

LANGUAGE PLANNING AND ONOMASTICS IN ZAIRE<sup>1</sup>

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1. Introduction

Various studies in the last few years have focused on different aspects of language use and language change for the purpose of nation building. Scholars have been dealing with "deliberate language change" performed either on the code, speaking patterns or both, within a particular speech community [Rubin and Jernudd 1971:xvi]. In this paper there is a discussion of changes in both code and speaking patterns as related to the onomastic system in the Republic of Zaire. The goal of this discussion is to point out and explain the relevance of onomastic systems to language planning for the benefit of ethnographic studies. The view taken here is that, since the onomastic systems reflect conventionalized practices in given societies, they must be planned in such a way that they will preserve and maintain their cultural identity.

2. Background

The problem of proper names for persons and places has been one of the crucial issues in the national affairs of Zaire, but has received very little space in the literature which focuses on the sociolinguistic problems of the country. Most writers concentrating on these language problems have mainly paid attention to general aspects of the sociology of language, such as the possibility of a "national language", standardization, language problems as reflected in the education system, and communications in the broad sense of circulation of information, etc. (see [Alexandre 1967; Mateene 1964, 1967; Polomé 1963, 1968]). As an example, it was in 1974 that the first National Seminar of Linguists

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of Zaire was held at the National University of Zaire (Lubumbashi campus) to examine:

- a. The promotion of the national languages in the framework of Zairian nationalism of resorting to authenticity;
- b. the teaching of languages in Zaire (teaching of Zairian languages, teaching in Zairian languages and teaching of foreign languages in Zaire);
- c. research on Zairian languages and perspectives for the future;
- d. standardization of the orthography of the Zairian languages;
- e. creation of the national Society of Linguists of Zaire.

As mentioned above, this was the first time that concerted efforts were made to analyze in a preliminary framework the current sociolinguistic situation in the country. However, no particular attention was paid to the area which constitutes the topic of the present study.

A brief look at the literature on onomastic systems in the world reveals that this domain has always been of concern, and for various purposes. R. Ferguson was concerned about the etymology of family names in France, England and Germany as they were related to the Teutonic name-system. He pointed out that:

The etymology of proper names is the only branch then of the subject which can in any sense be called popular; for what men, even of those who care not to enquire the origin of the language they speak, feel some interest or curiosity in knowing the meaning of the names they bear. [1864:3]

A. Dauzat illustrated the psychological, social and linguistic relevance of proper names in addition to the classificatory distinction between individual and collective names [1925:6-13]. The geographical nomenclature of the Kwakiutl Indians of British Columbia, as analyzed by F. Boas [1964:171-176], furnishes a good example of the ethnographic value of proper names. His effort showed that those geographical names were a reflection of both cultural patterns and linguistic potential.

The importance of names in the maintenance of social structure has been reported by Radcliffe-Brown about the Chinese method of giving names to offspring. With this method, everyone has three names:

The first is the lineage or family name; the second indicates the generation to which he belongs; the third is his distinctive personal name. From the second part of the name any member of the lineage can tell to which generation any particular individual belongs." [1950:14]

Thus, their system not only helps them to maintain the distinction between generations, which is an important feature of social structure, as explained by the author, but also has some implications for the rules

of marriage<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, it appears evident that such a system of naming is a structured process having its own social value among other institutionalized behaviors in this particular community.

In his description of the modes of livelihood of the Nuer people in East Africa, Evans-Fritchard [1940] has shown the social value of cattle as it is directly manifested in the onomastic and greeting systems. This should not be surprising for those familiar with the role played by cattle among the Nuer. Indeed the latter, as explained by Evans-Fritchard, take some of their names from the cattle terminology (ox-names) and it is the latter which are favored in salutations. Both cattle names and ox-names of people are used in song and poetry [1940:45-49]. In another paper, "Nuer modes of address", [1964:221] he clearly described the importance of names and titles of address among the Nuer by pointing out that "they symbolize a man's social position in relation to the people around him, so that, by the use of one or other of them, the status of the speaker to the person addressed is readily recognized."

