

Bantu Forensic Lexicography: a Kikongo case study

Jasper DE KIND, Gilles-Maurice DE SCHRYVER & Koen BOSTOEN

KongoKing Research Group, Department of Languages and Cultures, Ghent University

In this paper, the oldest Bantu dictionary hitherto known is explored, that is the *Vocabularium Latinum, Hispanicum, e Congense*, handed down to us through a manuscript from 1652 by the Flemish Capuchin friar Joris van Gheel, missionary in the Kongo (present-day north-western Angola and the southern part of the Lower Congo Province of the DRC). The date of this dictionary implies that Bantu lexicography is much older than has been generally accepted. Benson (1964) stated that it was only a century old, and nowadays, Bantu lexicography still seems to be considered only 150 years old. The *Vocabularium Congense* pushes this date back to 360 years ago.

The dictionary was compiled at the Capuchin Mission in northern Angola in the 17th century, and although the handwriting is clearly Van Gheel's, it is most likely that the Flemish priest copied it from another Capuchin. Moreover, it is very probable that the vocabulary list was compiled with the aid of a native speaker of Kikongo, namely Manuel Roboredo, a Kongolese Capuchin. The precise dialect that is described in the dictionary cannot yet be pinpointed with sufficient linguistic evidence, but as we show in this paper, it is very likely the Kisikongo variant spoken in the vicinity of Mbanza Kongo, the former capital of the Kongo Kingdom. Since this handwritten manuscript is hard to read, Joseph Van Wing and Constant Penders, two Belgian Jesuits, reworked the text in 1928, producing a decidedly more user-friendly version. However, considerable changes were executed with respect to the original manuscript. First, they changed the translation direction, from Latin/Spanish => Kikongo, to Kikongo => French/Flemish, replacing the Latin/Spanish with French/Flemish. Second, they adjusted the Kikongo orthography used in the original to the modern (i.e. early 20th century) orthography. As a consequence, the phonological changes Kikongo underwent from the 17th to the 20th century were completely obscured. Moreover, they suppressed all diacritic marks, of which the precise meaning has not yet been retraced. In other words, this paper argues that the dictionary Van Wing and Penders compiled does not reflect the Kikongo variant spoken in the 17th century, but should be considered a new dictionary, reflecting the early 20th century dialect.

The original manuscript is highly interesting in a variety of ways. Through a comparison with later sources, it allows for the study of the phonological and morphological changes the Kikongo dialect underwent from the 17th century onwards, and it reveals how the Capuchin missionaries compiled their vocabulary lists. The *Vocabularium Congense* — and the vocabulary list(s) it was copied from — are likely based on a Latin => Spanish dictionary of Antonio de Nebrija. This inevitably implies that Kikongo equivalents were sought for each Latin lemma, regardless of the absence of these concepts in the Kongo language. As a result, the need for neologisms was high. Various techniques were used, such as extending meanings of existing Kikongo concepts, the use of paraphrases and also, unsurprisingly, the frequent use of loanwords. On the other hand, misnamings also occur, as European concepts were wrongly attributed to existing Kikongo terms. For instance, the European concept of 'wolf' was designated with the Kikongo term for 'hyena'. This requires one to tread with caution when using the manuscript for yet another interesting linguistic/historical discipline, namely the 'Words-and-Things Method', by which a population's history is reconstructed through their language (and more specifically their lexicon).

The lexicographical structures of both dictionaries – Van Gheel’s (1652) manuscript, and Van Wing and Penders’ (1928) reworking of it – have been studied in detail. When contemplating the re-edition of 1928, one notices an advanced lexicographical structure, complete with combinatory aspects, example slots, as well grammatical notes. The Kikongo lemmata are thus often provided with extra information on their use and meaning. This material cannot always be traced back to the original manuscript of 1652, where the structure is also more linear. Occasionally the Capuchins did provide extra information (in Latin), over and above mere translation equivalents, but overall it seems as if Van Wing and Penders truly added material. A comparison of the two works also reveals that both convergence as well as divergence were employed in reversing out the data, in addition to ‘nonvergence’. These features will be amply illustrated during the presentation.

Currently, both the original manuscript and the re-edition are being digitized, linked and added to an interlingual and multimedia database that revolves around Kikongo and the early history of the Kongo kingdom. As such, it will be used (amongst others) to study Kikongo language change and the history of its speakers.

References:

- Benson, T.G. 1964. A Century of Bantu Lexicography. *African Language Studies* 5: 64-91.
Van Gheel, J. 1652. *Vocabularium Latinum, Hispanicum, e Congense*. Manuscript kept in the National Central Library of Rome: Fondo Minori 1896, MS Varia 274.
Van Wing, J. and C. Penders. 1928. *Le plus ancien dictionnaire bantu / Het oudste Bantu-woordenboek. Vocabularium P. Georgii Gelensis*. Louvain: J. Kuyl-Otto.