

**LANGUAGE USE AMONG 3RD YEAR LITERARY STUDENTS IN  
NGALIEMA (KINSHASA): A SOCIOLINGUISTIC AND  
PSYCHOPEDAGOGICAL STUDY OF MULTILINGUALISM IN THE  
CONGOLESE SCHOOL CONTEXT**

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**ABSTRACT**

In multilingual societies such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, language is a central vector of academic success, cognitive development and identity construction (UNESCO, 1953; Baker, 2011). This in-depth study examines the linguistic use of students in the 3rd literary section in the commune of Ngaliema (Kinshasa), focusing on the dominant role of Lingala as a functional urban mother tongue, on the phenomena of code-switching and linguistic interference, and on their impact on the mastery of academic French.

Using a mixed approach (questionnaires with 500 students, semi-structured interviews with teachers and participant observation in six secondary schools), the results show that Lingala is spoken by 87% of students and declared as their mother tongue by 58% of them, regardless of their ancestral language. Code-switching is very common (81% of pupils practice it often or very often), while Lingala interference is most evident in verbal conjugation (62%), phrastic structure (57%) and lexical choice (52%). These phenomena are not isolated but are part of a broader sociolinguistic dynamic, where urban multilingualism promotes creative linguistic hybridization, but poses pedagogical challenges when teaching approaches remain centered on a monolingual ideal (Cummins, 2000; Blommaert, 2005).

The study concludes that current pedagogical practices, which are mostly monolingual, do not take into account the multilingual repertoire of learners, leading to linguistic insecurity and academic underperformance. It advocates the adoption of pedagogical strategies that are aware of multilingualism, reinforced teacher training and language policies adapted to the Congolese urban context (Kamwangamalu, 2001; Bokamba, 2008; Heugh, 2014). This research contributes to applied sociolinguistics by providing empirical data on an understudied African urban context, and highlights the importance of rethinking the concept of 'mother tongue' in multicultural environments.

**Keywords:** plurilingualism, sociolinguistics, Lingala, code-switching, linguistic interference, academic French, Kinshasa, Ngaliema.

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Context of the study

Language is at the heart of human interactions and educational processes, serving not only as a means of communication, but also as a tool for cognitive development and the construction of social and cultural identities (Fishman, 1972; Bourdieu, 1991). In educational contexts, particularly in high school, language proficiency is both a means and an end, especially in the literary sections where oral and written expression are assessed with great rigour (Cummins, 2000).

In the DRC, a highly multilingual country with more than 200 indigenous languages, four national languages (Lingala, Kikongo, Kiswahili, Tshiluba) and French as the official language of instruction, this linguistic complexity is exacerbated by internal migration, interethnic contacts and globalization (Polomé, 1982; Kamwangamalu, 2003). In Kinshasa, an overcrowded and cosmopolitan capital, multilingualism is intensified: students navigate between school French, Lingala as an urban lingua franca, and other local or ancestral languages (Bokamba, 2008). Ngaliema, a residential and educational commune in Kinshasa, illustrates this diversity, where daily interactions shape hybrid linguistic repertoires that directly influence academic performance, particularly in French (Malekani, 2001).

This study deepens these dynamics by exploring how multilingualism, often perceived as an obstacle, can be transformed into a pedagogical resource if teaching practices are adapted (UNESCO, 2003; May, 2012).

### 1.2 Problem Statement

Despite the central role of French as an official language of instruction in the DRC, secondary school students, particularly in the 3rd literary section, encounter persistent difficulties in its academic use: grammatical, syntactic, lexical errors and textual inconsistencies are common (Malekani, 1987). In Ngaliema, teachers report frequent use of code-switching between French and Lingala, as well as structural transfers from local languages to French, effective in informal contexts but penalized in school evaluation (Blommaert, 2005; Kamwangamalu, 2012).

This problem is amplified by the ambiguity of the concept of "mother tongue" in urban areas: for many students, it is no longer the ancestral language but Lingala, the dominant language of

socialization and urban identity (Bokamba, 2008). Current teaching methods, rooted in a monolingual approach inherited from colonialism (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986), ignore these plurilingual realities, treating local languages as sources of error rather than cognitive assets (Cummins, 2000; Heugh, 2014). This leads to linguistic insecurity, decreased motivation and educational inequality, particularly in urban areas such as Ngaliema where linguistic diversity is a daily occurrence.

### 1.3 Objectives of the study

General objective: To analyze the linguistic use of students in the 3rd literary section in Ngaliema in a multilingual sociolinguistic context, taking into account the psychopedagogical dimensions.

Specific objectives:

- Define and examine the concept of mother tongue in the multilingual urban context of Ngaliema;
- Identify patterns of code-switching and linguistic interference in academic French production;
- Analyze the sociolinguistic factors influencing students' language use;
- To assess the adequacy of current teaching methods to plurilingual realities;
- Propose adapted pedagogical strategies to exploit multilingualism as a resource.

