

# The Power of Language and the Language of Power: Sociolinguistic Methods and Social Histories of Language and Political Power in Mobutu's Congo-Zaire (1965–1997)

Joshua Castillo 

Boston University, Boston, MA, USA  
E-mail: [Jcafhist@bu.edu](mailto:Jcafhist@bu.edu)

**Abstract:** This article argues for the potential of sociolinguistic methods to write post-colonial African history using a case study of the Mobutu regime's use of Lingala as its language of power (*langue du pouvoir*) in order to rule Congo-Zaire. Oral history interviews conducted in DRC from 2019 to 2021, corroborated by sociolinguistic and political science analyses from the period under study, reveal how the Mobutu regime's use of Lingala contributed to the privatization of the Zairian state, and the fracturing of Zairian society, but also the strengthening of Zairian and later Congolese national identity.

**Résumé:** Cet article met en avant le potentiel des méthodes sociolinguistiques pour écrire l'histoire postcoloniale de l'Afrique et se base sur une étude de cas de l'utilisation du lingala par le régime de Mobutu comme langue du pouvoir au Congo-Zaire. Des entretiens menés en RDC de 2019 à 2021, corroborés par des analyses sociolinguistiques ainsi que des analyses de sciences politiques de la période étudiée, révèlent comment l'utilisation du lingala par le régime de Mobutu a contribué à la privatisation de l'État zaïrois et à la division de la société zaïroise, mais aussi au renforcement de l'identité nationale zaïroise puis congolaise.

**Keywords:** Zaire, language policy, Lingala, nationalism, sociolinguistic history, Central Africa

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## Introduction

This article argues for the explanatory power of language—using sociolinguistic methods—to provide new perspectives on post-colonial African history through a case study of Lingala, the language of power (*langue du pouvoir*) adopted by the Mobutu regime in Congo-Zaire from 1965 to 1997. Specifically, I analyze language ideologies and recollections of changing language practices under the Mobutu regime, emerging from oral history interviews conducted in Lingala, Swahili, Kikongo, Ciluba, and French across the DRC as part of dissertation fieldwork between 2019 and 2021. The interviews for this dissertation research included three main groups: Congolese political and cultural elites and former members of the Mobutu regime at all levels of the administrative, party, and security hierarchy; Congolese and Congo-focused academic specialists in history, political science, anthropology, linguistics, and ethnomusicology with particular expertise relating to either Lingala or the Mobutu period; members of the Congolese general population (especially women to offset gender imbalances in politics and the academy) from all provinces and national language communities, ranging in age from 34 to 95.<sup>1</sup> I put these interviews in conversation with sociolinguistic and political science analyses from the period in order to engage with a historiographic problem that has confronted scholars since Mobutu lost power in 1997: How did Mobutu and his regime simultaneously privatize the Zairian state and fracture Zairian society, yet strengthen Congolese national identity in the process?<sup>2</sup> This article first describes how sociolinguistic methods can contribute to African history and then uses these methods to engage this historiographic problem, which political scientist Pierre Englebert has termed “Congo’s Nationalist Paradox.”<sup>3</sup> This article argues that the regime’s use of Lingala contributed to these divergent outcomes, facilitating Mobutu’s efforts to unify Zaire and further his control, while also fracturing Zairian society by fomenting opposition to the regime in the East, setting the stage for the civil and regional war that would devastate Congo once the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of the Congo (AFDL) coalition launched the invasion that toppled Mobutu’s regime in 1997.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork was conducted in Lubumbashi and Kinshasa in summer 2019 in conjunction with FLAS language study of Katanga Swahili dialect(s) and then in 2021 in Kinshasa, Kikwit, Boma, Matadi, Mbandaka, Mbuji-Mayi, and Goma through an SSRC IDRF fellowship.

<sup>2</sup> Catharine M. Newbury, “Dead and Buried or Just Underground? The Privatization of the State in Zaire,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 18–1 (1984), 112–114.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Englebert, “A Research Note on Congo’s Nationalist Paradox,” *Review of African Political Economy* 29– 93/94 (2002), 591–594.

<sup>4</sup> Jason Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (New York: Public Affairs, 2012), 93–163.

## The Power of Language: Using Sociolinguistic Methods to Write African History

Sociolinguistic methods, such as the historical linguistic approaches used by precolonial Africanist historians, can enable historians to read and analyze historical changes via linguistic ones and thus provide new insights into social, cultural, and political change in post-colonial Africa. I focus primarily on popular experiences of political power and thus work especially with language ideologies and language practices, bringing these concepts from linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics into conversation with work by Africanist historians.

Studying social change through linguistic change has been a core part of Africanist history since its earliest years as a discipline in the Western academy.<sup>5</sup> This research, however innovative, has primarily been limited temporally to the precolonial period and, methodologically, to historical linguistic approaches.<sup>6</sup> Historians and historical linguists, from Jan Vansina onward, have used historical linguistic analyses in conjunction with archeological and ecological evidence to illuminate otherwise inaccessible elements of precolonial African history and made foundational contributions to the field in the process.<sup>7</sup>

I propose in this article that sociolinguistic approaches to studying African history, although still tentative, have the potential to open up new vistas into understanding Africa's recent past. My starting point is the work of the late sociolinguist and anthropologist Jan Blommaert, who concluded that on-the-ground sociolinguistic processes such as language practices represent "an extremely sensitive index of broader social change."<sup>8</sup> Following Blommaert, changes in language practices and language ideologies index social changes in the same way as loan words and morphological variation index changes for historical linguistics. In the Zairian context, a change in language practices—Lingala's nation-wide expansion—indexed social and political changes connected to Mobutu's nation-building project, in the form of his personalized rule and efforts to centralize state control and strengthen national identity. At the same time, a change in language ideologies—

<sup>5</sup> Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 111–196.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of early historical linguistic contributions to African history see Christopher Ehret, *History and the Testimony of Language* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2011); and Jan Vansina, *Living with Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Jan Vansina, *Kingdoms of the Savanna* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966); James Jeffrey Hoover, "The Seduction of Ruwej: Reconstructing Ruund History (The Nuclear Lunda; Zaire, Angola, Zambia)" (unpublished PhD thesis, Yale University, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Jan Blommaert, *State Ideology and Language in Tanzania*, Revised edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 109.

increasingly prevalent criticism toward Lingala among Swahili speakers in eastern Zaire—indexed shifting popular attitudes toward the central government, which manifested in the form of popular support for multiple rebellions and culminated in the AFDL movement that toppled Mobutu in 1997. Sociolinguistic approaches to history differ from historical linguistic approaches by indexing short term social, political, and cultural changes rather than *longue durée* changes.<sup>9</sup> Another difference lies with the object of analysis for changes in language practices and ideologies—that is, speakers of languages rather than languages themselves as with historical linguistics. This focus on speakers, rather than linguistic structures, means that this sociolinguistic approach is especially suited to studying time periods still within living memory using oral histories. Drawing from oral history testimony, sociolinguistic historical methods can contribute to African social history by historicizing and contextualizing the language practices and ideologies of ordinary Africans whose linguistic repertoires do not include the European languages in which most research in African history is presented, debated, published, and consumed.<sup>10</sup> Describing the historical linguistic approach, the influential historical linguist Christopher Ehret wrote that “every language is an archive” whose “documents are the thousands of words that make up its lexicon.”<sup>11</sup> To adapt Ehret’s analogy, the primary archives for sociolinguistic historical research are speakers whose memories and experiences of different language practices or ideologies represent the individual documents for this research. Sociolinguistic historical evidence is accessible not only through interviews but also through music, novels, and other fora where language ideologies are expressed or through sociolinguistic publications that document language practices and changes. In contrast to the relative durability of historical linguistic evidence, sociolinguistic evidence is more localized, specific, and contextual, but can still be analyzed historically.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Derek Nurse, “The Contributions of Linguistics to the Study of History in Africa,” *The Journal of African History* 38–3 (1997), 359–391; Kathryn M. de Luna, Jeffrey B. Fleisher, and Susan Keech McIntosh, “Thinking Across the African Past: Interdisciplinarity and Early History,” *The African Archaeological Review* 29–2/3; (September 2012), 75–94; and Ehret, *History and the Testimony of Language*.

<sup>10</sup> As sociolinguist John Mugane has eloquently argued, the use of European languages, especially what he terms “vertical English,” for academic studies of Africa, disadvantages African scholars and disconnects this research from its most immediate audience, Africans themselves. See John Mugane, “The Great English Heist in African Studies,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 30–2 (2018), 148–162; and Ayo Bamgbose, *Language and Exclusion: The Consequences of Language Policies in Africa* (Münster: Beiträge Zur Afrikanistik, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Ehret, *History and the Testimony of Language*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Terttu Nevalainen, “What Are Historical Sociolinguistics?,” *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics* 1–2 (August 2015), 243–269.

