Artefactual ideologies and the textual production of African languages

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Abstract

This paper discusses ideologically structured textual practices in the study of African languages. The practices are practices of artefactualisation: the extraction of essential ‘form’ out of text, and the representation of such form as ‘language’. They fit into an inductivist paradigm which, through philology, has dominated the emergence of African linguistics. Genres of artefactualisation thus document the emergence of a professional corps in African linguistics, and I shall examine one such mature professional genre: the ‘grammatical sketch’, a concise core-linguistic description in the fashion of Boas’ Handbook of American Indian Languages. These artefactualisations, however, also have another function: they are often the ‘birth certificates’ of a language, since it is the deployment of such mature professional representations of languages that defines them as languages.

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1. Artefactualisation

There is an idea which is central to much of modern professional linguistics: the idea that language needs to be seen primarily as a limited collection of ordered forms – grammar – and of words – lexis.1 The assumption is, then, that modern linguistics has to find, identify and...
codify these things in ‘grammars’, ‘dictionaries’ and similar textual artefacts of scholarship. And the implication of this is that learning language is about learning this collection of forms and words. When a language is learned, it is learned by methodical attention to grammar (understanding the generative potential of these forms and their combinations) and by studying the lexicon; blending forms-in-combination with words will result in ‘speaking the language’. Indeed, the target of learning becomes ‘a language’ when textual artefacts exist that allow such efforts.

There are two deeper assumptions at play here. The first one is that speech – language in its actually used form, characterised by variability, negotiability and context-boundedness – can be reduced to ‘language’ by attending to and ‘extracting’ the core forms-and-combinations, and listing its words. In other words, the fantastic variation that characterises actual language in use can (and should) be reduced to an invariable, codified set of rules, features and elements in order to be the ‘true’ language that can qualify as an object of linguistic study. Conversely, the same assumption suggests that learning such stable and invariable ‘core’ features will enable one to produce every genre, style, and contextually appropriate form of speech. The pragmatics of language contains a stable linguistic core, and learning this linguistic core generates the full pragmatic richness of that language.

The second assumption is that such reduction efforts can and need to be done in specific, regimented forms of textuality. In other words, it is not enough to just know these rules of grammar and lists of words, they must actually exist in specific genres of textual artefacts of limited size and specific shape. A ‘language’, ideally, can be carried in one’s back pocket or briefcase; it can be stored on the shelves of a library and it can be passed around and traded as an object. Language becomes a book or a paper, or a collection of them, and many ‘languages’ exist only by virtue of the existence of such objects. The capacity to create such artefacts has become the hallmark of linguistic professionalism and expertise, and the competence to consume them defines ‘interest’ and ‘knowledgeability’ in language matters.

The combination of these assumptions is what shall be called here an artefactual ideology of language, an ideology in which particular textual practices can reduce language to an artefact that can be manipulated like most other objects: I can make it my own (‘My German’; ‘His Latin’), I can change, manipulate and transform it (‘I need to polish my German a bit’; ‘My French needs a bit of practice’), I can distinguish qualities in it (‘His Bulgarian is brilliant’; ‘he really speaks it poorly’). More precisely, it is an ideology in which two notions of grammar are put in close synergy with one another: the idea that language is primarily form – an abstract notion of grammar as in ‘the grammar of Swahili’ – and grammar as the textual genres in which such forms are codified, as in ‘a grammar of Swahili’. Let us call the first notion Grammar₁, and the second Grammar₂. This ideology and its associated practices have dominated modern linguistics and language teaching since Bloomfield, whose Outline Guide for the Practical Study of Foreign Languages (Bloomfield, 1942) provides the locus classicus for this assumption (Silverstein, 2005; Blommaert, 2005), and it is a powerful set of images in lay consciousness about language, language acquisition and language usage. The point of this paper is to examine how it has also dominated significant parts of the tradition of African linguistics.

In what follows, I shall focus on one particular codified genre of African linguistics: the ‘grammatical sketch’ or esquisse grammaticale as it was/is known in French, and will examine a small corpus of such artefacts from the Belgian Africanist tradition. I will focus very strongly on how it became a ‘fixed’ genre, a canonical form of textuality which, index-
ically, flags professional linguistic competence and so marks a stage in the development of the Africanist tradition. But it also flags something else: the existence of languages. Having a grammatical sketch meant that a language became ‘official’, that its existence could no longer be in doubt, and that it could start to be used in language maps, catalogues, and other professional linguistic discourses. It could also start to be used as an element of ethnolinguistic identification, and hence, as an instrument of identification in general: you speak Lingala, ergo you are Congolese. The latter is a persisting function of these professional artefacts: they are used widely in administrative procedures such as asylum applications, and if someone claims to speak a language for which no such codified artefactualisations can be found, his or her claimed identity is in doubt. Thus, Grammar2 genres such as the esquisse not only testify to the emergence of a professional corps in African linguistics; they are also in an almost literal sense the birth certificates of many African languages, and the connection between Grammar1 and Grammar2 has, in a very Foucauldian sense, political ramifications and real-world effects.

