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ETHNOLINGUISTIC VITALITY AND LANGUAGE IN EDUCATION IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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Abstract: A simple donation of textbooks in a national language to schools in the Sankuru Province by the Ministry of Education is surprisingly met with fiery reaction by the native Tetela elite. They decry cultural alienation of their youth, and linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992, Tollefson, 1991). Cultural alienation is no longer attributed to colonial languages (French), but even to a neighbouring national language. This paper exploits this incident and the new administrative map of the DRC (division of the Kasai Oriental Province particularly) to show how politics, language and ethnicity are interrelated; how the elite are always at the forefront of the language question, and how language management can work in education in the Congolese context. The study is also a review of the recurrent language question in the DRC, and an illustration of ethnolinguistic vitality at work. Eventually, it pleads for revision of the number of national languages so as to account for ethnolinguistic vitality of some ethnic groups – thought to have been disfavoured by the colonial administration.

Keywords : ethnolinguistic vitality, national language, language in education, bilingual programme, language management.

LA VITALITÉ ETHNOLINGUISTIQUE ET L'EMPLOI DES LANGUES DANS L'ENSEIGNEMENT EN RDC

Résumé : Un simple don d'anthologies en langue nationale aux écoles de la province du Sankuru par le Ministère de l'Education a déclenché une vive réaction de l'élite (politique) tetela. Elle crie à l'aliénation culturelle de leur jeunesse, et à l'impérialisme linguistique (Phillipson 1992, Tollefson 1991). L'aliénation culturelle n'est plus attribuée à une langue coloniale (le français), mais même à une langue nationale voisine. Cette contribution exploite cet incident et la nouvelle carte administrative de la RDC (le démembrement du Kasai oriental en particulier) pour démontrer comment la politique, la langue et l'ethnicité sont intimement liées, comment l'élite est toujours au front de la lutte linguistique, et comment l'aménagement linguistique peut fonctionner dans l'enseignement en RDC. Cette étude est une révision de la récurrente question linguistique en RDC, et une illustration de la vitalité ethnolinguistique à l'œuvre. Finalement, elle plaide pour la révision du nombre de langues nationales en RDC afin de prendre en compte la vitalité ethnolinguistique de certains groupes ethniques - jadis défavorisés par l'administration coloniale, estime-t-on.

Mots-clés : Vitalité ethnolinguistique, une langue nationale, programme bilingue, langues dans l'enseignement, aménagement linguistique.

Introduction

This paper revisits the national language question in the new administrative configuration of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) so as to show how ethnicity remains a crucial factor in the national politics despite all the efforts made to combat separatism. The DRC has implemented administrative reforms increasing the number of provinces from eleven to twenty-five. This new map includes within itself some germs of conflicts: the borders of provinces do not always correspond to those of ethnic groups and languages. As a result, some national and vehicular languages are in competition in the new provinces for the status of the national language. Particularly, the division of the Kasai Oriental Province into three provinces contained some predictable conflicts of language loyalty. In fact, two of the new provinces, viz. Lomami and Sankuru, were created on the grounds of claims for self-determination and separatism from other ethnic groups. Presumably Ciluba, the national language of the area, would hardly be accepted as the national language therein. Such is the concern of this paper. As a background, this study was inspired by an incident which had a large coverage in the media in 2022.

In its efforts to boost literacy in native languages, the UNESCO had donated textbooks in the four national languages of the DRC to Congolese schools, viz. Ciluba, Kikongo, Kiswahili and Lingala. The Ministry of Education distributed them to the beneficiaries according to their respective national languages. However, it sent the Lingala version to Sankuru although this province used to be in the Ciluba speaking area in the past. Unexpectedly, Lambert Mende[1], a native elite of Sankuru, reacted publicly in the media against this literacy campaign. He decried cultural alienation of the Tetela children by their exposure to a foreign language. This donation was interpreted as an act of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson 1992, Tollefson 1991) impeding Tetela children to learn in their own native language. Admittedly, a simple educational decision had become a political issue with a large coverage in the media[2]. Hence, this reflexion is based on the following research questions: Why did the Tetela elite reject Lingala as the national language to use in education in their province? How can language management work in education in the DRC in order to carter for people's ethnolinguistic vitality?

