

Missionary handbooks of African languages during the colonial period: between descriptive and practical appropriation

Cécile Van den Avenne

Ecole Normale Supérieure de Lyon

cecile.vandenavenne@ens-lyon.fr

Most of the first linguistic works describing African languages throughout the 19th century are dictionaries and handbooks, that is books with a peculiar status, as their aim is not purely descriptive but is also a didactic one: they propose a learning method.

Those African languages handbooks were written down by missionaries (destined for European missionary colleagues, and, potentially, for recent indigenous converts), but also by militaries and colonial civil administrators; engaged in the colonial conquest, their handbooks were destined for the militaries, traders, and European administrators. Those handbooks are a mixed genre, combining grammatical description, translation exercises, words lists, dictionaries, and a collection of proverbs and tales. In addition, they very often give a description of the language as part of an ethnographical or anthropological-type discourse (whether in a preface, an introduction, or throughout the text). Most of those handbooks (especially the pocket handbooks) are presented as works for the general public, very much simplified, which can be seen as problematic if we consider the fact that, at the time of their publication, the description and graphisation of the described languages were far from being stabilised.

I will focus for this presentation on *Bamanan* (a Western African language) handbooks written down by Spiritains and White Fathers, but also, as a counterpoint, by militaries and civil servants, at the end of the 19th century and beginning of 20th century.

Very early on, the *ad hoc* use of Bamanan as a vehicular language gave it a status not shared by other languages of Western Africa, and this was accompanied by the production of linguistic written works, some of which we can postulate worked towards reinforcing the vehicular status of the language.

Studying those handbooks, the goal is to account for a kind of practical appropriation of African languages during the colonial period. To describe these texts, I put into practice a theoretical and methodological approach resulting from a critical discourse analysis, attempting to link the different levels of analysis, these being: the material description of the textual organisation; the social conditions of the production of these texts, as well as the way in which these texts may dialogue between themselves or with others. As the anthropologist Joseph Errington has pointed it out, the texts of colonial linguistic description present a type of challenge to the reader due to their opacity: indeed, the work, consisting of describing the

languages, requires a commitment to “*close engagements with complex intimacies of talk*”¹, though the resulting texts generally smooth over completely their material conditions of production and stay far from actual real-life realities. Therefore, giving back the depth of these texts is an important issue at stake, in order to understand the conditions in which they were produced and the specific intercultural interactions which underlie them.

Corpus

Binger G. (1886) *Essai sur la langue bambara parlée dans le Kaarta et dans le Bélé Dougou ; suivi d'un vocabulaire, avec une carte indiquant les contrées où se parle cette langue*, Paris, Maisonneuve frères et C. Leclerc.

Ferrage P. M. (1918) *Petit manuel français-bambara à l'usage de Troupes Noires*, Paris, Imprimerie-librairie militaire L. Fournier.

Montel R.P.E. (1887) *Eléments de la grammaire bambara avec exercices appropriés, suivis d'un dictionnaire bambara-français*, Saint-Joseph de Ngasobil, Imprimerie de la mission.

Sauvant R.P. E.F. (1905) *Manuel de la langue bambara*, Maison Carrée, Alger, Mission d'Afrique des Pères Blancs.

Travele M. (1910) *Petit manuel français-bambara*, Paris, P. Geuthner.

¹ Errington J. (2008) *Linguistics in a Colonial World. A story of Language, Meaning, and Power*, Blackwell Publishing, p.3.