Before engaging with that part of the story, however, I shall need to prepare the canvas.

2. Inductivism, philology, and the Africanist tradition

The Africanist tradition has always been text-focused: it was a philology that created its own written literature through fieldwork (the elicitation and notation of language-in-use) and then used that corpus inductively to identify and systematise the ‘regularities’ of the language – linguistic generalisations of Grammar1. This, then, was applied in a move we can call reverse inductivism, in which these generalisations were offered as the basis for language teaching, standardisation, and social control. The inductive description became a reverse-inductive prescription. In that sense, the Africanist tradition is fully Boasian (Silverstein, 2005), even if most of the practitioners we shall discuss later had no direct lineage to Boasian anthropology.2

The reason is that Boas himself instantiated a moment in a longer history in which philology became modern linguistics, without however abandoning some of the fundamental epistemological, ontological and methodological principles of philology: the fact that it defined the study of language as an ‘objective’, inductive effort in which pragmatically organized parole could be correlated with linguistically ordered langue; the fact that this meant that linguistic analysis should emerge out of careful and disciplined attention to the deployment of structures of language (Grammar1) in textually imagined discourse; that such deployment would be finite, and that consequently a good corpus of texts could yield all of Grammar1; and the fact that such labour involved tightly regimented forms of textual representation: Grammar2. So even if modern linguists sometimes explicitly rejected philology and defined their approach as a break away from philology, fundamental assumptions of philology were carried over (Silverstein, 2005).

The study of African languages began as a philology: a textually oriented study that yielded descriptive accounts of the grammar of the languages, quickly to be turned into

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2 Excellent studies on the ideological foundations and textual politics of the Africanist tradition are Fabian (1986), Meeuwis (1999) and Irvine (2001a,b). There is, apart from that, a large amount of literature in which the history of Africanist scholarship is framed in terms of colonial oppression and representational simplification, with repercussions in the present. Mudimbe (1988) is a landmark, as are critical studies on early Africanist ‘discovery’ literature such as Fabian (2000). More general surveys are Errington (2001) and the collection edited by Gal and Woolard (2001).
prescriptive instruments for language teaching and control (Fabian, 1986; Irvine, 2001a),
while they also, and quickly, became inserted in efforts at taxonomic genetic ordering of
the languages (Irvine, 2001b). Indeed, the major linguistic efforts of the late nineteenth
and early twentieth century, early Africanist era – Carl Meinhof (1857–1944) comes to
mind – consisted of comparative studies of Bantu languages based on phonology and
aimed at defining relationships between ‘living’ language forms and reconstructed ances-
tors. Such comparative studies were based on whatever was available, from more or less
full-blown grammars and dictionaries over descriptive articles to published linguistic sam-
pies which, scientifically (read: philologically) annotated would offer a sound basis for
extracting the formal features useful for comparative analysis. Language material could
become linguistic data when it had been philologically reproduced.
Every and any bit of ‘real’ language could be used as an object of philology and so as a
target for linguistic analysis. This indiscriminate view of what could count as ‘text’ of
interest for the study of language was to some extent motivated by the view of Africa
as a continent without a written tradition, hence without a closed corpus of written sources
such as the Bible or the Vedic texts. The construction of a corpus was, consequently,
always the first step of any research effort in the Africanist tradition, and it was there right
from the start. The Rev. S.W. Koelle, one of the pioneers of African language studies,
describes part of his research procedure in the preface to his Grammar of the Bornu or
Kanuri Language:

‘As there was no native literature, considerable time was required merely to bring
some satisfactory portion of the language before my view. (...) The basis of this
Kanuri grammar is a manuscript literature of about 800 quarto pages, which were
dictated to me by my interpreter’ (Koelle, 1854: i, ix).