Over the past twenty-five years, linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have developed methods and approaches—especially research into language ideologies and language practices—with significant potential for historical research that has not yet been fully realized.<sup>13</sup> Language ideologies, a foundational concept of linguistic anthropology, are the “beliefs and attitudes that shape speakers’ relationships to their own and others’ languages, mediating between the social practice of language and the socio-economic and political structures within which it occurs.”<sup>14</sup> Historically, they act as archives of speech communities and their ideas surrounding language.<sup>15</sup> Language ideologies are rooted in historical events, and processes, and they can thus be used to read historical change.<sup>16</sup> Language ideologies represent complex historical evidence in that they can be adopted, performed, and altered based on who someone is speaking with and in what context.<sup>17</sup> In recent years, scholars have succeeded in linking both hegemonic and counterhegemonic language ideologies to shifting political and social power relations, demonstrating how language ideologies can both index and contribute to historical change.<sup>18</sup> Language practices refer to the varieties and variants of language(s) that communities use for different communicative functions.<sup>19</sup> Language practices such as language ideologies are an important object of analysis for sociolinguists, and much recent research focused on the language practices of different sub-cultures, speech communities, and communities of practice.<sup>20</sup> Both language ideologies and

<sup>13</sup> Miyako Inoue, “Introduction: Temporality and Historicity in and through Linguistic Ideology,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 14–1 (June 2004), 1–5.

<sup>14</sup> Jillian R. Cavanaugh, “Language Ideology Revisited,” *Sociolinguistic Frontiers*, Social Science Research Council, 4 June 2019, <https://items.ssrc.org/sociolinguistic-frontiers/language-ideology-revisited/>.

<sup>15</sup> “Language Ideology,” Oxford Bibliographies, January 2012, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0012.xml>, (accessed 6 July 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Jan Blommaert (ed.), *Language Ideological Debates*, Language, Power, and Social Process (Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Judith T. Irvine and Susan Gal, “Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation,” in Kroskrity, Paul (ed.), *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2000), 35–84.

<sup>18</sup> Debra Spitulnik, “Mediating Unity and Diversity: The Production of Language Ideologies in Zambian Broadcasting,” in Schieffelin, Bambi, Woodard, Kathryn, and Kroskrity, Paul (eds.), *Language Ideologies: Practice and Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 163–188.

<sup>19</sup> Bernard Spolsky (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy*, Cambridge Handbooks in Language and Linguistics (Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 3–6.

<sup>20</sup> In terms of African Sociolinguistics, much recent research has focused on fast-changing youth language practices, particularly in urban areas. See Nico Nassenstein and Andrea Hollington (eds.), *Youth Language Practices in Africa and Beyond* (Berlin: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015); Emmanuel Ebongue Augustin and Ellen

language practices index historical changes and thus hold potential as tools of historical research.

Oral history plays a central role within this research because of the informality and orality of Lingala usage in Zaire, and because of the particular value of oral history for sociolinguistic research. As critical as oral history has been for African history, it has been even more important to Congolese historiography due to the importance of orality in Congolese culture(s), Congo's fractured archival landscape, the destruction of archival materials amid civil war and economic crisis, and the unreliability of many government documents.<sup>21</sup> While the Congo Crisis period (1960–1965) and, to a lesser extent, the early Mobutu period (1965–1974) have a very extensive archival documentation, the archival picture becomes far less certain for the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>22</sup> Oral history offers additional benefit for sociolinguistic research because it enables researchers to access the interplay “between reminiscence, narrative and identity,” enabling linguists or historians to “link the personal to the social and historical, setting a speaker's use of language and dialect within the wider cultural context.”<sup>23</sup> These linkages are especially relevant in the case of Lingala, which, beyond missionary-sponsored writing up to the independence period, and limited popular publications since, has primarily been an oral language for much of its history, as with other urban lingua francas across Africa.<sup>24</sup> Lingala's orality has contributed to its relative scarcity in the political science literature into Mobutu's regime, in which researchers drew their primary sources mainly from written government and archival documents and periodicals in French, supplemented by interviews with regime officials and other political actors.<sup>25</sup>

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Hurst, *Sociolinguistics in African Contexts Perspectives and Challenges*, Multilingual Education, 20 (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Interview with Prof. Donatien Dibwe Dia Mwembu, Lubumbashi, 22 August 2019; Interview with Prof. Isidore Ndaywel è Nziem, Kinshasa, 29 August 2019. When interviewing important academic political figures or subject matter experts, I retain the names of my interviewees, but for the remainder of my interviewees, I use pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity in light of the potential sensitivity of these linguistic and political topics.

<sup>22</sup> Donatien Dibwe Dia Mwembu, “Le Poids des sources orales dans l'écriture et la réécriture de l'histoire contemporaine au Katanga,” in Mantuba-Ngoma, Mabilia (ed.), *La Nouvelle Histoire du Congo. Mélanges eurafricains offerts à Frans Bontinck, c.i.c.m* (Cahiers Africains vols. 65–67, Brussels/Paris: RMCA & l'Harmattan, 2004), 35–45.

<sup>23</sup> Natalie Braber and Diane Davies, “Using and Creating Oral History in Dialect Research,” *Oral History* 44–1 (Spring 2016), 98.

<sup>24</sup> Fiona McLaughlin, “How a Lingua Franca Spreads,” in Albaugh, Ericka, and de Luna, Kathryn (eds.), *Tracing Language Movement in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 213–233; Debra Spitulnik, “The Language of the City: Town Bemba as Urban Hybridity,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 8–1 (June 1998), 30–59.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Thomas Turner and Crawford Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 409–468; Michael

While oral history represents a central part of this research due to the sociolinguistic and historical context, the complexity of using language ideologies and recollections of language practices as historical evidence requires additional corroborating evidence. The two main, specialized sources that I consulted in order to corroborate my oral testimony were, first, sociolinguistic publications from and discussing the Mobutu period and, second, focused interviews with Congolese sociolinguists on their observations of language practices and ideologies relating to Lingala.<sup>26</sup> In order to gain a comprehensive view of Congo's highly multilingual linguistic landscape, I interviewed numerous Congolese linguists with specialized knowledge of the four national language regions during the course of my fieldwork.<sup>27</sup> These expert perspectives provided a critical supplement to oral history interviews with members of the general population and a careful reading of Congolese sociolinguistic publications.

A sociolinguistic approach to African history has particular potential for social history because it can illuminate the challenges and realities facing the majority of Africans who do not speak former colonial languages and thus find limited avenues for socioeconomic advancement within formal economies in which European languages often dictate advancement. At the same time, a sociolinguistic approach can also illuminate the experiences of Africans—who might not speak European languages—as they navigate informal economies and irregular work in order to make their living and provide for their families.

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Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 145–173; Jean-Claude Willame, *L'Automne d'un despotisme: Pouvoir, Argent, et Obéissance dans le Zaïre des années quatre-vingts* (Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1992), 223–224.

<sup>26</sup> These sociolinguistic sources included numerous contributions within conference publications from 1974 and 1985, from a 2000 edited volume, as well as several dissertations by Congolese linguists completed during the period. Additional articles are referenced throughout this article from authors such as Sesepe, Bokamba, Mutombo, Meeuwis, Goyvaerts, Mbulamoko, and Ngalasso. Ngal Mbwil, *Actes du 1er Séminaire des linguistes du Zaïre: Lubumbashi, mai 1974*. Lubumbashi: Centre de linguistique théorique et appliquée, 1974; Ntote Kazadi and Nyembwe Ntita, "Utilisation des Langues Nationales: Actes du Colloque sur les Langues Nationales, Kinshasa, 11–16 mars 1985," *Linguistique et Sciences Humaines* 27, special issue (1987); and Isidore Ndaywel E. Nziem, *Langues Africaines et créoles face à leur avenir* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003).

<sup>27</sup> The linguists with whom I conducted formal interviews are as follows. In Kinshasa: Daniel Mutombo Huta Mukana, Crispin Maalu-Bungi, Nyembwe Ntita, Sesepe N'sial, Denis Malasi Ngandu, and Léon Mundeke. In Lubumbashi: Marcel Kalunga, Maurice Muyaya, Cesar Nkuku, Alexis Takizala, and Nkiko Munya Rugero. In Kikwit: Joseph Koni Muluwa, and Jacques N'kiene. In Mbuji-Mayi: Adrien Munyoka and Emmanuel Kambaja. I also benefited immensely from helpful conversations with Michael Meeuwis, Nico Nassenstein, Eyamba Bokamba, Andre Makokila Nanzanza, Jacky Maniacky, and Samuel Matabishi.

Sociolinguistic approaches can also advance African history by responding to Larmer and Lecocq's objective to "achieve an understanding of African nationalisms in a comparative context within the African continent and beyond."<sup>28</sup> Beginning from their conclusion that "nationalism is as created, imagined and successful in Africa as it is elsewhere," the role of language—central to nationalism's imagined communities worldwide—holds particular relevance for understanding nationalisms in Africa's multilingual social, cultural, and political contexts.<sup>29</sup> Studying the language practices and ideologies of African state and civil society actors can deepen our knowledge of the imagination, formation, and contestation of official and non-official nationalisms during and since colonial rule. Additional analysis regarding the relationship between official (often formerly colonial) and national languages within contexts of contested nation-building projects would be especially beneficial.

### The Language of Power: Lingala and Political Power in Mobutu's Zaire

In the Zairian context, sociolinguistic methods help to illuminate how Lingala, as the language of power under Mobutu, both contributed to and revealed the Mobutu regime's privatizing of the Zairian state, fracturing of Zairian society, and strengthening of Zairian and later Congolese national identity.<sup>30</sup> A "language of power," or *langue du pouvoir* in French, is a concept emerging from Congolese political culture that has structured Congolese perceptions of political power and authority dating back to the colonial period.<sup>31</sup> While this article engages with an emic perspective of this concept, it has major parallels in other African countries that could benefit from further study.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Miles Larmer and Baz Lecocq, "Historicizing Nationalism in Africa," *Nations and Nationalism* 24–4 (October 2018), 812.