As a hypothesis, Lambert Mende's rejection of Lingala can be seen as a complex psychological response revealing frustration vis-à-vis the nation's indifference to the promotion of native languages. This position is thus an assertion of Tetela identity and ethnolinguistic vitality justified by the following factors: Sankuru is the 10th largest province (104 331 km^2) out of 25; its language was already in competition for the status of a national language during the colonial period (Polomé 1968); its language is already in use as a "provincial language" in Kasai Oriental (Mulamba et Kambaja 2001); a proof that it can play the role that the Ministry of Education wants to allot to Lingala; its natives are participants in power sharing in the country with noticeable representation in the government, the army, the institutions and other spheres of power; its subjectively perceived vitality (Smith et al. 2017) expressed in the slogan "Ona Kema fumba", that is, 'a (Tetela) child is not a slave,' is globally understood as an assertion of Tetela identity and power (political, spiritual, ancestral). It is widely popularized in the songs of the late Rumba star Papa Wemba, a native

[1]Lambert Mende is a former Minister for Communication. He is well known for his opinions which are sometimes controversial. It cannot be ascertained whether this view is his own or that of his native Tetela community.

[2]In response, Mr Atundu Liongo, a politician and a native elite of Lingala, defied this allegation. He recalled that Tetela children have always been in contact with Lingala, and that this language represented neither glottophagia nor linguistic imperialism in Sankuru. Obviously, the problem was elsewhere but not with the UNESCO literacy campaign.

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Tetela himself. Historically and politically, Sankuru is the homeland of the nation's first Prime Minister, a pan-Africanist and international figure, Patrice Emery Lumumba.

All these factors should ensure the visibility and vitality of the Tetela language, at least in its native area. With regard to language management, it is hypothesized that a bilingual programme can ensure the visibility of native languages and help learners to begin their education in a language which is familiar to them. That would ensure cultural diversity and prevent glottophagia of minority languages by majority ones (Krauss 1992, Crystal 2000). Structurally, after some terminological and methodological considerations on the topic, turn by turn, this reflexion will cover language management (in the DRC), the history of the language question in the DRC, the analysis of language in education, discussion, and conclusion to wind up the paper.

1.Methodological and terminological considerations

The present study concerns interethnic relationships and language choice in communication. It is thus appropriate to rely on 'Ethnolinguistic Vitality', a well-established theory used to study the relationships among different ethnic groups living together. For Giles et al. (1977:308), ethnolinguistic vitality is what 'makes a group likely to behave as a distinctive and active collective entity in intergroup situations'. In the same vein, Ehala (2009:38) defines vitality as "the potential for collective action to safeguard the group from environmental challenges." Therefore, in a cosmopolitan community or in interethnic relations, an ethnic group which has much visibility will tend to use its own language rather than the lingua franca as a way of asserting its identity. This vitality is determined by the group's status, demographic, institutional support and control factors (Johnson et al. 1983). For instance, a group with a demographic majority, with members holding power in institutions, with its language being used in the media and in education; such group members will tend to speak their language outside their home as if it were the lingua franca. Smith et al. (2017) classify "vitality theory" into 'objective vitality' and 'subjective vitality'. The former includes the factors of vitality (demographics, institutional support, and status) as perceived in comparison to other groups, and the latter highlights how groups may cognitively and affectively perceive them. Hence, there is a rough classification of ethnolinguistic groups into those having low, medium, or high vitality. In a multilingual country, every ethnic group tries to boost its ethnolinguistic vitality (as objectively or subjectively perceived) so as to survive in the linguistic arena; a visibility which is crucial for any aspiration to power sharing. This theory may help understand why Tetela and Songye people prefer their ethnic languages (vernaculars) to national languages. The topic concerns many aspects of language use. Hence, it is necessary to make clear some of the basic terms, namely, language management, the national language, and language in education.

1.1 Language management in the DRC

Throughout the history of the RDC, the language question has always been a sensitive issue (Young 1975, Mulamba et Kambaja 2001, 2007). Far from being a simple means of human communication, language is dangerously associated with speakers' identity, origin and a whole set of stereotypes and stigmatizations. Nowadays, the ubiquity of the new communication technologies such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram facilitates propagation of viewpoints. It is currently held that "The 21st century is believed to be the century when 50 to 90 percent of languages currently spoken will cease to exist" (Krauss 1992; Crystal 2000). Tetela people have to protect their language from extinction by keeping it operational and