Preference was given to ‘genres (...) which, though oral, might be considered analogous
to a body of literature such as a European language might offer’ (Irvine, 2001a: 68): folk-
literary genres such as epics, fables, and so forth, ‘stories’ that could be produced as mono-
logical, unidirectional and generically ‘special’ discourse. This is the Naturpoesie of Herder
and Grimm, a textual (oral) tradition that incorporates and articulates the spirit of a par-
ticular people, therefore offering ‘privileged scientific objects, providing more transparent
windows on linguistic patterns at the same time that they were (...) textual forms that
embodied the nation’ (Bauman and Briggs, 2003: 205). In the absence of such preferred
genres, however, anything would do, and elaborate philology was practiced on very unre-
markable texts. By way of illustration, consider Fig. 1, a page from Klingenheben-von
Tilling (1928: 8–9) presenting a Galla text.

The Galla text is a philological text designed for a specialist audience, and not made just
for reading but for analysis. It is represented in a complex, hermetic notation system and
sprinkled with footnotes offering linguistic commentary. The facing page offers a German
translation which has been mediated by – informed and structured by – the way in which
the Galla text has been treated. This is a scientific (philological) translation, and the material
that has entered into it comprises both the Galla text and the annotations and analytical
observations added to it. Both texts are graphically presented as prose, i.e. in the form of sen-
tences with conventional punctuation and equal in length. Ellipsis in the Galla text is marked
by bracketed additions in the German translation, displaying an awareness of the need to
produce a translation as (linguistically) close to the Galla text as possible, as well as an aware-
ness of conventions of textual completeness and referential adequacy in German.
The texts themselves are unremarkable. These are not epics or ritual formulae but short stories about mundane things like the sale of horses, travels and so on, as well as a series of greeting formulae; furthermore, they were not collected during fieldwork. Klingenheben mentions that: ‘In the summer semester of 1922, two natives were put at my disposal for a course on Galla, and the texts to follow were written down from dictation by them’ (id.: 1, German original); the notes she further adds all relate to dialect differences between both speakers. Probably, these texts came into existence because of a felt need for a ‘corpus’ on Galla, and the main purpose of the texts would be linguistic (and comparative) analysis.

The grammatical and lexical footnotes initiate such analyses: Klingenheben refers to published sources on Galla; she identifies borrowings and etymologies; observes remarkable stylistic, phonological and tonological features; explains particular inflected forms in relation to the root; and she mentions different phonetic or morphological realizations of words by her informants. The corpus is shot through by multiple procedures: grammatical–structural, dialectological, phonetic, comparative, lexical–etymological, comparative aspects are all footnoted. Thus, we see here how the text prompts a wide variety of linguistic analyses; it is the raw material for in-depth linguistic analysis and simultaneously represents the upper limit of linguistic knowledge at the time of production. The function of these analyses is denotational equivalence: the grammatical and lexical notes motivate and support a ‘precise’, ‘accurate’ (philological) translation. And thus, they prepare the ground for ‘pure’ linguistic description: a more maturely professional textual representation in which the philological text disappears and only the footnotes remain, so to speak.
3. The esquisse grammaticale: an artefactual genre

This brings us to one particular genre in the description of African languages: the esquisse grammaticale, the grammatical sketch. I shall restrict myself to work done on languages in the former Belgian Congo, and I will examine four examples produced by prominent Belgian Bantuists: Hulstaert, Esquisse du Parler des Nkengo (1970), Meeussen, Esquisse de la Langue Ombo (1952), Stappers, Esquisse de la Langue Lengola (1971) and Vansina, Esquisse de Grammaire Bushong (1959). All four esquisses are written in French; the translations of fragments given below are our own. For reasons of parsimony, I will refer to authors’ names whenever the four specific texts are discussed.

3.1. Professionalization and fieldwork

The esquisse grammaticale is a ‘mature’, highly professionalized, technical genre of language description. It was not (directly) meant for practical language learning but fitted into the large-scale Belgian academic efforts of the 1950s to comprehensively ‘describe’ and classify the languages of the Congo. These efforts yielded a treasure of published studies ranging from multivolume grammars and dictionaries, to articles and esquisses. A quick glimpse at Van Bulck’s (1948) Recherches Linguistiques au Congo Belge – a work of colossal encyclopaedic scholarship – shows that until the 1940s, the term ‘esquisse’ was hardly ever used by scholars to signal a particular genre of grammatical description. Studies were labelled Grundrisse or Grundzüge, notes de grammaire, outline grammar, essai de grammaire, elements de grammaire, or simply grammaire or la langue X. Most often, they offered grammar, vocabulary and texts. The esquisse thus appears to come into being as part of the gradual (post-WWII) professionalization of Belgian African linguistics. Practitioners had undoubtedly been influenced by the stock-in-trade of professionalized linguistics: grammatical sketches in the fashion of Boas’ (1911) Handbook of American Indian Languages, of varying length and degree of detail, and seen as the ‘best’ modus for describing languages threatened with extinction (see Stocking, 1974; also Moore, 2006).

