CULTURE & LANGUAGE

Lingala is a Central Bantu language that belongs to the largest African languages phylum: the Niger-Congo. It is one of an estimated five hundred Bantu languages (along with Chichona, Gikuyu, Kikamba, Kikongo, Kiswahili, isiZulu, Setswana, and isiXhosa) that are spoken in much of Sub-Saharan Africa from the Cameroon all the way to the Republic of South Africa.

Lingala, like any other lingua franca or Language of Wider Communication, has several dialects or varieties. However, a mastery of Standard Lingala facilitates the learning of the other dialects through contact with their speakers under immersion.

Lingala originally emerged among the tradesmen and riverine people of Mongala, Ngiri, and the Ubangi rivers who sailed these rivers by wooden canoes, known as bwato in Lingala, before and after colonization to sell their agricultural and fishing products all the way to the Congo River as far as Kinshasa and Kisangani. These Bangala or Lingala-speaking people as they came to be called, are known for their navigational expertise and prowess in fishing and handling of the swift currents of the Congo River and its tributaries on these bwato. They used these vessels to travel incredibly long distances for weeks and sometimes months not only to fish and sell their catch, but also to sell two of the agricultural products for which they are famous: palm oil and palm wine. While there are core beliefs that many of them share, there is no typical Lingala culture; instead, there are Bangala sub-cultures. These are reflected in the Congolese music and dances—the dominant form of entertainment in the region.

By all indications, Lingala is poised to become the link language of Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa during the next decades. Currently it is viewed as the de facto “national language” of DRC and Congo-Brazzaville, as it is spoken and heard by much of their estimated 58 plus million inhabitants. The possibility of its achieving the “super-lingua franca” status in the region is largely contingent on the socio-economic development of DRC.

STUDYING LINGALA IN THE U.S.

Below is a list of some of the universities in the United States that currently offer Lingala. For more information, please contact the National African Language Resource Center, or check the NALRC website, located at http://african.lss.wisc.edu/nalrc.

Boston University
Michigan State University
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

NATIONAL AFRICAN LANGUAGE RESOURCE CENTER (NALRC)

4231 Humanities Building, 455 N. Park Street
University of Wisconsin-Madison
Madison, WI 53706
Phone: (608) 265-7905 Fax: (608) 265-7904
Email: nalrc@mhub.facstaff.wisc.edu
Website: http://african.lss.wisc.edu/nalrc
WHO SPEAKS LINGALA?

People and History

Lingala is spoken as a first, second, and third language primarily in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), and in parts of five neighboring central African states: Northwestern Angola, eastern Gabon, southern Central African Republic, and southwestern Sudan. The estimated number of speakers ranges from twenty to twenty five million.

Lingala serves as one of the four national languages of inter-ethnic and inter-regional communication in a highly multilingual country. Lingala and its national counterparts (i.e., Kikongo, Kiswahili, and Tshiluba) are each used by about 25 - 38% of the population of DRC. The same situation holds true in Congo-Brazzaville where Lingala and Kikongo serve as national languages, with French as the official language.

In DRC Lingala functions as the dominant lingua franca in four and a half of the eleven provinces. In Congo-Brazzaville, it is the dominant lingua franca in its three major cities. Lingala’s popularity in this Congo River basin has made it the lingua franca of trade on the Congo River and its main tributaries, and is complemented by what is generally acclaimed as Africa’s greatest dance music: the Congolese music known variously as “Soukous” (Sukusu in Lingala), and Congolese rumba music.

As Gerald Seligman noted recently: “No music in Africa matches Soukous for its importance, its popularity and its reach. Whether called Congolese or rumba music, it [has] influenced the music of nearly all the countries surrounding it—[Congo-Brazzaville], Kenya, Tanzania, the Central African Republic, Zambia—and [has] even reached countries as far off as Zimbabwe and South Africa (in Mondo Soukous, 2001).”

It is this music and the other common agents of language spread (i.e., trade, colonization, religion, armed forces, education, administration, and urbanization) that have facilitated and privileged the rapid expansion of Lingala in the two Congos and beyond. This expansion and reputation will undoubtedly continue in the future, especially when DRC’s economic and political situations are stabilized, and its immense natural and human resources are fully developed and utilized.

WHY STUDY LINGALA?

Lingala is undoubtedly the most important and influential language among those that are recognized as national languages in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville). In DRC Lingala is one of four national languages (i.e., Kikongo, Kiswahili, and Tshiluba) that serve as lingua franca in selected public sectors: education, administration, judiciary, radio and TV broadcasting, and health services. In Congo-Brazzaville Lingala and Kikongo serve as national languages. In both countries French functions as the official language in administration, education, and international communication; but Lingala is the dominant trade language along the mighty Congo River (the second largest river in the world after the Amazon) and its major tributaries (e.g., Ubangi, Mongala, Lomami, Kwa, Tshuapa, and Lulonga). With the prospect for peace and socio-economic development in DRC, and its emergence as the leading economic powerhouse in Africa, Lingala will likely become the quintessential lingua franca of Central, eastern, and southern Africa.

A knowledge of Lingala in the near future provides multiple benefits to this African sub-region: it permits the learner to earn academic credit to satisfy a foreign language requirement; it offers access to research, business, and tourism in Central Africa; it enhances her/his appreciation of Congolese-Africa’s greatest dance—music; and it exposes her/him to the rich Lingala cultures embodied in its music and orature. In the distant future, the acquisition of Lingala will open up a rich frontier of linguistic, cultural, and communicative opportunities in the magnificent heart of Africa that contains incredibly immense natural and human resources and an incomparable ecological system.

Congolese teenagers in a variety of attires in Mbinza, Kinshasa

A Congolese woman performing one of the Congolese popular dances, the murwathi

A Bangala family making fishing traps for shallow waters

A Bangala family en route to an extended fishing stay on the Ngiri River