dynamic, and by avoiding unnecessary competition with another language in its own territory. As a matter of fact, two national languages were used in Sankuru, and none of them is native to the area: Ciluba as the national language of the province, and Lingala as a vehicular language by those who could master it. A situation that the Tetela elite could no longer tolerate. Since the elite are leaders of opinion (van Dijk 1993), it is feared that their discourse be taken word-for-word by the population and that it lead to unpredictable separatist actions. Nowadays, Otetela (the Tetela language) is outside the Ciluba administrative area, and the elite have rejected loyalty to Lingala despite linguistic proximity and cultural ties between Otetela and Lingala. This response calls certainly for a reassessment of the national language question. Admittedly, Lingala has always been present in Sankuru as attested by the policy of the community radio and television stations in Mbujimayi, the capital city of the former common province. They used to broadcast in Lingala besides Ciluba in order to reach the population of Sankuru (Mulamba et Kambaja 2001).

With respect to language in education, Ehala (2009:37) recalls that "One of the core principles of UNESCO, the Council of Europe and EU is to respect and protect linguistic and cultural diversity". The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, adopted by the UNESCO's General Conference in November 2001, declares that "as a source of exchange, innovation and creativity, cultural diversity is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature." It is thus legitimate for people to defend their native language whatever its sociolinguistic status in the country. Mutatis mutandis, the Tetela elite are right to demand that their youth develop literacy and reading skills in their native language even if the latter does not fulfill the "official" requirements of a medium of instruction, that is, the status of a national language. For Richards and Schmidt (2010:385), a national language is one that has a connection with a country, state, or other territory, typically the language that is most widely used throughout that territory, has the most speakers, and is closely associated with national identity. For example, English is the national language of the US; German is the national language of Germany. In the Congolese context, Ciluba, Kikongo, Kiswahili and Lingala are national languages.

They fulfill the same functions as French, the official language, but at a lower level of administration, institutions, and education. In his paper "On the Choice of Official Languages in the Democratic Republic of the Congo," Polomé (1968) details how Belgian colonizers have struggled to retain the present-day four national languages to the detriment of some challengers like Otetela. The factors of vitality that have led to that selection are nowadays achieved by many Congolese native languages which would rightly claim for their promotion to the status of a national language. Before interpreting the contradictory viewpoints on the donation of textbooks, let us revisit the language question in the DRC in order to show the lack of consensus on language choice affects those whose native languages have not been chosen. Ethnolinguistic vitality becomes thus for them the main means to prove the dynamism of their native language.

1.2. The history of the language question in the DRC

Before independence, language policy was managed by the Belgian authorities certainly in accordance with their own objectives. That is how there was co-official bilingualism comprising French and Flemish, whereas native languages were classified into three categories: national languages (Ciluba, Kiswahili, Kikongo and Lingala), vehicular languages, and vernacular languages. Ethnolinguistic vitality factors alone could not limit to four the number of the potential national languages; the colonial authorities had their own

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agenda in which language management did not play a great role. A large number of national languages meant increasing expenses. This original 'injustice' would hunt the mind of the elite of the so-called 'disadvantaged languages' and pervade the national language question throughout the nation's history. Since the language question has always been a very sensitive issue in this country (Young, 1973), any new decision on language policy calls for a thoughtful and critical analysis. In education, apart from French the medium of education at the upper primary school and throughout secondary and tertiary levels, the four national languages were used as the medium of instruction or as subjects on the curriculum in their respective provinces. However, in urban areas where most pupils can speak French, the national languages are hardly on the curriculum. Many reasons can justify this situation. On the one hand, parents are reluctant to see their children being schooled in a native language. On the other, there are often pupils transferred with their parents from other areas who cannot speak the national language in use. Hence, French is used as the lingua franca.

After independence, the DRC has been swinging from reform to reform of its language policy. Some of these changes seem to run counter the common theories on languages in contact and language planning and tend to be dictated by motives other than linguistic ones. The language policy in post-independence DRC was characterized by diglossia, with French as the official language, the four national languages, and vernaculars. Following are some landmarks:

-The AFDL regime and the rebellions

Through the Lemera Agreements, the 8th article, the AFDL (Alliance des Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Congo) declared English co-official language with French (Umoja, 2000). It also printed the Congolese Franc banknotes on which French, English and Kiswahili were used in an unbalanced bilingualism with most texts in French, but with one instance of English and Kiswahili to indicate the amount of money (Mulamba et Kambaja 2007). By making Kiswahili the only national language to the detriment of the other three, this decision was obviously a violation of the previous language policy. The presence of English was just a sign of gratefulness towards the Eastern neighbouring countries (Uganda and Rwanda) which had sponsored the rebellion. Nowadays, the Congolese franc banknotes have most texts in French, but with the amount of money also mentioned in the four national languages. With the various rebellions which sprang up after President Kabila's assassination, language management was not the same anymore. Lingala continued to be the language of the Army in the western part of the country under the government's control. By contrast, Kiswahili became the language of the Army in the East. But after the country's reunification, the rebellious factions joined again the administration of Kinshasa. In the Army, Lingala recovered its status of the lingua franca of the Army. Rallies with soldiers and policemen are held in Lingala, unless the officer turns to French. In short, the areas of influence of national languages sometimes change along specific events.

-Language policy in the 3rd Republic's Constitution

The very first article of the New Constitution defines language policy in the DRC in the following terms: "Its (DRC's) official language is French. Its national languages are Kikongo, Lingala, Kiswahili and Ciluba. The State ensures their promotion without discrimination. The other languages of the country constitute part of the Congolese cultural wealth of which the State ensures protection". However, there are some contradictions between the Constitution and praxis.

First, contrary to the Lemera's Agreements which have decreed co-official French-English bilingualism, herein English is cited nowhere. The Constitution only recognizes the French - national languages – vernaculars triglossia. Despite the current use of the so-called provincial languages (e.g. former vehiculars such as Otetela, Songye or Kanyok) on community Radio and TV stations, the national government has ignored these changes in language praxis. Yet, these media often perform better and are more frequent in the population's use. In short, there seems to be no follow-up of the official instructions because unauthorized languages (English and provincial languages) are used outside their "official" domains. While people strive to promote their native languages via the media and elsewhere as a proof of the dynamism of these languages, the State and the national government maintain the status quo which privileges the four national languages; a standpoint which is now challenged like in the present case under study.

-The new administrative map and the language question in Kasai oriental

The Kasai Oriental Province was a merger of three provinces: Sud-Kasai, Sankuru and Lomami. According to the recent Constitution of the DRC, provinces were to be divided, apart from the 3 ones deriving from an ancient division of the former Kivu Province. Their number went from 11 to 25 because every district became a new province. Some of these provinces were claimed on the basis of ethnic self-determination and separatism. Sankuru was monoethnic (Tetela only) and the language question is not as acute as elsewhere. By contrast, the situation is different in the Lomami Province deriving from the Kabinda district. Though its capital city is in the Songye area, this province was multiethnic and included Luba, Kanyok and Kete people as well. Not surprisingly, the language question arose in terms of a new competition between Ciluba, the national language of the area, and Kisongye, a (vernacular) provincial language. Ciluba is seen as 'a foreign language' by Songye people who were expecting a monoethnic province like before the creation of Kasai Oriental in the 60's. Yet, the provincial boarders are no longer the same: the former Lomami Province was monoethnic Songye whereas the new Lomami Province is multi-ethnic, and includes Ngandajika, Lwilu and Kamiji territories inhabited by other ethnic groups. For the elderly people who knew the history of their province, the renaming of the province as "Lomami" only meant Songye homogeneity and separatism from other ethnic groups. Songye people could not tolerate that their own language, and the language of their provincial capital city, be dominated by Ciluba, a national language from a neighbouring province. The latter could not remain welcome for people of this generation because ethnolinguistic vitality cannot be expressed in the language of the rivals.

All this turmoil was a purposeful work of the political elite who did not care about the consequences of playing with the nation's history. One way or another, there is that germ of separatism and self-determination to be expressed through ethnic languages. Admittedly, ethnolinguistic vitality walks hand in hand with the use of the native language. Hence, here and there the claims for some vehicular languages to be promoted 'national languages' were predictable. Some new provinces would find it necessary to reject their national language so as to promote their own native language, a process already initiated through what has been called 'provincial languages'. As a recall, Kanyok, Otetela, and Songye were used in the audio-visual media in the former Kasai Oriental Province (Mulamba et Kambaja, 2001). The rejection of Lingala in Sankuru, and the challenge to Ciluba by Kisongye in Lomami are instances of claims for promotion of local languages, and intolerance of invasion by neighbours. In these circumstances, present day's Sankuru happens to not owe loyalty to

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neither of the recognized four national languages. The slogan "Ona kema fumba", or 'a (Tetela) child is not a slave' finds its heralding role of proclaiming Tetela identity and power.