Linguistic studies in this new era of professional scholarship were usually based on fieldwork, an endeavour for which colonial and early postcolonial circumstances offered excellent conditions. And such fieldwork was done in the fashion of Boas and Bloomfield; it aimed at ‘inventory’ descriptions of language-as-structure, and it should ideally result in the classic generic triad of published results: a Grammar, a Dictionary, and a collection of Texts. It varied from extensive and detailed fieldwork over an extended period of time, involving audio recording and other forms of collaborative work, to brief one-on-one elicitation sessions with an informant, mainly working from a questionnaire. Two examples illustrate the extremes of the fieldwork continuum. The first example is from Jacobs (1971), the author of a multivolume grammar of Tetela and of shorter esquisses:

These efforts were conceived pyramidically, with descriptive studies feeding into large-scale comparative and classificatory studies such as the Lolemi project (see Doneux, 1965). Prior to these comparative efforts, linguistic cartography was the major macro-level research target. Two authoritative language maps were published, one by Van Bulck (1949), another one by Hulstaert (1950), leading to ferocious discussions between both authors (see Van de Velde, 1999). The esquisses are still widely used in historical and comparative Bantu studies.

Until well into the 1970s, Belgian scientists were on the faculty of all major Congolese universities.

These three genres characterise the oeuvre of many accomplished Africanists of the generation discussed here.
‘The material used for this grammar was collected during fieldwork between early 1953 and 1960. (...) The research on Tetela proceeded on the basis of meticulous transcriptions of audio recordings. The texts thus obtained provide a reliable image of the living spoken language. Ordinary stories were best suited for recording; for apart from the narrative mode, they make abundant use of dialogue, exclamation and question. (...) Audio recordings have the advantage that they can be listened to over and over again. Without this method, it would have been impossible for us to solve the various difficulties that emerged during research, to wit: the difference between o and u; the transcription of semivowels; vowel and consonant length; vowel assimilation and vowel elision; the tones of long consonants; the progressive tone effect; the tonal flow in verbs and other word types. Transcriptions of audio recordings are true documents of living spoken language and they form a reliable basis for further indispensable research by elicitation’ (Jacobs, 1971: 2, Dutch original).

The second example is from Stappers’ *Esquisse*:

‘Our informant, Ali Gabriel, born in 1944 in Ponthierville, was a student (...) at the University of Kinshasa (1968–1969) (...) The linguistic corpus on which this sketch is based was obtained by direct elicitation during 50 h of interviewing, spread over seven months (November 1968–May 1969)’ (Stappers, 1971: 257, French original).

Note that both authors claim to have worked on a corpus of narrated texts (Jacobs) or other linguistic specimens (Stappers). We are, of course, reminded here of the procedures discussed in Bloomfield’s (1942) *Outline Guide*: linguistic knowledge could only be generated if specific, disciplined textual practices were used. The fieldworker should elicit, take dictation, transcribe and re-transcribe, design while so doing a notation system adequate for the language, translate and retranslate, make file cards with ‘forms’, form categories and combinations of such cards, and so on. The literacy complex that Bloomfield had defined as a scientific method of language study was tightly organized and rigorously disciplined, and deviations from it would cast doubt on the scientific validity of one’s linguistic findings.

The *esquisse* was conceived as a ‘minimal’ Grammar; a skeleton-structural description of a language, and usually of a language of which there was no authoritative published record yet. It was, for all practical purposes, a genre of salvage linguistics. Performing it was technically demanding and publishing it (if done well) was welcomed as a genuine contribution to knowledge of the Congolese languages. It was usually short. Hulstaert’s sketch is 71 pages long; Meuussen’s counts 44 pages; Stappers’ is 50 pages long; and Vansina’s 109 pages; it could therefore be published as a stand-alone booklet (Hulstaert, Meuussen and Vansina) or as an article (Stappers).

3.2. The canonical structure

The *esquisses* all share a canonical structure, which can be schematized as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Phonology
3. Morphology
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ÉDITIONS J. DUCLOY, S. A., GEMBLOUX (Imprimé en Belgique).

Fig. 2. Vansina 1959.
– nominal forms
– pronominal forms
– verbal forms
– invariable forms
4. (Syntax)
5. (Wordlists)
6. Texts

The sequence of sections is fixed for as far as ‘Introduction’, ‘Phonology’ and ‘Morphology’ go; the sequence of the remaining sections can vary. Fig. 2, Vansina’s table of contents, shows the full range of sections.