<sup>29</sup> Larmer and Lecocq, "Historicizing Nationalism in Africa," 812; and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

<sup>30</sup> Englebert, "A Research Note on Congo's Nationalist Paradox," 591–594; Newbury, "Dead and Buried or Just Underground? The Privatization of the State in Zaire"; Karen Büscher, Sigurd D'Hondt, and Michael Meeuwis, "Recruiting a Non-local Language for Performing Local Identity: Indexical Appropriations of Lingala in the Congolese Border Town Goma," *Language in Society* 42–5 (November 2013), 527–556.

<sup>31</sup> Joshua Castillo, "Langue ya Pouvoir: Imposing, Opposing, and Navigating Lingala in Shaba (Katanga) – 1965–1997," in Nassenstein, Nico (ed.), *Current Topics in the Study of Lingala* (Mainz: Mainzer Beiträge zur Afrikaforschung, forthcoming 2022).

<sup>32</sup> An excellent discussion of this languages and power emerging from the Equatorial Guinean context can be found in Justo Bolekia Boleká, *Lenguas y Poder en África* (Madrid: Mundo Negro, D. L., 2001). Additional country-specific conversations can be found here: for Malawi, Alfred Jana Matiki, "Language Planning and

Congolese frequently use the term “language of power” when explaining the relationship between language and political power. Congolese political historian Jean-Marie Mutamba Makombo defined *langue du pouvoir* to me as referring to “the language spoken by those who are in the circle of power ... the chief’s language.”<sup>33</sup> Effectively, “language of power” refers to the language(s) used by those who hold political power, or in Congolese Swahili, *benye pouvoir*.<sup>34</sup> This term does not correspond to formal recognition through language but rather to the language practices of those holding political power. In this way, it evokes the concept of a language regime as formulated by Liu.<sup>35</sup> Implicit within this discourse is the idea that speaking the language of power provides differential access to those in authority. For example, when Laurent Desiré Kabila seized power in 1997, Congolese politicians seeking an audience with Kabila needed to speak at least some Swahili in order to gain an audience with him; by speaking Swahili they demonstrated their recognition of his authority, creating a favorable environment for their requests.<sup>36</sup>

The language that became Lingala, one of Congo’s four national languages alongside Ciluba, Kikongo, and Swahili, originated as a Bobangi-based pidgin in the late nineteenth century along the upper Congo River when European explorers, colonial authorities, missionaries, and their Congolese and other African workers came into contact with local Bobangi-speaking communities.<sup>37</sup> This heterogeneous group of speakers then spread Lingala across the area of northwestern Congo, which became known as

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Social Change: A Study of Linguistic Exclusion and the Legislation Process in Malawi” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of New Mexico, 2001); for Zimbabwe, Enocent Msindo, *Ethnicity in Zimbabwe: Transformations in Kalanga and Ndebele Societies, 1860–1990* (Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2012), 211–228; for Uganda, Medadi E. Ssentanda and Judith Nakayiza, “‘Without English There Is No Future’: The Case of Language Attitudes and Ideologies in Uganda,” in Ebongue Augustin, Emmanuel, and Hurst, Ellen (eds.), *Sociolinguistics in African Contexts* (New York: Springer, 2017); for Kenya and Tanzania, Ali A. Mazrui and Al’Amin M. Mazrui, *The Political Culture of Language – Swahili, Society, and the State* (Binghamton: The Institute of Global Cultural Studies, Binghamton University, State University of New York, 1996); and for Zambia, Debra Spitulnik, “Mediating Unity and Diversity: The Production of Language Ideologies in Zambian Broadcasting.”

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Prof. Jean-Marie Mutamba Makombo, Kinshasa, 5 August 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with “Baraka,” Lubumbashi, 21 August 2019. As Anthropologist Allen Roberts pointed out to me (personal communication, May 2020), the Swahili *benye pouvoir* holds particular resonance with deeper issues of ownership and legitimacy relating to political power in Central Africa.

<sup>35</sup> Amy H. Liu, *Standardizing Diversity: The Political Economy of Language Regimes* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Prof. Jean-Marie Mutamba Makombo, Kinshasa, 5 August 2021; Interview with Prof. Isidore Ndaywel, Kinshasa, 29 August 2019; Interview with Prof. Denis Malasi, Kinshasa, 16 August 2021.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Meeuwis, *A Grammatical Overview of Lingála*, Revised edition (Munich: Lincom GmbH, 2020), 18–22.

the Lingala zone, and also reached the colonial station at Léopoldville where Lingala quickly became implanted in the city.<sup>38</sup> The years from 1895 to 1900 were critical to Lingala's eventual expansion beyond this region and to its taking on a national as well as a regional status. Congo Free State authorities reacted to the Tetela mutinies of 1893–1894 by ethnically mixing units of the colonial military, the *Force Publique*, which had previously been recruited and deployed along ethnic lines. In order to overhaul and nationalize the *Force Publique*, colonial authorities needed a unifying military language of command. Lingala won out over its main competitor, Swahili, due to the loyalty of the significant number of soldiers from the Lingala region during the mutiny.<sup>39</sup> Lingala quickly took root among the *Force Publique* across all of Congo, gaining further momentum with a 1931 law, intended to combat ethnic factionalism, which required soldiers and their families to speak Lingala off-duty as well as on.<sup>40</sup>

Lingala provided the soundtrack to life in Mobutu's Zaire. Lingala's dominant position extended to almost every aspect of the regime, from the military to the police, from the party-state, the Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution (MPR), to the regime Mobilization and Propaganda (MOPAP) and to the territorial administration. Lingala was the language that Mobutu's unpaid, badly behaving soldiers used when demanding bribes or looking for "rebels."<sup>41</sup> Lingala was the language that Mobutu's all-knowing security services used when interrogating suspects or "disappearing" dissidents. Lingala (alongside French) was also the language through which Mobutu convened and addressed the nation, with many national slogans being in Lingala.<sup>42</sup> As Sarufi explained, "Lingala was President Mobutu's language, and because of this, it carried powerful authority."<sup>43</sup> Sarufi expressed a

<sup>38</sup> Eyamba Bokamba, "The Spread of Lingala as a Lingua Franca in the Congo Basin," in McLaughlin, Fiona (ed.), *The Languages of Urban Africa* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 50–70; Eyamba Bokamba, "D. R. Congo: Language and 'Authentic Nationalism,'" in Simpson, Andrew (ed.), *Language and National Identity in Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Pamphile Mabilia-Mangoma, *Les Soldats de Bula Matari (1885–1960): Histoire Sociale de la Force Publique du Congo Belge* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2019), 93–94; Sesep Nsial, "L'Expansion du Lingala," *Linguistique et sciences humaines* 27–1, CELTA (Centre de Linguistique Théorique et Appliqué, Kinshasa, 1986), 26.

<sup>40</sup> Mabilia-Mangoma, *Les Soldats de Bula Matari*, 181.

<sup>41</sup> While Lingala had already served as the language of the *Force Publique* during the colonial period, Mobutu's failure to pay soldiers, and injunction to obtain their salaries with their weapons, heightened this already unequal soldier-civilian relationship, enhancing Lingala's connotations of violence. For further discussion, see Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire*.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Meeuwis, "Constructing Sociolinguistic Consensus: A Linguistic Ethnography of the Zairian Community in Antwerp, Belgium" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Antwerp, 1997), 114–120.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with "Sarufi," Lubumbashi, 7 September 2019.

common theme throughout my interviews: Lingala's close popular association with Mobutu gave the language power, due to the personalization of his regime. This motivated Zairians from non-Lingala-speaking parts of Zaire to learn Lingala, contributing to the language's further spread across Zaire during Mobutu's rule.<sup>44</sup>

Lingala's status as the language of power under Mobutu had important limitations. It was neither recognized by formal legislation, nor used in (most) official written contexts, nor taught in classrooms (beyond the primary level in the Lingala zone).<sup>45</sup> Political scientist Amy Liu's concept of a language regime can help us to understand Lingala's position in Zaire. Liu defined a language regime as "the rules that delineate which languages can be used when and where."<sup>46</sup> Liu and other scholars of political economy primarily focus on efforts by states to enact language regimes through rules and regulation but also allow for less direct impacts on language, similar to theories from some recent language policy scholars.<sup>47</sup> In Zaire, the Mobutu regime enacted a hybrid Lingala-French language regime, primarily through the regime's language practices and ideologies rather than through formal policies. French was the official language and language of formal governance, elite communication, written documents, secondary and tertiary education, and communication with the outside world. Lingala—known as the language of power—was the language of informal governance, mass communication, and the military and police. Lingala was also the language of Zaire's capital, Kinshasa, and its world-famous Rumba music, and it thus indexed urban modernity and sophistication.<sup>48</sup> Lingala held particular importance in shaping popular experiences of the Mobutu regime due to its status as the main language for the regime's more informal and intimate relations with its subjects, and also its status as the language that Zaire's elite spoke among themselves in the corridors of power and political decision-making.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Sesep N'sial, "L'Expansion du Lingala."

<sup>45</sup> M. M. Ngalasso, "État des Langues et Langues de l'État au Zaïre," *Politique Africaine* 23–1 (1988), 13–20.

<sup>46</sup> Liu, *Standardizing Diversity: The Political Economy of Language Regimes*, 4.

<sup>47</sup> Spolsky (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Language Policy*, 4–6.