The Kasai Oriental Province was not the only one to have been threatened by separatism. Some weeks before the 50th anniversary of the DRC in 2010, some 'Independentist' Members of Parliament from Ituri and the Central Kasai Provinces claimed for the immediate implementation of the Constitution to create new provinces[3] Among the challenges awaiting this enterprise was the choice of the national languages, particularly in the provinces where the incumbent national language was outside its administrative or native area.

2. Analysis of language use in education

In language management, education happens to be the domain in which language is promoted through standardization and modernization by means of borrowings. Education is also a medium through which culture and ideologies are transmitted to members as initiation into the values of their community and civilization. In the design of the English curriculum of secondary schools in the DRC, for instance, there have been a shift from textbooks describing life in Europe (Britain series, Rip van Winkle) to those describing French speaking communities (Cartledge's series) and to those talking of Africa (English in Africa series). It is thus a sensitive issue to allow children to be schooled in a different language because of the danger of cultural alienation. Besides, being educated in one's native language is one of the human rights, according to UNESCO. It is easy to understand that in a multilingual country where competition for power among ethnic groups is fierce, not promoting one's own language (but another one) is seen as weakening the position of one's community, and jeopardizing its chances of competing with other ethnic groups. In line with ethnolinguistic vitality, everybody would wish their native language to be used in education despite all the difficulties which justify the limitation of the national languages to four. The case under study is only an illustration of the frustration of those whose native languages are not retained as languages of education though they fulfil to some extent the criteria for it. Realistically, the number of national languages should be limited, and not every native language can become a medium of instruction.

2.1. Education in native/national languages

Let us now return to the response of the Tetela elite to the use of textbooks in Lingala and its impacts on the education of the Tetela youth. Despite the UNESCO's decree on children's education in a familiar language, this right is not easy to implement in Sankuru (as elsewhere) for a set of reasons, among which: the difficulties in fulfilling all the conditions for Otetela to be chosen as a medium of instruction; its standardization; availability of qualified material designers to produce appropriate textbooks in Otetela; availability of editors or publishing houses willing to invest money in textbooks without a large readership; parents' willingness to see their children educated in Otetela while it does not lead to good

[3] The administrative map of the DRC has changed more than once throughout the country's history. The number of provinces has been respectively 6, 26 including the capital city Kinshasa, 11 and now 25 plus the capital city. To strengthen the national unity and cohabitation of different ethnic groups, President Mobutu merged different provinces to reduce the 25 provinces to 11. The new division restores to a large extent the same ethnic-based provinces, sometimes with new boarders, and the ensuing language conflict. 'Independentists' across the country were claiming for the implementation of the new Constitution so as to achieve their separatist objectives. The Members of Parliament from Ituri and the Central Kasai Provinces happened to be among the most active on this issue

jobs and social promotion. In his book *English in Africa*, Schmied (1991) identifies a set of factors which impede changes in language policy, among which the high cost arguments, the technological arguments and the psychological arguments. Language management, particularly the introduction of a new language in education is usually hampered by the difficulties related to the high cost of the project, the technological innovations which usually imply high costs, people's psychological readiness to accept the new language, and also by scarcity of the human resources to implement these changes. Hence, all major changes in the educational system such as the change to another medium of instruction have tended to be avoided. Any such operation implies not only changing the curriculum, but also teacher training programmes and the production (writing and printing) of textbooks and other teaching aids. All of them require considerable amounts of money, which is rarely available. The present case does not make exception: Otetela and Kisongye are not officially sponsored like the national languages and French, so as to edit and publish teaching materials.

Let us focus on education particularly while sidelining language use in other complex sociolinguistic situations such as inter-ethnic families. Admittedly, it is better to adopt bilingual programme. In multilingual contexts, education has often been associated with the assignment of different languages to different levels of education. Many models of programmes are advisable. There is less to do for cosmopolitan cities insofar as there is a lingua franca known to all the learners. However, because of parents' social status, some pupils can speak French at home, whereas others meet this language for the first time only at school. They do not master it so as to use it as a medium of instruction. Hence, necessity to turn to a bilingual programme to accommodate every learner.