The basic structure is clearly reminiscent of Boas’ schematization of ‘the characteristics of language’ in the introduction to the Handbook of American Indian Languages. Boas’ scheme also moved from ‘phonetics’ to ‘grammatical categories’, and the latter category consisted of nominal, pronominal and verbal categories. Let us now take a closer look at the different parts of the structure.

1. Introduction. The introduction is as a rule very brief. The authors situate the language geographically (Stappers: 257: ‘the Lengola language (…) is spoken in the Republic of Zaire in the Ponthierville area’), ethnically (Vansina: 5: ‘The Bushong are the central tribe in the cluster called Bakuba’), in relation to other dialects or varieties (Hulstaert: 1: ‘The linguistic notes used in this sketch are from the Bongila, the Nonga and the Poku. These groups differ little if anything among themselves’) and/or within existing classifications of Bantu languages (Stappers: 257: ‘The Lengola language, given the code D12 in the classification of the Bantu languages by M. Guthrie…’). The authors also mention, in the briefest possible terms, the origin of the work (Meeussen: 1: ‘The present attempt at description is based on notes taken at Kailo between 8 and 27 June 1951, a period during which I also took down some Binja’), and all of them mention the names, place of residence and ethnic affiliation of informants (see the fragment from Stappers given earlier). Some authors provide remarks on the notation system used in the esquisse (Meeussen: 1: ‘The transcription used here is the ‘Africa’ alphabet (…); from the IPA alphabet I borrowed the symbol…’). Finally, authors also mention the (few) existing works on the language. The introduction does not inform us on the theoretical framework, nor on the minutiae of the methodology used by the authors. Together with the overall conciseness of the introductions, this suggests the existence of a lot of common ground among a particular community of scholars. There must have been at least an implicit consensus about the usefulness and adequacy of the particular generic structure of the esquisse. The fact that this structure also remained intact over a relatively long time-span, from the 1950s to the 1970s in our four examples, and that it survived the onslaught of the Chomskyan emphasis on a massively theorized linguistics in the 1960s, also strengthens this impression.

2. Phonology. The chapter on phonology is usually brief, and simply presents the different sounds of the language in a standard organizational frame and lay-out, including the sequential organization of vowels analogous to the vowel quadrilateral and of consonants according to articulation place. Fig. 3 shows the first page of the chapter in Meeussen’s esquisse. From such a sound inventory, authors then move on to combinations of sounds: vowel harmony, contraction, the structure of the syllable, and tonology. The
PHONEMES

1. Les sons distinctifs simples sont au moins les suivants:

\[ \begin{array}{cccccc}
\& j \& i \& e \& a \& o \& u \& u \\
\& y \& w \\
\& m \& n \& p \\
\& b \& l \& j \& g \\
\& f \& t \& s \& c \& k \\
\end{array} \]

Il y a un m final syllabique; dans les deux exemples trouvés il a le ton bas: lulim, langue et jüm, dizaine.
Le phonème g, quoique limité à la position postnasale (gg), ne se laisse ramener à aucun autre.
Sont rares ou douteux comme phonèmes indépendants: bv, p, f; voir au vocabulaire les mots genou, pot, fosse, vent.
A côté de l, réalisé souvent comme r ou par un son intermédiaire entre l et r, il y aurait cependant un phonème distinct, r, à en juger par l'opposition isolée entre les radicaux -tel-, chanter, et -ter-, coudre; ce dernier se retrouve identique en Binja.

2. Les consonnes peuvent être précédées de nasale; alors on a d, p, non l, f. Ces phonèmes doubles sont:

\[ \begin{array}{cccc}
\text{mm} & \text{nn} & \text{(pp)} \\
\text{mb} & \text{nd} & \text{nj} & \text{ng} \\
\text{mp} & \text{nt} & \text{ns} & \text{nc} & \text{nk} \\
\end{array} \]

A l'initiale, mm- et nn- sont souvent réduits à m-, n-.