<sup>48</sup> Büscher, D'Hondt, and Meeuwis, "Recruiting a Nonlocal Language for Performing Local Identity," 529.

<sup>49</sup> Didier Goyvaerts, "The Emergence of Lingala in Bukavu Zaire," *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 33–2, (June 1995), 295–314; Nsial, "L'Expansion du Lingala," 19–41. Within the administration, Lingala extended down to the *sous-region* and the *zone* but not generally to the lowest level, the *collectivité* or *quartier* (in urban areas) where local languages or regional lingua francas continued to be used. For more discussion of French's position and role in Zaire, see Sully Faik et al., *La Francophonie au Zaïre* (Lubumbashi: Éditions Impala, 1988). As Eyamba Bokamba has discussed, many first republic elites spoke Lingala as well, but their actual influence scarcely extended beyond Kinshasa due to the decentralized nature of the first republic and

In comparing Lingala under Mobutu with other dominant lingua francas that expanded after independence in Africa, three aspects that stand out are as follows: first, Congo/Zaire's complex linguistic context; second, the fraught political context in which Mobutu launched his nationalist project; and third, Mobutu's use of Lingala to convoke the Zairian nation. Congo's high degree of linguistic diversity, with around 240 languages, is on the higher end of the spectrum in Africa, but what really distinguishes Congo from many of its contemporaries is the at least limited degree parity among different regional lingua francas that exist on top of the local languages in a three-tiered sociolinguistic hierarchy with French at the peak (see figure 1).<sup>50</sup> In 1970, Congo's four national language zones divided the country along almost equal lines<sup>51</sup>—with 18% of the population in the Kikongo zone, 16% in the Ciluba zone, 28% in the Lingala zone, and 38% in the Swahili zone.<sup>52</sup> This relative parity among competing lingua francas contrasted with numerous other multilingual African countries where one lingua franca predominated as, for example, with Swahili in Kenya and Tanzania, Wolof in Senegal, or Chichewa in Malawi.<sup>53</sup> Congo's multiple lingua francas and their concurrent regional identities complicated Mobutu's efforts at promoting Lingala, particularly given these languages' political mobilization as markers of regional and national identity during the Congo Crisis.<sup>54</sup>

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due to numerous rebel and secessionist movements that held parts of Congolese territory during this period.

<sup>50</sup> Meeuwis, "Constructing Sociolinguistic Consensus," 91–120.

<sup>51</sup> I arrived at these rough estimates by including Kinshasa within the Lingala zone and dividing Haut-Zaïre's population between the Swahili and Lingala zones as the Lingala-Swahili border runs through this region.

<sup>52</sup> Population figures taken from Isidore Ndaywel, *Histoire générale du Congo: de l'héritage ancien à la République Démocratique* (Paris: Afrique Editions, 1998), 406–407. These numbers were complicated by the extent to which populations in these different regions actually spoke the national languages in addition to their ethnic languages. A reasonable estimate for the period might be anywhere from 40 to 70%, with significant differences across regions. Based on my interviews and fieldwork, the percentage of the population who speak the national languages within each region appears to have risen substantially since 1970; interview with Prof. Jacques N'kiene, Kikwit, 6 September 2021.

<sup>53</sup> Alfred Jana Matiki, "Language Planning and Social Change: A Study of Linguistic Exclusion and the Legislation Process in Malawi" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of New Mexico, 2001); McLaughlin, "How a Lingua Franca Spreads"; and Mazrui and Mazrui, *The Political Culture of Language – Swahili, Society, and the State*.

<sup>54</sup> Whereas the government of the Katanga secession promoted Swahili, and Kalonji's South Kasai secession used Ciluba, Mulele's rebellion in Kwilu made extensive use of Kikongo, while the Simba ("lion" in Swahili) became heavily associated with Swahili. The linguistic elements and implications of the Congo Crisis is an important topic requiring further study: Interview with Prof. Donatien Dibwe Dia Mwembu,

**Figure 1. Map of Congolese national language regions. Courtesy of Nico Nassenstein, 2019.**



The fraught political context from which Mobutu seized power both necessitated his strengthening of an official national identity and made this task more difficult.<sup>55</sup> As head of the army during the Congo Crisis, Mobutu supervised a brutal and exceptionally violent crackdown of separatist regions that made little distinction for civilians. In Kwilu, for example, Mobutu's soldiers imposed Lingala on the population (as the *Force Publique* had done during the colonial period) while inflicting horrific violence. This experience caused a whole generation of people in Bandundu and elsewhere to largely reject Lingala as a language of violence and oppression, even as economic and political reasons pushed many of them to speak Lingala regardless later on.<sup>56</sup>

Lubumbashi, 22 August 2019; Interview with Prof. Adrien Munyoka, Mbuji-Mayi, 27 November 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Turner and Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*.

<sup>56</sup> Emery Masua Kalema, "Violence and Memory: The Mulele 'Rebellion' in Postcolonial D. R. Congo" (unpublished PhD dissertation, Wits Institute, 2017);

Mobutu largely disregarded these attitudes as he used Lingala in order to convoke the Zairian nation, in contrast with many of his African contemporaries.<sup>57</sup> In Senegal, for example, as Leigh Swigart has written, President Abdou Diouf's decision to use Wolof in a major speech in 1988 represented an unprecedented moment for a polity where French was the only language used for addressing national audiences, owing to the French colonial legacy plus the influence of President Senghor and other Francophone elites.<sup>58</sup> In Zambia, Kenneth Kaunda convoked the state solely in English; he would give his speeches in English, and all of his government's slogans were in English. Zambia's motto under Kaunda, which he would repeat in many of his speeches, was "One Zambia, One Nation." Both Kaunda and his regime would utter this slogan in English, meaning that he constructed his state, verbally and symbolically, through English in order to avoid criticisms of tribalism.<sup>59</sup> Mobutu, by contrast, established a Lingala-centric language regime from his seizure of power onward through his addressing of domestic audiences and stating of government slogans primarily in Lingala. For example, he would ask his audiences in Lingala: *ekolo bo?* (how many nations/ethnic groups?) and they would respond *moko* (one).<sup>60</sup> While *ekolo* can be translated as nation, it is also often used to mean ethnic group. Given Lingala's association with the conflict from which Mobutu seized power, his calls for *ekolo moko*, or one nation, encountered opposition initially, but his regime's continual yet uncodified convoking of a Zairian nation through Lingala contributed to the strong sense of national identity among Congolese, which Englebert has discussed.<sup>61</sup>

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Personal Correspondence with Salikoko Mufwene, August 2018; Interview with Taty Kabamba, Kikwit, 1 September 2021; Interview with Isidore Ndaywel, Kinshasa, 21 August 2019.

<sup>57</sup> While Nyerere in Tanzania similarly used Swahili for convoking and imagining the Tanzanian nation, Mobutu differed in terms of his simple use of Lingala without successful efforts at codification or the formal imposition of Lingala through education. See Blommaert, *State Ideology and Language in Tanzania*. Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe had some similarities to Mobutu in terms of basing his power on the Shona language amid his terror campaign against Matabeleland; however, the relative parity of the (multiple) other regional lingua francas made the Zairian case unique. See Enocent Msindo, *Ethnicity in Zimbabwe: Transformations in Kalanga and Ndebele Societies, 1860–1990*, (Rochester, University of Rochester Press, 2012), 211–228.

<sup>58</sup> Leigh Swigart, "The Limits of Legitimacy: Language Ideology and Shift in Contemporary Senegal," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 10–1 (2000), 90–130.

<sup>59</sup> Debra Spitulnik, "Radio Culture in Zambia: Audiences, Public Words, and the Nation-State," (unpublished PhD dissertation unpublished, University of Chicago, 1994), 156–157.

<sup>60</sup> Mobutu would initiate this call and response in many of his rallies to the point where it has become a hallmark of his regime within Congolese society. An example can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DAQSefuiK4k>.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Mbala Nkanga, Kinshasa, 22 July 2021. Numerous interviewees cited Mobutu's Lingala slogans, and especially these call and response invocations

## Locating Lingala in the Mobutu Regime Literature

From a political science perspective, the Mobutu regime stands as one of the most thoroughly analyzed post-colonial regimes on the continent.<sup>62</sup> The picture that emerges from these political analyses is one of a highly centralized and personalized authoritarian regime that repeatedly changed and adapted but eventually lost control over much of the society that it ruled.<sup>63</sup> After his 1965 coup, Mobutu gained control of Congo in the late 1960s and early 1970s through cooptation and intimidation internally, and by cultivating favorable relations with Belgium, the US, and later France externally, before seeing his power ebb under the weight of mismanagement and greed after the late 1970s.<sup>64</sup> Mobutu held onto power until 1997 by shifting the form of his regime whenever politically expedient, and coopting whatever opponents he could not muzzle or eliminate.<sup>65</sup> Cooptation, as Young and Turner explained, was “used with remarkable effect throughout the Mobutu era ... as the far-flung apparatus of the state offered a large reservoir of positions for those willing to pledge faithful service.” Lingala represented an important point of continuity amid the regime’s repeated reinventions across the decades. Speaking Lingala allowed Zairian officials to demonstrate their loyalty to Mobutu and their buy-in or cooptation to his political system.<sup>66</sup> Mobutu began his rule in 1965 facing numerous threats to his rule from political rivals and formerly rebellious regions, but he consolidated power between November 1965 and 1967 by ruthlessly eliminating internal opposition and cultivating a close relationship with the US, solidifying his power through the formation of the MPR party state in 1967.<sup>67</sup> Mobutu further

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when explaining to me how Lingala contributed to this national identity construction. See Englebert, “A Research Note on Congo’s Nationalist Paradox,” 591–594.