The importance of names in this particular society was not only limited to the cattle terminology and their interaction with social events, but names also appeared to play a key role in the Nuer conception of time and space and in reference to their age-set system. The names given to years, for instance, reflected some crucial events that have marked the life of the group (floods, pestilences, famines, wars, etc.) [1940:105]. Evans-Fritchard's effort was to draw attention to this onomastic system and show that "a study of the dominant interest of the Nuer might be approached from this angle." [1940:48]

G. Nissim [1973] has approached a number of African societies in Chad, Togo, Cameroon, Mali, and Upper Volta trying to show how traditional names reflect the spiritual relationships between God and people. A. B. Weiner [1976] has described the naming process which denotes an aspect of the Trobriand cultural identity.

With regard to Zaire, one might refer to a brief analysis made by E. Polomé [1958] in which he shows the ethnographic meanings of some selected personal names among the Bakongo of Lower Zaire, Batetela-Bakusu of Sankuru and Maniema, and Baluba of Kasayi and Northern Shaba. Faik-Nzuji [1974] has also attempted to look at the origin, naming processes,

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<sup>2</sup>Radcliffe-Brown explains that the Chinese rule of exogamy prevents persons with the same surname from marrying each other: "Since such names are partilineally inherited and therefore the two persons of one name may be supposed to have had an ancestor in common, though it may be three thousand years ago" [1950:67]. Also in his On Joking Relationships [1940], reprinted in Radcliffe-Brown [1952:102], he has shown the importance of names in the maintenance of the social structure.

grammatical and semantic structures of some selected personal names among the Baluba of the Kasayi region.

In all of the studies mentioned above, there is an obvious recognition of the relevance of onomastic systems to the sociolinguistic situations in various parts of the world. However, there has not been any direct relationship that I am aware of between the current theories and practices in language planning and onomastic systems of any particular population. To ignore this domain of the culture is to miss an important aspect of the ethnography of its speech community. Thus, an effort is made in the present analysis to show that proper names play a key role in a speech community as "linguistic indicators" of socialization. In this approach some aspects of the planning as they were implemented and cultivated in Zaire will be presented, namely the problem of the name of the country itself, the problem of "Western first names", names of foreign peoples which were given to towns, streets and historical sites, and finally changes made in the greetings, terms of address and names of administrative divisions will be examined.

### 3. Name of the Country

Before 1885, the "Congo Basin"<sup>3</sup> was not a unified country as it is at present. At that time, there were various kingdoms and states which occupied this huge territory. In May, 1885, the Berlin Conference determined the partition of the continent between the existing powers, and Congo Free State was founded. The new entity included then all of the independent and autonomous kingdoms and states. The name Congo was actually the name of the kingdom of the BaKongo group. The choice of the name Congo for the whole territory might have been a result of the close contacts which this group had established with Westerners long before they went into the interior of the country. For instance, E. Polomé [1968:297] has mentioned that "Kikongo" was the first Bantu language known to Europeans. Obviously, the name "Congo Free State" was a reflection of the socio-political situation between the country and the western powers at the time. Under this name occurred one of the worst forms of colonization ever recorded in the world (see Leo Frobenius [1907] in B. Davidson [1964:364-365]).

A few years later, development in the European political and economic arena, and especially the need for permanent exploitation of the country, brought changes in the Belgium--Congo Free State relationship. Thus, on September 9, 1908, after twenty-three years of existence, the Congo Free State was annexed to Belgium as a colony [Bustin 1963:29]. This change was manifested in the name of the country: Congo Free State became Belgian Congo. It is this name which was associated with the

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<sup>3</sup>The historical background is provided by Bustin [1963].