3. Les principales variantes des phonèmes sont:

\[ \begin{array}{cccc}
\& \text{ng} \& \text{nk} \\
\& \text{nx et n\# alternent avec nj;} \\
\& \text{d et p comme réalisation de l et f après nasale: nd, mp;} \\
\& \text{cj alterne souvent avec tj; voir au vocabulaire les mots bon, feuille, creuser, tronc;} \\
\& \text{y et w sont souvent la réalisation de j, i, e et y, u, o devant voyelle; il est à remarquer que y, distinct de j, peut être la première consonne d'un radical verbal, alors que w ne se trouve pas dans cette position (n. 26);} \\
\end{array} \]

Fig. 3. Meeussen 1952.
3. Morphology. The morphology chapter dominates the esquisse. It corresponds roughly to Boas’ survey of ‘grammatical categories’. With the exception of Stappers, the authors all follow the sequence: NOMINAL–PRonomINAL–VERbal–INvariable. (Stappers inserts a chapter on ‘morphophonology’ and then treats nominal forms alongside verbs under ‘inflection’). Nominal forms are treated within the framework of Bantu nominal categories marked by class prefixes. Thus, very much like in the case of the sounds, we get a schematic overview of classes using the standard numbers of Bantu noun classification, and a few prefixes + roots as examples. Fig. 4 illustrates this. Pronominal forms include the personal pronouns, connectives, possessives, demonstratives, interrogatives, numerals. All four esquisses treat these categories, and they all use roughly this sequence of categories in their discussion. Verbal forms are organized in terms of inflectional categories that encompass tense, aspect, modality: ‘infinitive’, ‘constatative’, ‘present’, ‘perfect’, ‘future’, ‘continuatives’, ‘subjunctives’, and so on. Again we see how the authors first provide a formulaic rule followed by examples. Invariable forms – ideophones and particles – are usually listed with only the slightest attempt at categorization. All in all, the treatment of morphology is strongly oriented towards generative morphosyntactic formulae, in which different possible combinations between affixes and roots are schematically presented. In Vansina and Meeussen, the whole of the ‘system’ is summarized in a number of tables (Fig. 5).

4. Syntax. Vansina is the only author who has a separate chapter on syntax. His chapter contains three sections: the word groups (nominal, pronominal, verbal and invariable), the proposition (a combination of such groups), and finally the sentence (composed of different propositions). From small to big: syntax is here understood as ‘word order’, the gradual extendibility of linguistic structures as soon as words are being formed,
TABLEAU A. — PRÉFIXES

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<th>Préfixes complexes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>(moi) (nous) (toi)</td>
<td>bu-</td>
<td>u-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>ba&quot;-</td>
<td>u-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-6</td>
<td>bu-</td>
<td>i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>bi-</td>
<td>i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>l-</td>
<td>i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>i-</td>
<td>i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>ki-</td>
<td>i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>07</td>
<td>by-</td>
<td>i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>n-</td>
<td>i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>n-</td>
<td>i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>lu-</td>
<td>i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>tu-</td>
<td>i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>ku-</td>
<td>i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>ka-</td>
<td>dém. et rel. i-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>017</td>
<td>i-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Les préfixes nominaux ont le ton bas;
pronominaux ont le ton haut, excepté aux classes 1, 9 et 17;
verbaux ont le ton haut, excepté à la 1ère et la 2ème personne.

A la 1ère et la 2ème personne, il n'y a que des préfixes verbaux; pour le reste les espaces laissés en blanc indiquent le même préfixe que celui de la colonne précédente.

TABLEAU B. — CONJUGAISON

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AFFIRMATIF</th>
<th>NÉGATIF</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Narr.</td>
<td>Perf. (-sáka- -i)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antér.</td>
<td>(-sámbú- -á)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prét.</td>
<td>(-s- -i)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Réc.</td>
<td>(-s- -i)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prés.</td>
<td>(-mbú- -á)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habit.</td>
<td>(-mbú- -á)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fut.</td>
<td>Hyp. (-tu- -a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subj. (&quot;- -i)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>à inf. (&quot;pv- -i)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impér.</td>
<td>(-á)(&quot; -a)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 5. Vansina 1959.
until the point where a sentence has been formed. The different permutations of the slip files printed on paper, one could say. ‘Syntax’ thus understood was a notoriously obscure and ‘difficult’ area of African linguistics. De Rop’s (1956) Lomongo Syntax explicitly aimed at complementing Hulstaert’s Praktische grammatica van het Lonkundo (Lomongo) (practical grammar of Lonkundo (Lomongo)) (Hulstaert, 1938), of which De Rop writes that it had covered sounds, tones and morphology, but ‘a systematically composed syntax of Lomongo did not yet exist’ (De Rop, 1956: vii) (De Rop later published his own Grammaire du Lomongo – Phonologie et Morphologie, De Rop, 1958).