<sup>62</sup> Jean-Claude Willame, *Patrimonialism and Political Change in the Congo* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972); Michael Schatzberg, *Politics and Class in Zaïre: Bureaucracy, Business, and Beer in Lisala* (New York and London: Africana Publishing Company, 1980); Thomas Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle: Zaïre in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Newbury, “Dead and Buried or Just Underground?,” 112–114; Turner and Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*; Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaïre*; Willame, *l’Automne d’un despotisme*; Kankwenda Mbaya (ed.), *Zaïre, What Destiny?* (Oxford: Codesria, 1993); Crawford Young, “Zaïre: The Shattered Illusion of the Integral State,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 32–2 (1994), 247–263; and John F. Clark, “Ethno-Regionalism in Zaïre: Roots, Manifestations and Meaning,” *Journal of African Policy Studies* 1–2 (1995), 23–45.

<sup>63</sup> Turner and Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*.

<sup>64</sup> Turner and Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, 47–77.

<sup>65</sup> Gauthier de Villers and Jean Omasombo Tshonda, *Zaïre: La Transition Manquée, 1990–1997* (Brussels: Cahiers Africains nos. 27–28, 1998).

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Prof. Maurice Muyaya Wetu, Lubumbashi, 16 August 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Turner and Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*; Jean-Claude Willame, *Patrimonialism and Political Change in the Congo*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).

transformed his government through the 1970s to increase presidential power and broaden his elite coalition.<sup>68</sup> Mobutu made additional changes later during the 1980s in response to the political threat posed by the opposition *Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social* (UDPS), and Mobutu ushered in a further transformation in 1990, when he embraced and attempted to coopt and control democratic reforms to placate increased internal and external opposition.<sup>69</sup> Each of these shifts saw Mobutu transform the structure and function of his regime in order to maintain control. During each period, Lingala remained core to the regime and especially to Zairians' experience of it, through Mobutu's nationally broadcast speeches and through the use of Lingala by members of the regime in the territorial administration and the MPR party apparatus.<sup>70</sup>

Politically, Mobutu cultivated an extensive patronage network, making his elite supporters' access to positions, wealth, and power entirely dependent on their staying in his good graces.<sup>71</sup> Whenever any of these elites appeared to pose a threat to him or the regime, Mobutu would either imprison them, muzzle them, or demote them in favor of their political rivals, creating a revolving cast of would-be politicians who sought to take as much for themselves as they could whenever they were in power.<sup>72</sup>

Lingala also contributed to Mobutu's patrimonial system by being the main language used for actions of patrimonial largess. For example, when I interviewed former MPR Central Committee advisor and speech-writer, Remi-Nathan Mungimur, he recalled—code-switching into Lingala during our French-language interview—that MPR party secretary Kithima Bin Ramazani had given Mungimur a substantial compound in Kinshasa by simply telling an aide: *pesa ye ndako* (give him a house), after which Mungimur immediately received the house.<sup>73</sup> This followed a pattern whereby Mobutu and members of his inner circle would use Lingala when giving favors to their supporters, contributing to an ethic of patrimonial reciprocity that reinforced Lingala's status as the language of power.<sup>74</sup> Through its association with Mobutu's patrimonial politics, Lingala also became associated with a shift in moral expectations that critics labelled with the Lingala moniker *sopeka*. As historian Martin Kalulambi Pongo analyzed, this social change

<sup>68</sup> T. K. Biaya and Jean Omasombo Tshonda, "Social Classes in Zaire Today," in Mbeya, Kankwenda (ed.), *Zaire: What Destiny?* 1993, 104–107.

<sup>69</sup> Willame, *L'Automne d'un despotisme*; Gauthier de Villers and Jean Omasombo Tshonda, *Zaire: La Transition Manquée, 1990–1997* (Brussels: Cahiers Africains nos. 27–28, 1998).

<sup>70</sup> Ngalasso, "État des Langues et Langues de l'État au Zaïre."

<sup>71</sup> Turner and Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, 165–166.

<sup>72</sup> Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire*.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Prof. Remi-Nathaniel Mungimur, Kinshasa, 12 September 2021.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Prof. Mbala Nkanga, Kinshasa, 22 July 2021.

overseen by Mobutu contributed to “the deprivation of the social and professional morality of everyone from government officials, to the unemployed, to car washers,” as Zairian adapted to new norms of corruption and inequality normalized by Mobutu’s regime.<sup>75</sup>

Mobutu took a divide and rule approach to ethnicity, systematically favoring his fellow Equateuriens and setting different ethnic groups against each other even as he preached and sometimes practiced politics of national unity.<sup>76</sup> Mobutu preached and sometimes practiced politics of national unity through a regional quota system for education and careful regional balancing of his many governments, but he also took a divide and rule approach to whatever opposition he encountered, systematically favoring his fellow Equateuriens in the military and in internal security, while setting different regions and ethnic groups against each other in times of crisis.<sup>77</sup>

In the political science literature on Mobutu’s regime, discussion of Lingala has remained relatively muted. Most analyses have drawn sources mainly from the formal, French language side of Mobutu’s hybrid language regime in terms of government documents, official speeches, and statements, and regime-aligned newspapers, supplemented by interviews with regime members. Turner and Young, in their exhaustive account of the regime up to the early 1980s, acknowledged widespread perceptions within Zaire of Lingala’s importance in the regime, but they primarily looked elsewhere to explain Mobutu’s longevity in power.<sup>78</sup> Reflecting much later, Crawford Young saw Mobutu’s affinity for Lingala as pragmatic in nature in that it was the only national language that he spoke proficiently and that it was already firmly established when he took power as the language of Kinshasa, and the Zairian army, two power centers that Mobutu needed to control.<sup>79</sup> Studying Lingala’s role in Mobutu’s regime contributes to the literature on Mobutu first by providing a new vantage point, showing us how a leader that has often been presented as an archetypal African dictator appeared to Zairians living under his rule.<sup>80</sup> Second, studying Lingala under Mobutu deepens our understanding of how his regime operated, complimenting the administrative correspondence, government publications, and recorded

<sup>75</sup> Martin Kalulambi Pongo, *Être Luba au 20ème Siècle: Identité Chrétienne au Congo-Kinshasa* (Paris: Karthala, 1997), 193–194.

<sup>76</sup> T. K. Biaya, “Ethnicity and the State in Zaire,” in Nnoli, Okwudiba (ed.), *Ethnic Conflicts in Africa* (Codesria Book Series. Dakar: CODESRIA, 1998), 336–341.

<sup>77</sup> Turner and Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, Biaya, “Ethnicity and the State in Zaire,” 336–341.

<sup>78</sup> Turner and Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, 152–156.

<sup>79</sup> Personal Communication with Crawford Young, 23 March 2018.

<sup>80</sup> Michaela Wrong, *In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz: Living on the Brink of Disaster in Mobutu’s Congo* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 11–12.

speeches that have formed the main primary source foundation of numerous previous studies.<sup>81</sup>

While the Mobutu regime has received extensive treatment from political scientists, the history of the Mobutu period, in the words of the late Congolese historian Jacob Sabakinu Kivulu, “still remains to be written.”<sup>82</sup> Isidore Ndaywel laid down the historical blueprint for discussing Mobutu’s rule through his *Histoire Générale du Congo*, where he primarily analyzed the regime’s political and cultural evolution but also noted how the decline of Zaire’s economy after 1974 transformed Zairian society.<sup>83</sup> Recently, Sarah Van Beurden has discussed how Mobutu’s politics of *authenticité* and his efforts at cultural guardianship influenced the transnational worlds of Congolese art, and Miles Larmer and Erik Kennes have ably depicted the complex history of how the Katangese gendarmes fought against and interacted with Mobutu’s Zairian state.<sup>84</sup> Several other monographs and many dissertations have covered different aspects of the Mobutu period since Ndaywel’s magnum opus; however, Sabakinu Kivulu’s observation continues to resonate regarding much of the social history of Mobutu’s rule (1965–1997).<sup>85</sup> This study of Lingala’s role within the regime fills a crucial gap within the literature in terms of illuminating the linguistic means through which, first, Mobutu and his state ruled over Zaire and, second, into some of the ways that Zairians responded to Mobutu’s language regime, deepening our knowledge of Zaire’s social history in the process.

<sup>81</sup> Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire*; Turner and Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*; Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle*.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Prof. Jacob Sabakinu Kivulu, Kinshasa, 29 August 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Isidore Ndaywel E. Nziem, *Histoire générale du Congo*.

<sup>84</sup> Sarah Van Beurden, *Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2015); Erik Kennes and Miles Larmer, *The Katangese Gendarmes and War in Central Africa: Fighting Their Way Home* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016).

<sup>85</sup> Notable published historical monographs that dedicate extensive sections to the Mobutu years include Kalulambi Pongo, *Être Luba au 20ème Siècle*, Gauthier de Villers and Jean Omasombo Tshonda, *Zaire: La Transition Manquée, 1990–1997* (Brussels: Cahiers Africains nos. 27–28, 1998). Notable unpublished history dissertations discussing the Mobutu period include Pedro Monaville, “Decolonizing the University: Postal Politics, The Student Movement, and Global 1968 in the Congo,” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2013); Alain Flavien N’kisi Nganda, “Le régime Mobutu à l’épreuve du monde catholique congolais (1965–1997) substitut à l’absence de contre-pouvoir,” (unpublished PhD thesis, Université Catholique du Louvain, 2018); Emery Masua Kalema, “Violence and Memory”; and Jean-Denis Otung-Abienda Kasese, “Contribution à une analyse de la sacralisation du pouvoir moderne et de ses conséquences: le cas Joseph Désiré Mobutu,” (unpublished PhD thesis, Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2009).