country for half of this century, and which identified the country with the colonialists. The independence of the country on June 30, 1960, from Belgian rule, naturally affected the name of the country again. The latter was renamed The Republic of the Congo (Léopoldville). Notice that it was necessary to specify Léopoldville since there was another Republic of the Congo (Brazzaville) across the river. In fact, this confusion was partly a result of the arbitrary establishment of the present political boundaries in the continent. However, since 1960 there have been variations and changes in the naming of the country. The Republic of the Congo (Léopoldville) did not last long. Thus, after a painful period immediately following Independence Day, the name of the country was changed from the Republic of the Congo (Léopoldville) to Democratic Republic of the Congo (Léopoldville). Here the change was mainly the addition of "democratic". Shortly after, Léopoldville was substituted by Kinshasa. The substitution of Kinshasa for Léopoldville characterizes the first attempt by the government to recover the authentic name of the region. The name Léopoldville remained in historical records. However, recently (1971) there has been a radical change in the name of the country. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (Kinshasa) was changed into the Republic of Zaire. One realizes how much information is contained in the different names of this country. These names reflect and constitute an index of the various socio-political events which have marked the history of the country and its people.

The change of name to the Republic of Zaire occurred on October 27, 1971. This date, in fact, is one of the historic moments of achievement of the 'Second Republic' led by President Mobutu Sese Seko. The word Zaire is a 15th century Portuguese misspelling of the authentic Kikongo word 'Zadi'. The latter was the traditional name of the national river<sup>4</sup>, which is thought of as the symbol of Zairian unity. The change of the name in 1971 happened at a time when Zairian peoples were in search of a new spirit and revival of authentic traditions which would express the national identity. Since the former name (Congo) became synonymous with anarchy, secession, rebellion and various types of disorder, it was an effective action to change this state of mind. This change coincided with the 6th anniversary of President Mobutu Sese Seko's regime, and was part of a mental decolonization process undertaken by the government. Thus, the change of the name had strong psychological effects on the population. The mass media, especially the radio stations, reinforced the implementation and participated intensively in the cultivation of this reform. In connection with the government programs (lectures, speeches, etc.), the media helped quickly to erase the former name in the national vocabulary (except, of course, for the nostalgic people who would rather have seen the former situation be perpetuated).

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<sup>4</sup>From the Shaba region to Kisangani, the river is called Lualaba, but from the Kisangani region to the Atlantic Ocean it is called Zaire.

#### 4. Individual Names

For those familiar with the ethnographic literature on African societies, the role of personal names in socialization is not a mystery. The individual names very often reflect the interaction of people and their environment. Social relationships and spiritual life are expressed through these names. This is by no means a peculiarity of African societies. In the works cited above, one will find the same type of correlations in other societies throughout the world. However, the objective here is to show their relevance to language planning.

The change of the name of the country was not an isolated fact. It was part of a decolonization process, led consciously by the government in accord with Zairian nationalism. Along with the country, all of the streets, cities, and country sites which were formerly given colonial names were changed. All of these places, streets or sites, recovered either their traditional names, that the Belgians had minimized or received new and authentic Zairian names. The lyrics and melody of the national hymn were also changed. These reforms in language use were launched in order to regain the national identity. It would be alienating (in the Zairian context) to maintain colonial names which through their nature remind people of those dramatic years of disruption.

Not only were the streets, cities, parks, lakes and buildings de-baptized, but western "first names" such as Alexis, Jean, Pierre, André, Anne, etc. were also abolished for the Zairian people. In fact, this system which was imposed on the population by the missionaries and the colonial administrators did not fit into the traditional African ways of naming children. Unfortunately, the authentic African names were symbols of paganism for the earlier missionaries.