The great Hulstaert himself never really produced a fully-fledged study of the syntax of Lomongo, having devoted sixty-plus years to phonological, morphological, lexicographic and dialectological studies and to the collection and edition of Lomongo texts. The marginal status of syntax as a topic of inquiry is also attested by the meagre attention given to it in Manuel de Linguistique Bantoue, one of the many books of that other workhorse of Belgian African linguistics, Gaston Van Bulck (1949). In the chapter on the structure of Bantu languages, Van Bulck’s treatment of phonetics covers ten pages (63–73); that of morphology fifteen pages (73–88) and syntax one and a half utterly uninformative pages (88–89). De Rop’s very concise Introduction à la Linguistique Bantoue Congolaise (1963) likewise devotes about 20 pages to phonology, 30 pages to morphology, and 6 pages to syntax. The study of Bantu languages, obviously, was primarily a matter of sounds and morphemes, their distribution and combinatorial – Bloomfield, Hockett and Harris are not far away.

5. **Wordlists.** Meeuissen, Stappers and Vansina all provide an alphabetically organized vocabulary of different length, but in each case oriented towards ‘basic terminology’: terminology that could be used for historical and comparative analysis. Hulstaert provides a brief note on lexical differences between Nkengo and Lonkundo, of which he had separately produced a long lexicographic study.

6. **Texts.** In all four examples, the authors close their study with ‘texts’ with a ‘literary’ French translation on the facing page or column (Fig. 6). The texts are usually ‘folkloric’, mostly animal fables. The most generous is Hulstaert, who provides no less than nine texts. Vansina gives two texts and Stappers one. Meeuissen provides one animal fable as well as a translation of ‘phrases du questionnaire de M. Guthrie’ – a list of elicitation expressions developed by Malcolm Guthrie and designed to provide information for linguistic analysis.

Fig. 6. Meeussen 1952.
3.3. Discussion

The *esquisse* is obviously a specific, codified textual and epistemic genre: a pocket-size, uniform description of everything a linguist needed to know about the language. As mentioned earlier, the *esquisse* is a mature and professionalized genre, instrumental in providing linguistic-descriptive material for large-scale comparative analyses of African languages. There is, consequently, a wealth of implicit agreement on what kinds of things were required for that purpose: the canonical structure of the *esquisse* is a blueprint of such a genred and regimented collection of linguistic knowledge. What was needed, we now can see, was rigorously analysed sound inventories, surveys of morphemes and their combinations, a basic vocabulary that could be compared with that of other languages, and a sample of folkloric (i.e. ‘authentic’, ‘natural’) texts-with-translation, which offered a glimpse of how the grammar and vocabulary were brought into action in stories.

If we now compare this to the philological tradition discussed earlier, we see that the texts-and-translations here follow grammar; the phonetic, morphological and lexicographic notes ultimately lead to a text, which is not there for analysis because it is the result of analysis. The dynamic, cultural aspects of language are a precipitate of structure, of grammar – an echo of Bloomfield’s reverse inductivism and a suggestion that dynamic and variable texts emerge from static and invariable grammar, not the other way around. Still, we see traces of the philological tradition in the use of texts as part of linguistic description, as well as in the emphasis on ‘original’ texts. With the exception of Meeussen’s translations of Guthrie’s elicitation phrases (which, en passant, offers us a glimpse of Meeussen’s fieldwork practice) all the authors offer ‘cultural’ texts, *not produced by themselves* but suggested to be the people’s texts. This is philology: the linguist not only contributes to the study of linguistic structure, but also, and simultaneously, to the study of literature, and text and grammar are two sides of one coin.

But more than anything else, we are facing a professional written code here: a literacy complex nested in a small community of users. All the authors use technical notation systems (the Africa Alphabet, the IPA...) and similar structuring devices such as the numbered categorization of noun classes in Bantu languages, the vowel quadrilateral for organizing the vowel inventory of the language, the use of linguistic-technical abbreviations (*AFF* = ‘affirmative’, etc.), references to Guthrie’s Bantu classification index and so forth. Thus, with an eye on the various illustrations given above, it is clear that the *esquisses* are not meant to be ‘read’ but to be ‘examined’, because they are not ‘written’ in a usable orthography but ‘noted’ by means of a technical, hermetic notation system, the uniformity of which was the object of a considerable amount of professional reflection in its own right (e.g. Burssens, 1972; Burssens and Van Bulck, 1935). It is equally clear that they are not intended for a wide audience but for a restricted group of ‘experts’ who can comprehend the implicitness of the technicality of the genre.