## Lingala's Role in Privatizing the State and Fracturing Zairian Society

Lingala's power under Mobutu stemmed, first of all, from its association with Mobutu himself. Mobutu, a member of the Ngbandi ethnic community from Equateur province, was born in the Lingala-speaking town of Lisala and grew up mainly in Equateur's towns. Mobutu then served in the Lingala-speaking colonial military, the *Force Publique*, and later seized control through a military coup and thus brought Lingala with him to the center of political power.<sup>86</sup> Mobutu viewed Lingala as a neutral means of communication and unification for the whole country, and members of his regime, seeking to demonstrate their loyalty to Mobutu, adopted Lingala *en masse*.<sup>87</sup> My interviews with members of Mobutu's inner circle—in particular, former chief-of-staff Mokonda Bonza and long-time confidant Jonas Mukamba—corroborated Young's assessment. As Mokonda Bonza explained: "Mobutu did not really analyze Lingala or advance a language policy for it, he simply used the language."<sup>88</sup> It was Mobutu's high-profile use of Lingala to address the Zairian public and his use of Lingala when speaking with his inner circle that propelled the language to its informal yet premier status.

Lingala's powerful status under Mobutu pushed politicians and other regime officials across Zaire to learn the language. Politicians from Shaba (Katanga) and other restive provinces came to see learning Lingala as a critical way to demonstrate their *militantisme* or fervent loyalty to Mobutu, which Callaghy termed the "the key criterion of selection, maintenance, and promotion" in the regime.<sup>89</sup> As Christopher Mwenze Mulangu, a former regime official from Katanga recalled, "if you did not make at least an effort to speak Lingala, you just could not make it as a politician. It was the language of power!" Per Mwenze and other former regime officials from Swahili- and Ciluba-speaking parts of Zaire, officials needed to learn and speak Lingala because the perception was that "you gained access to power through this language."<sup>90</sup>

*Mutations* was one key policy that pushed Lingala usage among members of the territorial administration and Zairian government. Mobutu instituted *mutations* during a December 1966 speech to congress by stating that government officials, first, could not serve in their home regions and, second,

<sup>86</sup> Turner and Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, 152–154.

<sup>87</sup> Interview with Christopher Mwenze Mulangu, Lubumbashi, 6 September 2019.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with Mokonda Bonza, Mobutu's former chief of staff, Kinshasa, 8 November 2021.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas Callaghy, *The State-Society Struggle: Zaire in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 233–234.

<sup>90</sup> Interview with Mulinzi, a Katangan former regime official (61), who worked for two Mobutu prime ministers in the 1990s, Lubumbashi, 6 September 2019.

would be rotated to a different territory every three years.<sup>91</sup> This policy was intended to prevent officials from building up too much independent power and from becoming too close to their subjects.<sup>92</sup> Although never codified, *mutations* also had the effect of making Lingala the *de facto* language of popular communication for Zairian government members and especially territorial administrators, a core component of Mobutu's regime that Callaghy characterized as "Mobutu's prefects." Under Mobutu's system, territorial administrators were hand-picked by Mobutu or his advisors and served at his discretion. According to former *commissaire de zone* Lazar Tshipinda, MPR doctrine established commissioners as "little Mobutus" in the areas that they administered, with almost unrestricted powers and supervision over their own staff, the gendarmerie, security police, JMPPR (Jeunesse de la Mouvement Populaire de la Révolution) leaders, MOPAP, and the population. Tshipinda explained that "by speaking Lingala, commissioners were able to access Mobutu's authority" and more effectively broadcast his rule over their territories.<sup>93</sup>

If speaking Lingala brought administrators closer to Mobutu, it often distanced them from the populations under their rule. Political scientist Waruzi Bianga, during his study of rural reform in Eastern Congo, found among the rural farmers whom he interviewed in the Swahili-speaking Kivu province that the use of Lingala by the regional authorities when communicating with the local population contributed to popular perceptions that these authorities were "not interested in local welfare."<sup>94</sup> As Baraka recalled regarding her perception of people from the Swahili zone, "people thought that if someone spoke Lingala they considered themselves better than everyone else. People saw speaking Lingala was a way to oppress other people in a humiliating way (*kukandamiza bengine* literally means to push down or stomp on other people)." Thus the Lingala language practices of regime officials contributed to the fracturing Zairian society by fueling resentment in the form of negative language ideologies against what some Zairians, particularly in the Swahili zone, experienced as linguistic oppression.<sup>95</sup>

Mobutu addressed domestic audiences only in Lingala, even in places like Katanga or Kasai where many people did not understand the language. In this way, Mobutu used Lingala to build a sense of national community. As

<sup>91</sup> Mobutu Sese Seko, *Discours, Allocutions, et Messages : 1965–1975* (Paris : Editions J. A., 1975), 161–162.

<sup>92</sup> Interview with Prof. Lazar Tshipinda, Provincial Minister of Education, Kasai Orientale, Mbuji-Mayi, 26 November 2021.

<sup>93</sup> Interview with Prof. Lazar Tshipinda, Provincial Minister of Education, Kasai Orientale, Mbuji-Mayi, 26 November 2021.

<sup>94</sup> Waruzi Bianga, "Peasant, State, and Rural Development in Post-independent Zaire: A Case Study of 'Reforme Rurale' and its Implications" (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1982), 175–176.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with "Baraka," Lubumbashi, 21 August 2019.

one elderly interlocutor recalled, “from the beginning, Mobutu spoke Lingala, only Lingala, not French.”<sup>96</sup> With Mobutu using French mainly for foreign consumption, Lingala served as the medium for his frequent popular rallies across the country. As Congolese Linguist Sesep N’sial noted in 1986, “Marshal Mobutu makes his speeches most frequently, if not exclusively in Lingala, as much in Kinshasa and Equateur, as in the linguistic regions of Kikongo, Ciluba, and Kiswahili.”<sup>97</sup> Mobutu’s Lingala speeches served as an important reason for ordinary Zairians, as well as regime officials, to learn Lingala. As Mucheko remembered growing up in rural Katanga: “We started to sing in Lingala [through the MPR and popular music] and we began to listen when Mobutu would give speeches in Lingala. We also started trying to speak Lingala little by little, and so we began to understand Mobutu’s speeches better and better.”<sup>98</sup> Nearly every Congolese whom I have interviewed from non-Lingala speaking parts of Zaire shared this sentiment about learning at least some Lingala under Mobutu’s rule, with Mobutu’s speeches and slogans being a major point of focus in addition to the significant role of Lingala’s association with Kinshasa and its rumba music and with the MPR.<sup>99</sup> The regime never made this practice explicit and, in fact, never gave Lingala an official status at all, though not for lack of trying.<sup>100</sup> Mobutu addressed popular audiences in Lingala throughout his rule, building a national speech community and strengthening Zairian national identity through Lingala in the process.

The use of Lingala by Mobutu and other regime officials also facilitated their privatization of the state by enabling them to transmit the messages to internal audiences while avoiding criticism from the regime’s Western backers in Washington DC, Brussels, and Paris. For example, in May of

<sup>96</sup> Interview with “Nuru,” Lubumbashi, 8 September 2019.

<sup>97</sup> N’sial, “L’Expansion du Lingala,” 25.

<sup>98</sup> Interview with Mucheko, Lubumbashi, 9 September 2019. Anthropologist Allen Merriam noted a similar expansion of Lingala among young people in the small, isolated village in rural Kasai that he conducted fieldwork in, writing that MPR political songs in Lingala were especially popular and influential. Allen P. Merriam, “Music Change in a Basongye Village (Zaire),” *Anthropos* 72–5 (1977), 829–831.

<sup>99</sup> As Thomas Salter has discussed, rumba music in Lingala was a very significant reason why Zairians and other Africans learned Lingala during the period discussed here. See Thomas Salter, “Rumba from Congo to Cape Town,” (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2007), <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/2670>.

<sup>100</sup> During the *Premier Séminaire des Linguistes du Zaïre* in May 1974, regime-aligned linguists led by deputy minister of culture NM Mbulamoko attempted to gain academic approval for a plan to make Lingala co-official language alongside French but failed in the face of intense opposition led by Zairian junior scholars. Personal correspondence with Johannes Fabian, 5 April 2018. See Ngal Mbwil (ed.), *Actes du 1er Séminaire des linguistes du Zaïre: Lubumbashi, mai 1974*. Lubumbashi: Centre de linguistique théorique et appliquée, 1974, 297–300. Also see Turner and Young, *The Rise and Decline of the Zairian State*, 154–156.

