango-Kwilu and that of the majority of the population. This gap

increased as the language of the missions remained stable while the language of the population in general developed along new lines.

(7) The grammar and dictionary materials give needed guidance in the revision of existing literature and in the production of new materials. They help to form a standard to follow in order to ensure a wide acceptance of the materials.

(8) We received the necessary guidance for language decisions for the Bible translation work. It became clear that we would have to re-translate rather than to revise existing Bible materials.