Faik-Nzuji [1974] has suggested for Luba personal names that: 1) their coinage is a result of a socio-cultural motivation, and not a random fact; 2) their analytic interpretation should proceed by a morpho-semantic analysis [1974:3-4]. Examples:

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|-----|----------|---|
| (1) | Mbuuyi   | 'the oldest twin'   |
|     | Kānkú    | 'the youngest'  |
|     | Múswāmba | 'the child born after twins'                                    |
|     | Kábishí  | 'premature child' (derived from the adjective<br>-bishí 'raw' ) |

However, let us note that not all of the proper names have a particular meaning in the community. For instance, she gave some personal names such as Mpóóyí, Odyá and Bóóyí which apparently do not have any structural relationship to other elements of the Luba language, but which have been recognized by the speech community and transmitted as proper

names [1974:4]. Although she did not expand her analysis, she has nevertheless indicated the functional role of those personal names.

Of special interest here is the "reincarnation" process in Luba naming, which she observes is most generally used. Two aspects characterize this process: namely, the "re-birth" and the "power of the name".

The re-birth essentially consists of the belief that the newborn is one of the ancestors who has come back. Thus, his names should be given to the child, and in so doing, that ancestor (i.e. his memory) is perpetuated. In many cases this name will influence the behavior of the parents toward the child in social contexts, depending upon the structural relationship between the ancestor, whose name was given to the child, and the child's parents. Notice that the notion of "reincarnation" has also been reported by Radcliffe-Brown [1950:20] among the Henga, in connection with the process of giving the name of a grandparent to a grandchild.

The power of the name consists of the belief that the name represents the soul of the individual. Therefore, to inherit or to receive someone's name, is to inherit or receive at the same time his qualities, faults and even his destiny [Faik-Nzuji 1974:7-8]. It is not the purpose of this paper to examine these aspects of personal names in detail. However, they are relevant, and the subject of a projected systematic analysis of the correlation between names, individuals and social interactions in Zaire. The account given here is a simplified description of more complex social phenomena supporting this analysis.

Besides the reincarnation process, there are additional processes relating to the birth or conception circumstances which have important ritual functions in the community. Thus the system of "first names" referred to above was completely inappropriate. Moreover, in many cases, these first names were last names of some foreign citizens in their own culture. Therefore, the authorities decided to stop these alienating practices. In order to convince people of the decisions, the President himself gave the example by changing his identification from Joseph Désiré Mobutu to Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga. Reforms in individual names occupied a large space in the key issues of the country for a long period of time.

Resistance from the Church, which saw language reform as an attempt to interfere with its missions, led government officials to deliver many popular speeches which explained the rationale behind these actions. The government showed that changes made in the onomastic system should not be taken as actions against religion, since faith cannot be identified with a particular type of name. The population was then required to take only the authentic country names inherited from the ancestors.

Misleading interpretations and commentaries in Europe made it neces-

sary again for the government to extend its explanation to the world community. Thus, Mr. Sakombi Inongo, then "Commissaire d'Etat" at the Zairian Department of Orientation, as a direct representative of the President, lectured in Dakar, Brussels, and Paris. This was part of the government's program to explain the essence of "Zairian authenticity" in general and the rationale behind the changes made in the onomastic system. He used the example of the name of the President himself, first to give its correct meaning, and secondly to show that the authentic names have an ethnographic value for the people. The text below is illustrative<sup>5</sup>:

Thus, there was in Zaire what has been called the first names affair and what has been the occasion, in Europe, of commentaries either unfavorable or humoristic. Some newspapers succeeded in giving fanciful translation of the authentic names of General Mobutu. Although flattering for the virile character of our Chief of State, these translations were, no less, false. Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu Wa Za Banga. Each name has an ancestral reference. Mobutu Sese means the inveterate defender of the forefathers' land. Mobutu Seko, the audacious warrior who ignores the defeat because his endurance wins. Mobutu Kuku Ngbendu, or Mobutu Wa Za Banga means the powerful warrior going from conquest to conquest without being stopped. There is a Gallic proverb which says "We do not have part to the glory of our forefathers unless we force ourselves to resemble them." You would not like, Gentlemen, to deny for General Mobutu the qualities of courage and force which, according to your own ancestors, he has inherited from his forefathers."

This text is a fragment of the lecture given by Mr. Sakombi Inongo in Paris on April 3, 1973 for the French public. It appears to fit well with the notion of reincarnation discussed above.