### 1.4 Research Hypotheses

1. Language interference from Lingala and other local languages significantly affects academic performance in French.
2. Code-switching is a frequent and largely unconscious strategy in oral and written communications.
3. The sociolinguistic profile of students strongly influences their mastery of academic French.
4. Current pedagogical practices do not adequately take into account the multilingual repertoires of learners.

### 1.5 Champ d'investigation

This research is mainly in the field of sociolinguistics, by studying language use in a specific school community (Fishman, 1991). It also integrates psycholinguistics to analyze attitudes and language acquisition, and applied linguistics to evaluate pedagogical practices (Baker, 2011). The interdisciplinary approach aims to provide empirical insights on plurilingual education in an African urban context.

## 2.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Multilingualism offers cognitive benefits, such as improved mental flexibility and increased metalinguistic awareness (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2011). However, in postcolonial African contexts, language policies often favour exogenous languages to the detriment of local ones,

leading to identity conflicts and educational challenges (Kamwangamalu, 2001; Albaugh, 2014).

In the DRC, Lingala has established itself as a lingua franca in Kinshasa, evolving from a colonial language of commerce to a marker of modern urban identity, with phenomena of hybridization (borrowings from French, code-mixing) (Bokamba, 2008; Nzoimbengene, 2015 in recent studies on urban Lingala). Code-switching, defined as the alternation between languages in the same utterance, is a common communicative strategy in multilingual environments, motivated by social, identity or cognitive factors (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Kamwangamalu, 2012). In education, it can facilitate understanding but generate interference if not supervised (Blommaert, 2005).

The literature review reveals a discrepancy: while general studies on multilingual education in Africa exist (Abdulaziz, 1970; Gorman, 1970; Heugh, 2014), few focus on Ngaliema or Kinshasa specifically. Malekani (1987; 2001) studied English language acquisition by plurilingual Congolese learners, highlighting similar interferences, but this study fills a gap by focusing on French and Lingala in an urban secondary context. Moreover, critical perspectives such as those of Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986) emphasize the need to "decolonize" educational linguistic practices in order to integrate African languages.

### 3.0 METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a mixed approach combining quantitative (descriptive statistics) and qualitative (thematic analysis) methods, for a holistic understanding of language patterns (Creswell, 2014). The quantitative data come from socio-psycholinguistic questionnaires administered to 500 students in the 3rd literary section, while the qualitative data come from semi-structured interviews with teachers and participant observations in class.

The selected schools are: Bobokoli Institute, Sainte Marie High School, EDAP/UPN, Reverend Samba Institute, Marcelin Mobateli Institute and 04 January School Complex. Statistical analyses were carried out with descriptive tools (frequencies, percentages), and thematic coded qualitative data to identify recurring patterns.

### 4.0 PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

This section presents the data collected, organized into tables followed by analytical comments. The results confirm the dominant role of Lingala and the impacts of multilingualism on academic French.

**Table 1: Languages Spoken by Learners**

Language	Number of Learners	Percentage (%)
Lingala	435	87.0
French	410	82.0
Kikongo	165	33.0
Kiswahili	120	24.0

Language	Number of Learners	Percentage (%)
Tshiluba	95	19.0
English	210	42.0

This table illustrates the predominance of Lingala as the language of daily communication, followed by French. English, a foreign language learned at school, is gaining presence under the influence of globalization (Kamwangamalu, 2003).

**Table 2: Learners’ Declared Mother Tongue**

Language	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Lingala	290	58.0
Kikongo	80	16.0
Tshiluba	65	13.0
Kiswahili	45	9.0
French	20	4.0
Total	500	100

More than half of the students declare Lingala as their mother tongue, highlighting its urban and functional evolution, regardless of ancestral origins (Bokamba, 2008).

**Table 3: Language Used by Learners in Different Contexts**

Context	French (%)	Lingala (%)	Local Language (%)
At home	28	54	18
With friends	15	70	15
In the classroom	82	12	6
On the playground	10	75	15

French dominates in the classroom, but Lingala prevails in informal contexts, creating cognitive pressure during academic transitions (Cummins, 2000).

**Table 4: Frequency of Code-Switching**

Frequency	Number of Learners	Percentage (%)
Very often	260	52.0
Often	145	29.0
Rarely	70	14.0
Never	25	5.0
Total	500	100

81% of students frequently practice code-switching, confirming its status as a systemic and unconscious strategy (Myers-Scotton, 1993).

**Table 5: Common Errors Identified in Learners' Written French**

Type of Error	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Verb conjugation	310	62.0
Sentence structure	285	57.0
Vocabulary misuse	260	52.0
Agreement (gender/number)	240	48.0
Coherence and cohesion	195	39.0

Grammatical and syntactic errors predominate, typical of the interference of Bantu languages such as Lingala (Malekani, 1987).