In the present case, the transitional bilingual programme is appropriate since French remains the medium of instruction throughout secondary and tertiary levels. For Richards and Schmidt (2010:55), a transitional bilingual programme is the partial or total use of the children's home language when they enter school, and later on a change to the sole medium of instruction. According to Lambert Mende's argumentation, it is necessary for Tetela children to become literate in Otetela in order to be initiated into the native culture. According to Schmied (1991), following are the most common transitional approaches which can be adapted for them:

> "Teaching French as a subject in lower primary education and using it as a medium in upper primary education. That is, children are educated in Otetela and, at the same time, they learn French as a subject. The possible change-over usually takes place after four years. This has the advantage that all pupils can acquire a reasonable level of French before it takes up the burden of supporting the content of other subjects."

This is already the case for teaching in areas where pupils do not speak French. Education begins in the national language, or even in the local vernacular, and it is carried out in French later on. However, for those who consider the mother tongue as a repository of a culture to promote, as claimed in the Tetela elite's response, another possibility would be:

> "Using Otetela throughout primary education. French remains an important subject, however, because it will be needed as a medium of instruction at secondary school. Nevertheless, such a proposal can hardly please most parents because every elite dreams of great academic achievements for their children. As a reminder, one of the resolutions of the seminar of linguists in Zaire (CELTA, 1974) held in Lubumbashi proposed the creation of a pilot literary section in Goma, with Kiswahili as the medium

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> of instruction. Not surprisingly, pupils did not register because their parents disliked the experiment. The latter did not see any brilliant academic future for their children who would not master French. Despite all the arguments put forth by Lambert Mende in favour of Otetela, it is unlikely that he expected this language to become the only medium of instruction for these children."

In conclusion, the choice of the four national languages has not solved the problems of those whose native languages were sidelined. Hence, this issue is recurrent in order to augment the national languages. This desire has been echoed and materialized in provincial languages, an implicit promotion of vehicular languages to a higher status of national languages. This has been done without any official decree.

3. Discussion

This paper was triggered by the response of the Tetela elite to the donation of textbooks in Lingala to schools in Sankuru. Although in the past Lingala was the most engrained of the four national languages in this area, attitudes seem to have changed with respect to language loyalty since the creation of the new Sankuru Province. Otetela, the local language, is preferred as the medium of instruction on the grounds of ethnicity particularly. Lambert Mende's response supports Mondal's (2025:79) observation that "marginalized communities reclaim agency, reinterpret histories, and resist dominant cultural narratives." Changes must take place one day. If Tetela people have to survive in the competitive Congolese linguistic environment, they must promote their language; and education remains the domain through which this objective is pursued (Rubagumya 1990; Mutombo 1987, 2012). Apart from Ciluba which is both an ethnic and a national language for some of its speakers (native Luba-Luluwa people), the other national languages are in fact second languages for their speakers, after ethnic languages. One is first of all a Nande, a Ruund, a Shi or a Sanga before being a Kiswahili speaker. Therefore, whenever need be, one identifies oneself with the ethnic language (the we-language), rather than with the lingua franca of the larger speech community. One belongs thus to many speech communities with different degrees of loyalty.

Among the three reasons (cultural, linguistic and political) which have played a significant role in the Tetela elite's response, political ones seem to have been the most outstanding. Culturally, Otetela and Lingala have belonged – and they still belong – to the same socio-cultural Amongo community (Guthrie 1948). Linguistically, both Otetela and Lingala belong to the C language family. This proximity makes that Lingala was easily adopted by Tetela people in comparison to the other three national languages (Kazadi 1987, Nyembwe 1987, Kazadi et Nyembwe 1987). There is no reason to allege that today Lingala will cause the death of Otetela; both objective and subjective ethnolinguistic vitality (Smith et al. 2017) of Tetela people are high in the DRC. Tetela elite have visibility in different domains of the public life; and Tetela culture is present in the Congolese music via the Rumba star Papa Wemba. It is also unfounded to fear pupils' cultural alienation given the cultural and linguistic relatedness between the two languages. This reality cannot be denied today.