As one can imagine, the problem of changing names was a serious one at different levels of the community. Tremendous efforts were made to implement and cultivate these changes. Thus, the reforms took place in macro and micro contexts affecting both French (foreign language) and the "four national languages". At the macro level, the vocabulary was marked by the term "Zaire", which identifies three realities, namely: the country, the currency and the river. Administrative divisions left

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<sup>5</sup>The original text may be found in Sakombi Inongo [1973]. In the translation given here, an effort has been made to remain as close as possible to the original version. Some other data on the problem of names in general may also be found in "Le MPR à Six Ans", May 30, 1973. Kinshasa, Department of Orientation.



by the colonialists, such as "chefferies", "communes", "provinces" (see E. Polomé [1968:295-298]), were respectively substituted by "collectivities", "zones" and "regions". Their respective colonial names such as "Elizabethville", "Léopoldville", etc. were changed to "Lubumbashi", "Kinshasa", etc. For one's spatial orientation, these changes have an obvious importance.

## 5. Greeting System

At a micro level (in social interactions) besides the reforms in the system of first names, some terms used in the greeting system (terms of address) and correspondence were changed. Thus, French terms such as "monsieur", "madame", "mademoiselle" were respectively substituted by "citoyen/citoyenne". The term "citoyen" also replaced titles such as "Son Excellence". The feminine form "citoyenne" reduced the social distinction between madame/mademoiselle. It is interesting to notice the complexity of these language changes in a multilingual society like Zaire. Code switching and language planning would be crucial to analyze in the framework of these reforms. For instance, western first names were abolished in favor of native names in Zairian languages. But since French is still the official language in Zaire, the changes in administrative terms and the greeting system have been effected with substitution of other French lexical items. However, since everyday speech behavior is marked by various code switchings (involving all of these languages and depending upon specific contexts and status of the speakers,) it would not be surprising to find the reforms discussed above reflected in the code switchings, especially in the "political vocabulary".

It is important to point out that these changes have been introduced to affect the Zairian population. As in the case of the titles used in addresses, terms such as "monsieur" or "madame" will be employed whenever a Zairian interacts with a foreigner, but the foreigner who has been in the country and knows about the socio-linguistic rules, would be expected to use "citoyen(ne)" when replying. Among Zairians themselves only the latter form is used. All of these variations in the sociolinguistic situation have been extensively exploited by the radio stations for their implementation as already mentioned. The President himself spent months travelling throughout the various regions in an effort to implement the new language policy and at the same time to evaluate its efficacy.

## 6. Discussion

This paper has sought to point out an aspect of language use which seems neglected in the literature on language planning. Proper names and terms of address are so involved in everyday activities that people take them for granted. In Zaire, personal names do not merely distinguish people from each other; they also operate as "linguistic indicators" of socialization, in that they are usually representative of various social relationships within a family. At a more general level, they play an

indexical role reflecting the sociocultural changes or events in the community.

It is believed that from a systematic examination of onomastic systems in countries which, like Zaire, rely upon oral traditions, further insights could be gained about social organization.

The relevance of this paper lies in its implications for a general analysis of the sociolinguistic situation in countries facing the problems of "nationality planning" [Fishman 1974:84]. Decisions made by the Zairian government concerning language use as a national resource, were politically motivated, but naturally linguistic ones. The importance of these changes in the verbal repertoire is also indirectly felt in the economy, as can be seen once one imagines that to change the name of the country, sites, buildings, streets or personal names requires consequently the change of those names in official documents, business documents, new identification cards, maps, etc.

It has been documented here that the Zairian onomastic system reflects the history, culture and the socio-political events which have marked the national scene. However, it is amazing and sometimes disappointing to realize that most of the planners have not noticed the importance and the linguistic nature of the political decisions made in this domain. Hopefully, more attention will be paid to these changes which have been successfully carried out in the permanent search for the recuperation and affirmation of the national identity.

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