1976, Mobutu instructed an audience of MPR party-state officials in Kinshasa that while the brazen theft of some members of his government was wrong, *koyiba na mayele* (stealing cleverly; literally, stealing with intelligence) was an acceptable and even laudable practice for both government officials and ordinary Zairians. A month later, when American diplomats questioned Mobutu for his apparent instruction to steal, Mobutu responded at another rally by asserting that his Lingala phrasing had been misinterpreted, but he did not deny his original position.<sup>101</sup> This was common practice according to former regime official Christopher Mwenze Mulangu who stated,

Mobutu knew very well that most of the white people in Zaire could not understand Lingala and thus he preferred to use Lingala to communicate with the population while being able to deny what he had said later on. It was a way of communicating where if someone tried to translate it, he could always say, maybe you translated incorrectly. When he spoke in Lingala, it was meant for the autochthones. When he spoke in French he would hold back but in Lingala he would say everything. He would even say ‘don’t worry about the white people, I can trick them.’<sup>102</sup>

Mobutu could speak bluntly and openly in Lingala and thus demonstrate his power to his domestic audience; he could then deny these inconvenient truths in French. Mobutu’s use of Lingala helped power his demolition of the state and gave his American, Belgian, and French supporters plausible deniability regarding the regime’s worst excesses.<sup>103</sup>

Using Lingala rather than French allowed Mobutu to filter his audience, enabling him to transmit his message to the people as he intended to and then to deny it later on, which was particularly important as he sought to maintain both domestic stability through fear or paternalism and external support for his regime through foreign policy and an appearance of legitimacy. Mobutu’s use of Lingala also sent a clearer message to his Zairian audience due first to Lingala’s association with direction and command and, second, due to its association with the fast-paced moral ambiguity of urban life as the main lingua franca of Kinshasa.<sup>104</sup> Mobutu’s instructions to steal

<sup>101</sup> For the full account, see David Gould, *Bureaucratic Corruption and Underdevelopment in the Third World: The Case of Zaire* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980) 79–80.

<sup>102</sup> Interview with Christopher Mwenze Mulangu, Lubumbashi, 6 September 2019.

<sup>103</sup> According to Wyatt MacGaffey, Mobutu, who long claimed the mantle of being an “authentic” chief, also fulfilled an important societal expectation by using wielding either symbolic or actual violence against internal opponents. See Wyatt MacGaffey, “Aesthetics and Politics of Violence in Central Africa,” *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 13–1 (June 2000), 63–75.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with Prof. Mbala Nkanga, Kinshasa, 22 July 2021; personal correspondence with Prof. Bogumil Jewsiewicki, 2 October 2020.

cleverly, or in other versions, to steal but not too much (*yiba kasi mingi te*) became a license for officials and a rallying cry for opponents as Mobutu normalized state theft.<sup>105</sup>

In terms of linguistic change, the fact that Lingala became much more widely spoken beyond the Lingala zone after Mobutu gained power caused Zairians, particularly from the East, to associate Lingala with the predation and corruption of the regime.<sup>106</sup> This association reverberated across much of Zaire in the form of negative language ideologies toward Lingala. Indeed, language attitudes toward Lingala both contributed to and revealed the strained relationship between Eastern Zaire and the Congolese central government in Kinshasa that nourished multiple rebellions and continues to this day.<sup>107</sup> Whereas before Mobutu, people only recalled Lingala as having had connotations of impoliteness and brutality owing to the exactions of the *Force Publique*, under Mobutu, Lingala became associated with theft, oppression, and menace as well.<sup>108</sup> These negative ideologies existed alongside positive language ideologies associating Lingala with modernity, urban sophistication, and trendiness; however, across Eastern Zaire, negative ideologies toward Lingala appear to have outweighed the positive ones.<sup>109</sup>

In understanding why these associations became established, the actions of regime members—starting with politicians—provided immediate proof for this association. As historian Donatien Dibwe observed, “[Zairian] politicians spoke Lingala, they held power, and they were thieves.”<sup>110</sup> Widespread attitudes of Lingala as being a language of theft, which extend beyond the Swahili zone, can be linked to its association with Congolese politicians, in

<sup>105</sup> Interview with Sister Philomene Muntumpe Tshisopa, Kinshasa, 24 August 2019.

<sup>106</sup> Joshua Castillo, “Langue ya Pouvoir: Imposing, Opposing, and Navigating Lingala in Shaba (Katanga) – 1965–1997,” in Nassenstein, Nico (ed.), *Current Topics in the Study of Lingala* (Mainz: Mainzer Beiträge zur Afrikaforschung, forthcoming).

<sup>107</sup> These can be seen most readily in Catherina Wilson, “The Congolese Yankee: Language and Identity among Youth in Kisangani,” (unpublished Master’s thesis, University of Leiden, 2012), 32–34.

<sup>108</sup> This association of Lingala with brutality but not theft among Swahili speakers was most apparent among interviewees older than seventy, for example. Interview with “Nuru,” Lubumbashi, 8 September 2019.

<sup>109</sup> This linguistic observation comes from the one hundred plus interviews that I have done during fieldwork with Congolese from the former Orientale, Kivu, and Shaba provinces. It is also corroborated by sources such as H. M. Mutombo, “Pour ou contre l’unicité linguistique au Zaire ?” *Analyses sociales* 1–4 (July–August 1984), 27–36. For a discussion of positive language ideologies associated with Lingala in Eastern Congo, see Büscher, D’Hondt, and Meeuwis, “Recruiting a Nonlocal Language for Performing Local Identity.”

<sup>110</sup> Interview with Prof. Donatien Dibwe Dia Mwembu, Lubumbashi, 22 August 2019.

particular, of whom Mobutu was the most prominent. Among Ciluba speakers in Kasai, thieves are often referred to as *mwivi a mangala* (literally, Lingala thief) in a kind of embedded protest against the normalization of theft that many people connected to Mobutu's rule. Among Congolese Swahili speakers, as Katangese linguist Marcel Kalunga explained, the Mobutu regime's imposition of Lingala violated expectations of respect (*eshima* in Katanga Swahili) and deference to established linguistic norms in terms of using either Swahili or another local language. A very common statement that Katangese and other Congolese Swahili speakers voiced to me regarding Lingala is that Lingala *aina eshima* (Lingala has no respect). Swahili speakers link this statement of language ideology to Lingala's highly direct and low-distance style of communication (in contrast to the indirect and differential style of Congolese Swahili dialects) and thus to Lingala's use by violent security forces and political leaders for whom the population has little affinity, in an instance of linguistic iconization.<sup>111</sup>

Zairian women suffered particularly under Mobutu's rule, and in areas that the regime viewed as especially rebellious like Shaba province, women came to associate this suffering with Lingala due to the fact that Lingala was the language spoken by the soldiers and gendarmes who exploited or harmed them most directly. Much of this violence occurred in day-to-day life, in addition to the extraordinary violence that the regime deployed when encountering real or perceived opposition.<sup>112</sup> Regarding this quotidian violence, Nuru, a farmer who would transport her goods to market remembered, "it was simple, if soldiers wanted to, they would stop you and seize whatever you were carrying ... they would ask, in Lingala, *ozokende wapi? Omemi nini?* (where are you going? What are you carrying?)"<sup>113</sup> The women's

<sup>111</sup> Iconization is an element of language ideology defined as "a transformation of the sign relationship between linguistic features (or varieties) and the social images with which they are linked." See Irvine and Gal, "Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation," 37–38. Interview with Prof. Marcel Kalunga, Lubumbashi, 16 August 2019. As Nico Nassenstein has discussed in fascinating detail, these contrasting politeness strategies are most striking in Kisangani, where most of the population is bilingual in Swahili and Lingala, and many people code-switch between the two languages and politeness strategies as they navigate daily life. Nico Nassenstein, "Politeness in Kisangani Swahili: Speakers' Pragmatic Strategies at the Fringes of the Kiswahili-Speaking World," *Africanistik-Aegyptologie-Online*, 2018, <https://www.afrikanistik-aegyptologie-online.de/archiv/2018/4654>.

<sup>112</sup> The regime deployed a higher level of violence at moments of crisis like during the Shaba Wars (1977–1978), or Moba wars (1982–1983), or when faced with political opposition as with the UDPS during the early 1980s and 1990s. See Schatzberg, *The Dialectics of Oppression in Zaire*; Erik Kennes, "Fin du cycle post-colonial au Katanga, RD Congo," (unpublished PhD thesis, Laval University, 2009), <https://corpus.ulaval.ca/jspui/handle/20.500.11794/21489>; and Kalema, "Violence and Memory."

<sup>113</sup> Interview with Mvula, Lubumbashi, 8 September 2019.

linguistic abilities mediated these interactions. If women spoke Lingala and could respond, then the soldiers would not demand payment and would treat them well because as Nuru explained, “soldiers did not know Swahili and only spoke Lingala. If you could speak Lingala, then they would treat you like family.” For those who could not speak Lingala, the soldiers would demand money, and if the women did not have it, these interactions would quickly turn violent. “Soldiers would especially target older girls and women, if they seized you and you were sexually mature, they would assault and rape or kidnap you.” For “Ritafwari,” who spoke Lingala as the daughter of a Katangan *Force publique* veteran, these interactions were far less confrontational and violent. She reflected, “it helped me a lot knowing Lingala. When I came across a military roadblock, I would just say in Lingala *mbote, sango nini* (hi, how are you)? And they would let me pass every time without any problem.”<sup>114</sup> These women’s testimonies underscore the critical role that Lingala played in mediating Zairian women’s interactions with soldiers and other members of the Zairian state.