Politically, and as a manifestation of ethnolinguistic vitality, the Tetela elite no longer like to contribute to the linguistic dynamism of another language because they have their own native language to promote, and their own province to develop. It is noteworthy that Otetela and Lomongo were the main losers in the Belgians' language policy in the DRC

because these languages were in competition with the eventual four national languages (Polomé 1968). As such, nowadays they are among the strongest candidates to the status of national language if the RDC should increase its national languages. By rejecting the textbooks in Lingala without an alternative edition in Otetela, the Tetela elite show clearly that they prefer to sacrifice their youth's literacy in national languages instead of promoting a rival language. Such an agenda is obviously more political than linguistic. It is thus high time language management in the DRC were reassessed and redefined in order to account for the present-day language ecology (Mambo 2014). The new administrative configuration has some (socio-)linguistic consequences, as shown below. The recession of Ciluba in the Sankuru province was predictable for linguistic, cultural, and mainly political reasons. Despite a large number of Ciluba speakers in Lusambo, the capital city of Sankuru, Ciluba does not work as an ethnicity marker for Tetela people (Giles, 1977, Johnson et al. 1983). It was common to see Tetela being fluent in Lingala but unable to utter a single sentence in Ciluba, the national language of their province. Such a situation is unthinkable of, for instance, for an elite native of the former Katanga Province not to know Kiswahili.

The high cost argument is evoked as an excuse and the main impediment to any change of language policy. All over the world, governments have been reluctant to introduce changes in language management because their implementations would require expenses in order to produce teaching materials in the new language, to edit them, and to train the teachers of the new language (Schmied 1991). Besides, people need some psychological change in order to accept the new language, particularly when its advantages with respect to social promotion are not evident. For most people, knowledge of a language must be an asset for social promotion, for instance, rather than a simple satisfaction of curiosity. It is necessary for the RDC to revise its language management in order to account for ethnolinguistic vitality of people on the one hand, and to correct the injustice made to some languages by Belgians in their language choice, on the other. South Africa is smaller and less populated than the DRC. Nevertheless, as Alexander (2025) reports, "South Africa's constitution recognizes 12 official languages: Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi (…), Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga and, since 2023, South African Sign Language or SASL." The endoglossic official languages obviously serve to ensure visibility of its main ethnic groups. English, the exoglossic official language, is the primary language of parliamentary and state discourse. Belgians limited the number of national languages to four to avoid expenses; the Congolese elite cannot blindly imitate them. The present-day linguistic ecology of the country and the ethnolinguistic vitality of many groups would call for the promotion of some vehicular languages such as Otetela, Lomongo, Kinande, Kiluba, to cite but a few, to the status of national languages.

With respect to language in education, some decisions are worth taking concerning the use of native languages. There is need to turn to "transitional bilingual education" (Richards and Schmidt 2010) before imposing French as the medium of instruction. The national languages are not actually known by everybody. Children who are not native speakers of any consider them as second languages. That is why it is realistic to teach children in the language they know, that is, in the mother tongue as recommended by UNESCO. That would please and appease the elite whose mother tongues are not national languages like in the case under study. Practically, that already happens because in villages and in areas where pupils do not know the national language in use, the local vernacular/vehicular language is used. Yet, they have not appropriate or quality teaching materials because of lack of edited books and trained teachers in these language varieties.

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The DRC is a multilingual country whose language stratification is wrongly reduced to a diglossic three-level French -- national languages – vernaculars bilingualism (Ferguson 1959, Fishman 1967). However, as Mulamba and Kambaja (2001) have shown in their study of language use on TV and radio, some provinces use some vehicular languages alongside national languages, blurring thus their real sociolinguistic status. Otetela happens to be among these. These authors have found four levels in this diglossic stratification:

The official language: French
National languages: (Ciluba, Kiswahili, Kikongo, and Lingala)
Provincial languages: (Kanyok, Otetela and Songye in Kasai Oriental)
Vernaculars: all the language varieties which are not used in official settings.

Resorting to transitional bilingual education means that children will begin schooling in the native language, whether it is a vernacular/vehicular, or a national language. Meanwhile, they learn French as a subject on the curriculum, until this language becomes the only medium of instruction once learners' competence and fluency in French is found fair. Admittedly, the eventual goal for the claimants is to see their native languages be raised to the status of official languages.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the Sankuru case is only indicative of language and ethnicity, and of what can happen when the native elite back up the cause of their ethnic group to ensure its visibility. Education is the core of life of any community and it is one of the human rights that the UN tries to protect. It cannot be left to hazard and carried out in a language that children do not master. The creation of new provinces has raised ethnic awareness and its marker, the ethnic language. The present national languages are second languages for most Congolese, they cannot supersede their ethnic languages forever. The new administrative map of the DRC will thus have a direct impact on language policy and language practice. Particularly, here and there the present national languages will be challenged by some local languages in the name of ethnolinguistic vitality and ethnic visibility. They will see their respective areas of influence recede to the benefit of some of the present-day provincial languages across the country.

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