**Table 6: Teachers' Views on Causes of Language Difficulties**

Cause Identified	Teachers Agreeing (%)
Mother tongue interference	90
Excessive code-switching	85
Lack of exposure to French	80
Inadequate teaching materials	65
Overcrowded classrooms	70

Teachers mostly attribute the difficulties to interference and lack of exposure, reinforcing hypotheses (Kamwangamalu, 2012).

## 5.0 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The results indicate that Lingala functions as the dominant social and functional mother tongue for the majority of students, influencing their production in French through syntactic and lexical interference (borrowings or calques) (Bokamba, 2008; Malekani, 2001). Code-switching, observed in 81% of respondents, is not a sign of impairment but an adaptive strategy for negotiating meaning in a multilingual environment, as theorized by Myers-Scotton (1993) and Blommaert (2005). However, in an academic context, it leads to penalties, aggravating linguistic insecurity.

These difficulties do not stem from a lack of individual intelligence, but from a gap between monolingual pedagogical practices and urban sociolinguistic realities (Cummins, 2000; Heugh, 2014). For example, the functional separation of languages (French in the classroom vs. informal Lingala) creates a "cognitive divide" that students must bridge on their own, impacting their motivation and participation (UNESCO, 2003). In addition, the emergence of English (42% of students) reflects global trends, suggesting a move towards a broader plurilingualism including international languages (Kamwangamalu, 2003).

This study highlights the need to redefine the "mother tongue" in urban Africa: no longer ancestral, but dynamic and contextual, influencing identity and learning (May, 2012). Compared to similar contexts (e.g., Swahili in Tanzania, Abdulaziz, 1970), Ngaliema illustrates how urbanization accelerates the linguistic shift towards dominant lingua francas.

## 6.0 PSYCHOPEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The study highlights the need for a conscious plurilingual pedagogy, where local languages are integrated as resources rather than suppressed (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2011). Psych pedagogically, repressing mother tongues can increase insecurity and reduce participation, while an inclusive approach promotes trust and outcomes (UNESCO, 1953; Heugh, 2014). Strategies such as contrastive analysis (French vs. Lingala), explicit code-switching teaching, and bilingual scaffolding could mitigate interference and exploit plurilingual skills.

The implications extend to teacher training: integrating sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics into curricula to anticipate mistakes and promote a positive attitude towards multilingualism (Malekani, 2001; Kamwangamalu, 2012).

## 7.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 7.1 Conclusion

This study demonstrates that multilingualism is an integral feature of the linguistic reality of students in Ngaliema. Ignored, it becomes a source of academic difficulties; recognized, it can enrich learning. Lingala dominates as a functional mother tongue, profoundly influencing the use of French through code-switching and interference, while current, monolingual pedagogical practices aggravate this gap (Cummins, 2000; Bokamba, 2008). Rethinking language education by integrating plurilingual repertoires is essential for an inclusive and effective school in a Congolese urban context, thus contributing to the decolonization of educational practices (Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 1986; May, 2012).

### 7.2 Recommendations

**Students:** Develop a metalinguistic awareness to distinguish between informal and academic registers; practice French outside the classroom via reading, debates and writing; strategically use mother tongues to translate or compare structures. Form structured French study groups to build confidence.

**Teachers:** Take training in plurilingual pedagogy to anticipate interference; teach French-Lingala contrastive analysis; create an inclusive environment where code-switching is a transitory, unpunished tool; use progress-oriented formative assessments.

**To school administrators:** Adopt school policies that recognize multilingualism; organize training workshops; enrich libraries with adapted French materials; promote language clubs and writing workshops.

**To government decision-makers:** Develop multilingual policies that integrate national languages; revise curricula to include language awareness and code-switching; invest in local teaching materials; support research on urban language use.

## 8.0 APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: SOCIO-PSYCHOLINGUISTIC QUESTIONNAIRE (LEARNERS)

Sex:  Male  Female Age: \_\_\_\_\_ School: \_\_\_\_\_ Languages you speak: \_\_\_\_\_  
Language spoken most at home: \_\_\_\_\_ Language used with friends: \_\_\_\_\_  
What is your mother tongue? \_\_\_\_\_ Do you mix languages when speaking?  Yes  No  
Do you mix languages when writing?  Yes  No Which language is most difficult at school? \_\_\_\_\_

### APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR TEACHERS

What languages do your students use most frequently? Do you observe code-switching in class? What types of errors are most common in students' written work? Do teaching materials reflect learners' linguistic realities? What strategies do you use to address language interference?

### APPENDIX C: CLASSROOM OBSERVATION GRID

Item Observed | Yes | No | Remarks Use of French only |  |  | Code-switching observed |  |  | Student participation |  |  | Teacher corrective feedback |  |  |

### APPENDIX D: LIST OF SCHOOLS STUDIED

Bobokoli Institute Lycée Sainte Marie EDAP/UPN Institut Révérend Samba Institut Marcelin Mobateli School Complex 04 January

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