In situations of crisis, the quotidian violence of Mobutu’s state increased to horrifying levels, and Lingala then contributed to both the fracturing of Zairian society and the enforcement of Zairian national identity. During the first Shaba War in 1977, *Forces Armées Zaïroises* (FAZ) soldiers—on at least a few occasions—pushed the connection between Lingala and being *Zairois* through the barrel of a gun.<sup>115</sup> In the Zairian border town of Dilolo (and likely elsewhere), FAZ soldiers used Lingala to test suspected “rebels,” local civilians caught by the army, during their interrogations. Once the rebels fled, Tumaini recalled that “the [Zairian army] soldiers came back and killed many people. If someone spoke Lingala, they would let them live, the soldiers would think, oh, you’re from Kinshasa, speaking good Lingala made the soldiers think of them as fellow countrymen.” Tumaini also recalled that “if someone couldn’t speak Lingala, they would say, this one is a foreigner [implying they’re a rebel from Angola], and kill them. In the time of Mobutu, knowing Lingala was very important, it saved people’s lives. It truly was the language of power!”<sup>116</sup> Several other interviewees corroborated Tumaini’s account of Zairian soldiers weaponizing Lingala during the Shaba Wars.<sup>117</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Interview with “Ritafwari,” Lubumbashi, 8 September 2019.

<sup>115</sup> For a detailed history of the Shaba Wars, see Erik Kennes and Miles Larmer, *The Katangese Gendarmes and War in Central Africa: Fighting Their Way Home* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Western Shaba was a particular pressure point for the Mobutu regime due to the Lunda’s leading role in the Katanga secession and its massive mineral wealth.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with “Tumaini,” Lubumbashi, 8 September 2019. For a later discussion of the potential life-and-death consequences of knowing Lingala in Eastern Congo, see Büscher, D’Hondt, and Meeuwis, “Recruiting a Nonlocal Language for Performing Local Identity,” 529–532.

<sup>117</sup> Interview with Mavuno, Lubumbashi, 8 September 2019. Interview with Prof. Marcel Kalunga Mwela Ubi, Lubumbashi, 3 September 2019.

During multi-sited fieldwork across Congo's four linguistic zones, I found these negative attitudes to be most concentrated and vehement in Katanga, where the regime's perceptions of the province as being a *zone rouge* led to military occupation of sections for much of 32-year rule.<sup>118</sup> Lingala's imposition also clashed with Katangese nationalism centered around Swahili, which had flourished during the Katangese secession, as Katangese politicians used Swahili in speeches and radio broadcasts to imagine their own, ultimately unsuccessful nation. When the long-time Katangese rebel Laurent Kabila took power at the head of the multi-national AFDL rebel coalition in 1997, he adopted Swahili as his language of power within his government and inner circle and also attempted (unsuccessfully) to impose the language on the Congolese armed forces.<sup>119</sup>

Regime violence enacted through Lingala fractured Zairian society and deepened the resentments that tore the country apart during the Congo Wars.<sup>120</sup> As "Musafiri," a recruit who joined the AFDL rebellion during their march across Zaire in 1996 and climbed through the ranks explained, this violence also underscored the necessity of knowing at least some Lingala in order to demonstrate Zairian identity and survive encounters with the state. Zairian soldiers in these instances used a logic of erasure an important aspect of language ideology—by erasing Zaire's multilingual reality and Shaba's status as a non-Lingala speaking area—in their shibboleth test of national belonging.<sup>121</sup> The fact that many people passed these tests through their knowledge of Lingala in rural Southwestern Shaba far from the Lingala zone pointed to the success of regime language practices in imposing Lingala on

<sup>118</sup> As late as 1988, Southwestern Katanga, parts of which the *Tigres Katangais* seized during the second Shaba War, still "carried the military designation of 'operational area.'" See Daniel Henk, "Kazi ya Shaba: Choice, Continuity, and Social Change in an Industrial Community of Southern Zaire" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Florida, 1988), 57–58.

<sup>119</sup> Kabila went as far as to change the (newly renamed) DRC's currency into Swahili and English. According to my interview with a Congolese with knowledge of Laurent Kabila's thinking, he regarded Lingala as a "prostitute" language because of its association with Mobutu and saw Lingala speakers as "infiltrators" who could not be trusted. Apparently, it was impossible for Congolese to gain an audience with Laurent Kabila without speaking at least some Swahili, and speaking Swahili became an informal yet enforced requirement for entering his *présidence*. For example, I interviewed a long-time member of Mobutu's motorcade who Kabila had removed because of his lack of Swahili knowledge. Interview with "Musafiri," former AFDL military intelligence officer, 2021.

<sup>120</sup> Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters*.

<sup>121</sup> Irvine and Gal define erasure as "that aspect of ideological work through which some phenomena (linguistic forms, or types of persons, or activities) are rendered invisible." See Judith T. Irvine and Susan Gal, *Signs of Difference: Language and Ideology in Social Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 20–21.

the Zairian population as an often violent part of their nationalist unification project.

Mobutu himself exhibited a similar logic of erasure during a 1989 nationally broadcast speech when he stated: “I wrote this speech in French but I am giving it to you all in Lingala so that we can all understand each other (*po toyokana*).” Mobutu then listed Zaire’s provinces, saying after each, “I am speaking in Lingala so that, they can understand me (*bayoka ngai*).”<sup>122</sup> Mobutu’s statement implied Lingala could serve uncritically as an inter- and pan-Zairian language of communication and national unification. On one level, by 1989, when Mobutu gave this speech, he was largely correct; his regime’s imposition of Lingala had succeeded in the sense that much of Zaire’s population could understand at least basic Lingala by that point.<sup>123</sup> On another level, Mobutu’s statement reflected a dominant language ideology within the regime that downplayed Zaire’s extensive linguistic diversity and multiple regional lingua francas in favor of a view of Lingala as a “neutral” national language capable of unifying Zaire.<sup>124</sup>

Under Mobutu and later on, the oppositional attitude toward Lingala that many Congolese from the other three national language zones express has also been counter-balanced—particularly among young people—by language ideologies holding that not speaking Lingala or speaking Lingala badly makes someone a *yuma* (wimp, sissy, or halfwit), a word that Kikongo speakers have borrowed as well.<sup>125</sup> Young people across Congo/Zaire have thus been an important driving force in Lingala’s expansion, both through engagement with music and culture from Kinshasa, but also under Mobutu,

<sup>122</sup> Mobutu Sese Seko, “Message du Président Mobutu Sese Seko aux Zaïrois,” Kinshasa, Zaire (8 January 1989). For video of rally, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jkptB4CGxZU>, (accessed 24 April 2021).

<sup>123</sup> While my fieldwork in Congo has often been in urban areas, I have yet to meet a Congolese person even from a rural area who did not know at least some words of Lingala, owing to their experience living under MPR rule (as well as the influence of Kinshasa and its music).

<sup>124</sup> Regime insiders tried and failed to gain academic approval for a plan granting Lingala co-official status alongside French during a 1974 language conference in Lubumbashi. See Joshua Castillo, “Revealing Debate: The 1974 First Seminar of Zairian Linguists and Congo’s Politics of Language in Historical Perspective,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, forthcoming.

<sup>125</sup> This word, drawn from American westerns, was a central part of *Hindubil*, as an oppositional term to *bill*, in the street language originating in 1950s Kinshasa that historian Ch. Didier Gondola has analyzed, from which many words have been adopted into mainstream Kinshasa Lingala. See Ch. Didier Gondola, *Tropical Cowboys: Westerns, Violence, and Masculinity in Kinshasa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 7. During fieldwork in Kikwit and Matadi, I found that my Kikongo-speaking interlocutors explained the need to learn Lingala through the desire not to be considered a *yuma*.

through the JMPR youth movement.<sup>126</sup> Another common sentiment from my interviewees was that speaking Lingala connected them more into the Zairian national community, which was indeed Mobutu's objective in order to strengthen his rule.<sup>127</sup> The ambiguity between these contrasting responses to Lingala underscores the complexity and richness of using sociolinguistic evidence for historical writing, as sociolinguistic changes in language ideology and practices reveal ongoing cultural, social, and political changes.<sup>128</sup>

## Conclusion

This tentative case study of how Mobutu's regime used Lingala as the language of power to rule Zaire provides us with insight regarding the power of language, through sociolinguistic methods, to improve our understanding of the recent past. Further historical research is needed to develop this sociolinguistic approach both in Congo and across Africa, and beyond. Within African history, sociolinguistic methods can index social, cultural, and political changes by facilitating the study of linguistic change, especially in terms of language ideologies and language practices. These methods can thus extend the legacy of historical linguistic research into periods within living memory. In Mobutu's Zaire, Lingala, as the language of power, mediated relations between ordinary Zairians and the regime and facilitated Mobutu's privatization of the state, contributing to the strengthening of Zairian and later Congolese national identity but also fracturing Zairian society in the process. As this article has endeavored to show, sociolinguistic methods can help historians to amplify marginalized voices and provide new insights into the linguistic dimensions of social life and political power in and beyond the African continent.

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**Joshua Castillo** is a PhD Candidate in African History at Boston University. His research focuses on the relationship between language and political power under

<sup>126</sup> Tshimpaka Yanga's superb yet underutilized 1980 thesis demonstrates both the process and the means through which this occurred in Western Kasai, Bandundu, and along the Congo River. See Tshimpaka Yanga, "A Sociolinguistic Identification of Lingala (Republic of Zaire)" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Texas Austin, 1989); and Merriam, "Music Change in a Basongye Village (Zaire)," 806–846.

<sup>127</sup> Personal Communication with Crawford Young, 23 March 2018.

<sup>128</sup> Blommaert, *State Ideology and Language in Tanzania*, 109.

the Mobutu regime from 1965 to 1997 in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

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