

The Oldest Bantu Dictionary: Digitalization and Future Historical Research on Kikongo

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1. Background

- 1483: first contacts between the Kongo Kingdom and European travellers
- 1651-1652: Latin to Spanish and Kikongo dictionary by the Flemish Capuchin Joris van Gheel (cf. Nsondé 1995)
- 1928: Re-edition by the Belgian Jesuits Joseph van Wing and C. Penders

2. Van Gheel, the real author?

- D'Alençon (1914): Van Gheel **copied** (for his own use) **from another dictionary**. His stay was too short to acquire sufficient knowledge to write the dictionary on his own (June 1651 – December 1652) (cited in Van Wing & Penders 1928: xxvi).
- Van Wing & Penders (1928): consider **van Gheel** to be the real author, albeit **with** the help of a **Congolese interpreter**.
- Thornton (2011): emphasis on the **role of Roboredo**, a Congolese priest who assisted the Capuchins in their language endeavours. Van Gheel very likely copied from an older dictionary or vocabulary list, compiled by or with the aid of Roboredo.



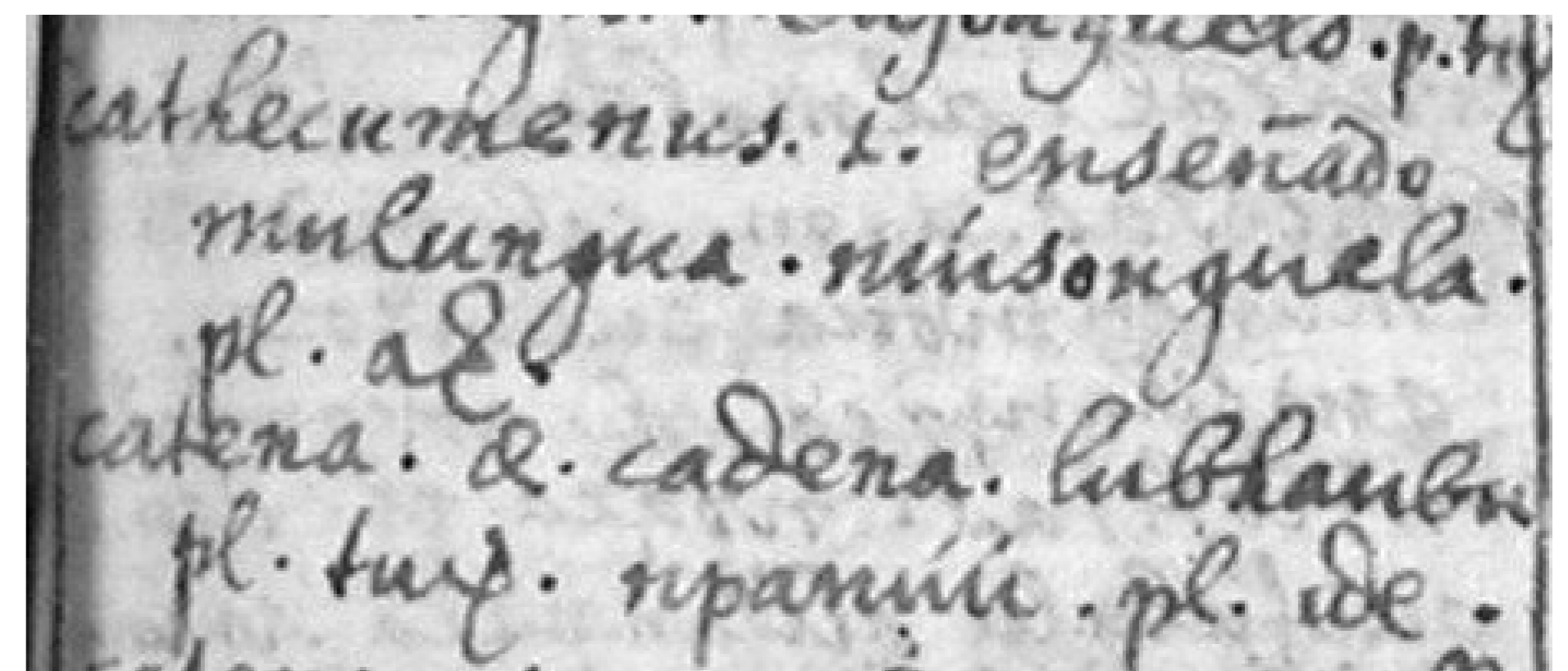
Figure 1: Map of the Kongo Kingdom



3. Compilation Method of the Capuchins

- Bontinck (1976): dictionary is based on a popular Latin to Spanish dictionary which was brought earlier to Kongo by the Capuchins.
- Roboredo provided the Kikongo equivalents, often resorting to extending existing meanings to convey the foreign (Latin) concepts, e.g. under **cathecumenus**:

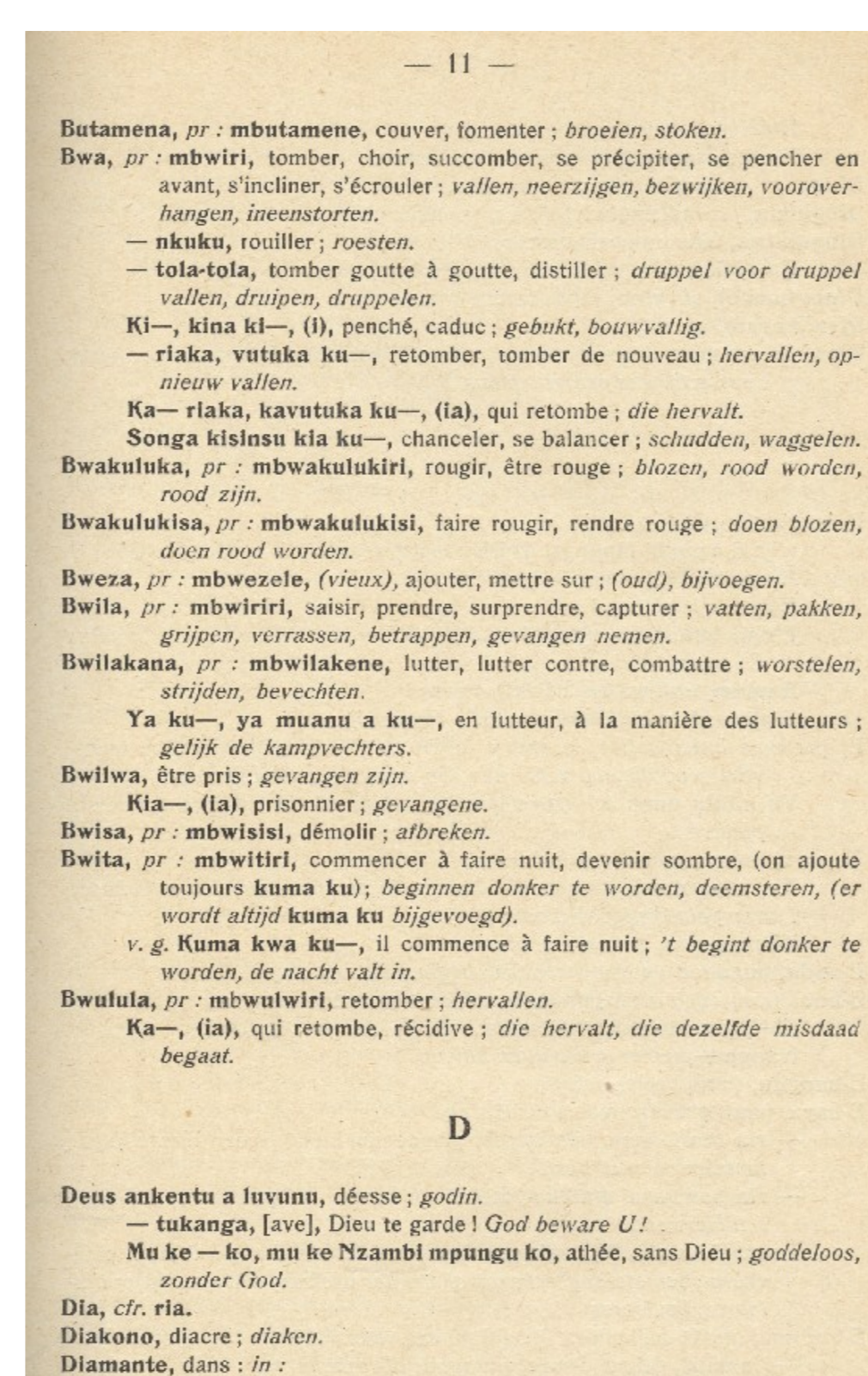
cathecumenus. i. enseñado.
mulungua. músonguela.
pl. a&.
catena. a. cadena. lubhanbu
pl. tu&. npanúú. pl. ide.



Figures 2 & 3: Pages and extract from the original dictionary

4. Modernization process of Van Wing & Penders

- Removal of the Latin and Spanish; replaced by French and Flemish
- Direction changed, from: **Latin > Spanish/Kikongo** to: **Kikongo > French/Flemish**
- Adjustment of the original (Portuguese-inspired) orthography to the 'modern' (1928) orthography of Kikongo => **phonetics/phonology obscured**
- Orthography changes not always systematic: b > b, bh > v but sometimes also bh > b
- Sound changes not immediately historically explainable: p + a > bh + a or b + a



(1) *páan-	>	- bhan-	>	- vaan-	'give'
*pàc-	>	- bác-	>	- bas-	'split'
*páng-	>	- bhang-	>	- yang-	'act, execute'
*páapat-	>	- bá?-	>	- babat-	'touch'
*pátà	>	- bhata	>	- vata	'village'
(2) *pí-	>	- bhi-	>	- vi-	'burn'
*pia	>	- bhia	>	- via	'field'
*pikà	>	- bhika	>	- bika	'slave'

