

Frenchification : Construction and Deconstruction

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Abstract. This paper explores the process of frenchification of Bantu names in the Republic of Congo. The research is documented with the data collected from the Congolese regions and in the city of Brazzaville from 2019 to 2024. Applying a contextual and structural approach, the study reveals that the frenchification is predictable. The frenchified Bantu names can be unfrenchified through a reversal mechanism. The paper calls for linguistic consciousness, by denouncing the speaker's responsibility in the distortion of Bantu names. At length, frenchification can be deconstructed. In this framework, the present paper is conceived as a contribution to the existing research projects on preserving African socio-cultural resources in general, the Congolese in particular.

Key-words: frenchification, assimilation, vernacular language, vehicular language, alteration.

Résumé. Cet article explore le processus de francisation des noms bantous en République du Congo. La recherche est documentée avec les données collectées dans les régions congolaises et dans la ville de Brazzaville de 2019 à 2024. En appliquant une approche contextuelle et structurelle, l'étude révèle que la francisation est prévisible. Les noms bantous francisés peuvent être défrancisés grâce à un mécanisme d'inversion. Ce travail appelle à une conscience linguistique, en dénonçant la responsabilité des locuteurs dans la déformation des noms bantous. Enfin, la francisation peut être déconstruite. Dans ce cadre, le présent article est conçu comme une contribution aux projets de recherche existants sur la préservation des ressources socioculturelles africaines en général, congolaises en particulier.

Mots-clés : Francisation, assimilation, langue vernaculaire, langue véhiculaire, altération.

Introduction

This investigation is a logical continuation of the exploration in the process of frenchification of Bantu names in the Republic of Congo. The quest began with two papers, one of which is entitled “Frenchification of Ngungwel proper names” published previously (A. Ngalouo-Antso, 2018). The other being published has substantiated the unpublished communication bearing on “The Frenchification of Streets and Public Landmarks Names” presented recently at the joint 33rd West African Linguistic Congress (WALC) and 29th Congress of the Federation for Modern Languages and Literatures (FILLM) held from October 23-26, 2023 at the University of Ghana, Legon.

The first article shows up how the orthography of Ngungwel (B.72) names is distorted under the influence of the French language. Likewise, the second paper deepens the study to the streets and landmarks names on the signs of the city of Brazzaville. Based on the samples resourced from the Congolese ethnic and national languages, both investigations unveil the covert aspects of the frenchification process, meaning how it works and its predictability or unpredictability. With the same spirit, the present paper aims study frenchification as a linguistic theory. In addition, it is led by the thought that a frenchified Bantu name can also be ‘unfrenchified’ by a reversible mechanism. The issues postulated to be the potential foundation of frenchification as a linguistic theory will be discussed. These include: linguistic consciousness, assimilation, substitution, pre-nasalisation and homophones.

The approach used in this research is contextual and structural. In addition to the data collected previously in 2018, the investigation is documented with a corpus of personal, streets and landmarks names gathered randomly in Brazzaville in September 2024.

1. Operational definitions

Frenchification and Linguistic consciousness are theoretically the main concepts around which this investigation is built up.

1.1. Frenchification

First of all, the noun “frenchification” derived from the verb “frenchify”, meaning to give something or someone a French shape or character. The missionaries who shouldered the responsibility to convert the Amerindians in the 17th century New France took “Christianization” and frenchification as alike. Moreover, L. Campeau (1967, p.4-8) writes: *the savages could readily be civilized and frenchified and that with the French language they would soon acquire a French heart and spirit.*

Two centuries later, the term frenchification was used in Belgium as the influence of French to the detriment of Dutch. In this line of thought J. Treffers-Daller (2002, p. 50) posits:

after Belgium became independent in 1830, Dutch continuously lost ground in Brussels, as a result of a process of language shift towards French, generally known under the term Frenchification.

Following McRae (1986, p. 25) cited in J. Treffers-Daller (2002), two main factors have entailed Frenchification: the influence of French as the only official language of the country until 1898, and the international prestige of the French language. I will address frenchification as ideological and linguistic phenomenon. Having scrutinized the term frenchification, now I embark upon linguistic consciousness.