This implicit complex of genre features operates like a register, as a literate discursive system that produces semiotically an object – language-as-structure – and the subjects involved in the construction of this object – Africanist linguists. And this register provides stability: its function as a normative discursive system produces maximally communicable text-artefacts within the community of scholars interested in communicating in this fashion. And interestingly, the stability of the genre rests upon the capacity to ‘shrink’ lan-
guage to a concise artefactual set of schemes, formulae and tables. The less ‘text’ in the
grammar, the better the grammar is qua grammar – a good Grammar₂ presents Grammar₁
in its skeleton form. This miniature replica of language was not an autonomous genre, as
we have seen. It was part of a larger repertoire of genres, and its main function was not to
provide a practical language teaching or learning tool, but to be used as a building block in
larger scientific edifices: classification, historical and comparative research, linguistic
cartography.

4. Conclusion: the birth certificate of language

Let us recall that many of the esquisses came into being because the languages they
addressed had not (yet) been appropriately described. Thus, languages were literally born
in the textual procedure here described: a procedure which rested on an assumption of lan-
guage-as-structure and as replicable in artefactualised textual objects: the concise but accu-
rate description. Van Bulck’s (1948) Recherches Linguistiques du Congo Belge again
provides us with clear illustrations of this. The whole book is organized around written
sources, ‘records’ in the Bloomfieldian sense, composed by European or other non-African
scholars, missionaries, travellers and explorers, and languages are listed (i.e. they are sug-
gested to exist), and afterwards plotted on the linguistic map of the Congo, when at least a
suspicion of their existence can be culled from the existing sources.

This existence of language was a matter of their existence as researchable structure in a
written record. A ‘language’ or ‘dialect’ is acknowledged as such when there are lexical or
grammatical (morphological) records that allow comparison with other languages. And
this, as we have seen, was a matter of textual procedure, the artefactualisation of language
into textual items that could be seen as stable, rigorous, and illustrative of the ‘essence’ of
the language. There was considerable respect for such textual items. Van Bulck lists
sources which, often, should not be lent too much credibility as accounts of history and
culture; to Van Bulck, however, the few bits of language contained in such sources were
invaluable, for they were very often the only existing written, textual artefacts for lan-
guages nowhere else documented.⁶ Thus, salvage linguistics in Africa, like elsewhere,
assumed the shape of attention and appreciation for whatever was or could be made tex-
tually existent. The bits of Galla mundane storytelling collected by Klinghenheben (Fig. 1)
were published in one of the most prestigious journals of its time (edited by Carl Meinhof)
and were probably also perceived as an important contribution to knowledge of that part
of Africa.⁷ And the practical handbooks, phrases usuelles and other (hardly reliable) lin-
guistic curiosa discussed by Fabian (1986) found their way to the shelves of a good number
of academic libraries and thence into comparative linguistic studies. For better or for
worse, here was textual language stuff – always useful in the hands of those who could con-
vert it into respectable linguistic knowledge (rather than practice, of course).

The more professionalized this occupation became, the more importance was given to
uniform, structured, codified textualization. The esquisses in that sense provide us with a
glimpse of professional ideologies of textuality, in which rigor in generic form indexes epi-

⁶ Fabian’s (1984) Language on the Road of course demonstrated that such sources – e.g. early travelogues by
European missionaries – could also be used for different, more interesting kinds of analysis.
⁷ Just like the letters that Sapir included in his Wishram Texts (Moore, 2006).
stemic validity, and in which the ‘reduction’ of the wild variation in language usage to a handful of pages on language structure suggested to be the engine behind this variation was seen as a mark of great scholarship. The indexicalities of epistemic validity and scholarship are anchored in textual formats, in ways of writing language, codified and deviant from ‘ordinary’ writing of language. And given the so-called ‘unwritten’ status of most African languages, the particular professional, codified writing of linguists was often the first (and often the only) writing of the language at all – a ‘described’ language often entailed a scribed language.

The point is languages came into being because, as Bloomfield declared, not every act of writing would do; they came on record, one could say, because of the particular textual-generic requirements that were imposed on ‘the record’, and they came on record in terms of these generic requirements. The record therefore included certain things at the same time as it obscured other things; it made certain things visible while it made other things invisible; it demarcated a particular – pocket-size – collection of phenomena as being ‘language’. Writing was already tailored towards Grammar₁, it needed to be a writing that made structure visible in written normative, structuring code: Grammar₂. The official birthplace of a good number of African languages is this nexus of Grammar₁ and Grammar₂. And their birth certificate is a technical textual artefact such as the *esquisse*.

References


8 This attitude has not vanished. It is not uncommon to read laudatory phrases like ‘Mr. Y has cracked the code of language B’ in reviews of grammars of African languages. Usually, what is meant is that Mr. Y has provided a more rigorous (often: the first rigorous) grammatical description, and has been able to correct a few errors committed by predecessors.


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