Figure 3: Page from Van Wing & Penders (1928)

5. Potential for further research

- The digitalization of this dictionary will allow **diachronic research** on the Kongo languages
- Research on **phonetics/phonology** and sound correspondences
- **Lexical research**, e.g. the Words-and-Things method
- The sermon accompanying the dictionary provides a full text of the Kongo language of the 17th century and will be useful for **morphological, syntactic and pragmatic** linguistic research

References

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 Nsondé, Jean de Dieu. 1995. *Langues, Culture et Histoire Kongo aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles. A travers les document linguistiques*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
 Thornton, John. 2011. Roboredo, Kikongo Sermon. Available at: <http://www.bu.edu/afam/faculty/john-thornton/roboredo-kikongo-sermon> [Accessed on 27 Nov 2011]
 TLex. 2010. *TLex Suite: Dictionary Production Software*. <http://tshwanedje.com/tshwanelex/> [Accessed on 27 Nov 2011]
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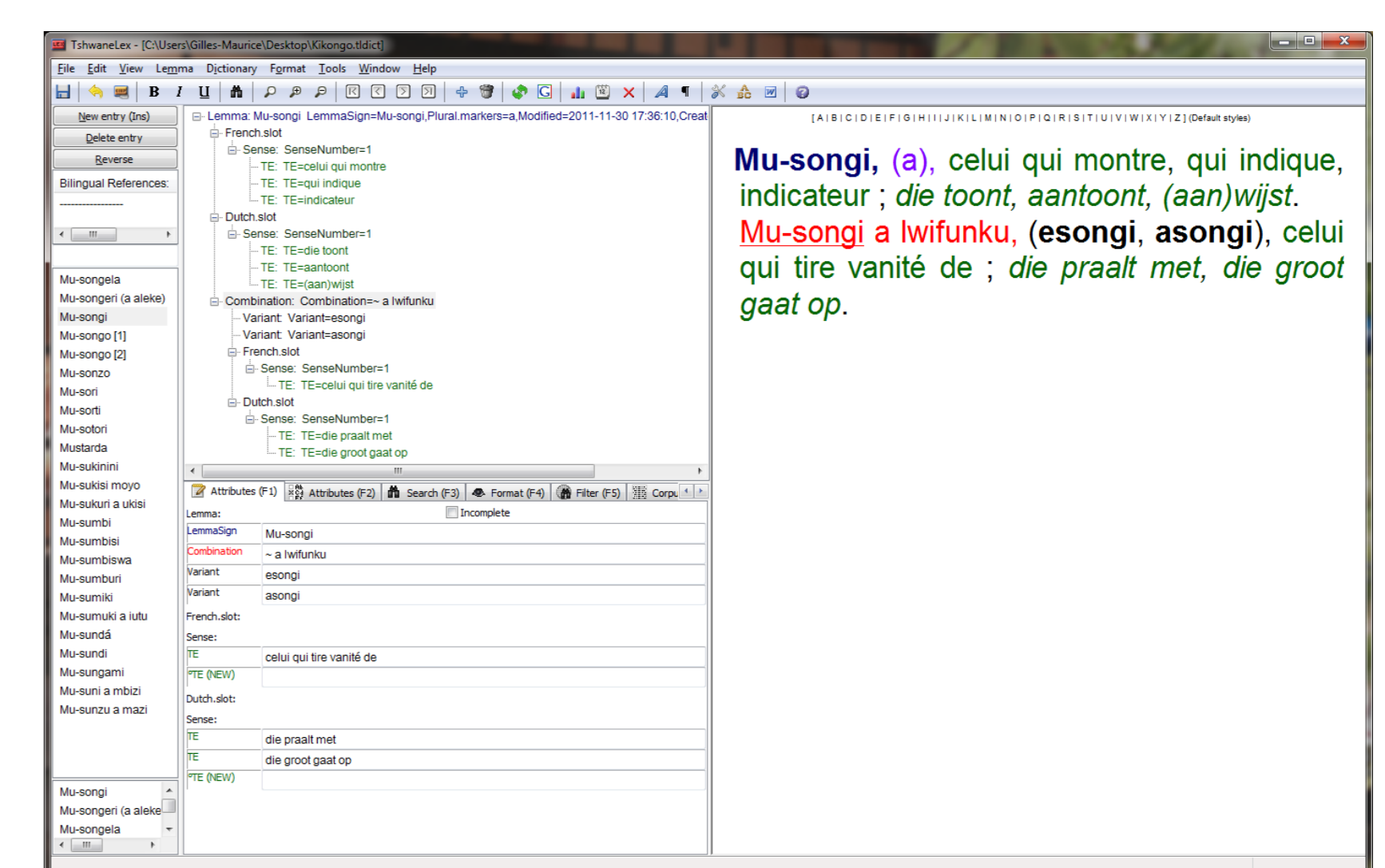


Figure 4: Digitalized dictionary, in TLex