1.2. Linguistic consciousness

M. Kysylbaikova et al (2022, p. 4) consider linguistic consciousness as:

a set of conceptual, perceptual, and procedural knowledge of a representative of a certain linguoculture about the objects of the surrounding world or as a union of images of consciousness realized through various linguistic means (words, free and stable phrases, associations, etc.).

This implies the distinction of one language in its complexity including the related ethnographic and extra linguistic constraints from another. For, T. Kots' et al (2022, p. 837), *linguistic consciousness refers to the outcomes of mental activity, perception and assimilation of information verbalized by means of the national language*. Furthermore, the author mentions the reflection as being the key concept embedded in the many definitions of linguistic consciousness. *The reflection involves the attitude of the subject to the object: the subject enters the picture of the world as an observer, which records the space, time and other characteristics of the object and gives them a subjective assessment*.

Adhering to the ideas of the aforementioned authors, I will address the term linguistic consciousness as the speaker's responsibility to preserve his native language, a sociocultural value, in the same way anyone would value his genetic code.

2. An ethnographic Background

The Republic of Congo is located in the heart of Central Africa. It covers an area of 342,000 square km, and stretches northwest from the coast line in the southwest to the dense equatorial forest bordering, respectively, the Central African Republic and Cameroon in the North, the Democratic Republic of Congo in the East, Gabon in the West and Cabinda (Angola) in the southwest. The Republic of Congo is basically an agricultural country with two major seasons: the rainy season (September-May) and the dry season (June-September). During these people the Congolese carry out various activities including subsistence farming, hunting and fishing. According to the recent census carried out in 2024, the Republic of Congo has a population of 6, 180 641 inhabitants.

Historical sources reveal that the Téké were organized in a kingdom long before the white man's arrival in their territory. The Téké kingdom was also known as Tio kingdom of Anzico. As J. P. Nkara (2007, p. 28) points out: "the Tio kingdom was a northern neighbour to the Koongo dia Ntotela kingdom with which it had numerous relations". The Tio kingdom covered the area within which Téké is used as a native language in central Africa. It runs from Eastern Gabon to the Democratic Republic of Congo, more specifically, from the upper Ogoue River in Gabon to Bolobo (on the left bank of the Congo River in the Democratic Republic of Congo). In Congo Brazzaville specifically, this area corresponds to the following present-day regions: Plateaux, Pool, Bouenza, Lekoumou, Niari, and Cuvette - Ouest. According to A. Ndinga-Mbo (1984, p. 36), from the third century to the sixteenth century, this kingdom emerged, until the Atlantic slave trade, and the dramatic colonization that Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza (1852-1905) started at the end of the nineteenth century through his journeys in Téké country (Ogwe, Alima, Mfwa...) and by a treaty signed with king Iloo on October 3rd, 1880. That treaty conferred to the Congolese territory the status of a French colony. The date of birth of the Bazzaville, the Capital city of the Republic of Congo is October 3rd, 1881. In 1891 Congo became was one of the four members of the French Equatorial Africa.

The Congo has 12 main Bantu ethnic groups: Koongo, Teke, Tsaangi, Punu, Mbosi, Mbete, Kota, Bongili, Makaa, Kaka Bobangi and Fang; and three non-Bantu ethnic groups: Gbaya, Banda and Ngbaka. With more than 40 vernacular languages, and three vehicular languages: monokotuba, Lingala and Sango (A. Jacquot, 1971; G.N. Kouarata et al; O. Massoumou, [online, accessed December 29th, 2025]). Lingala and a Munukutuba are both national languages, French being the official language.

France imposed the teaching of French in the Congo as in all of French Equatorial Africa in accordance with the application of the decree of the Governor General of French Equatorial Africa, Victor Augagneur, signed on December 28, 1920th. The decree reads: *no school will be authorized if teaching is not given in French. The teaching of any other language is prohibited.* In other words, the French language was the only one used in schools and teachers were forbidden to use the country's languages with their pupils. The investigation conducted by O. Massoumou (online, p.256) reveals that French appears to be the written language for 88.08% of the population surveyed (318/361). Lingala is the second written language after French. In fact, 3.32% of the populations involved in the survey say they write this language. Subsequently, foreign languages are written. According to the author, *if French occupies a predominant position in writing, this is not the case when it comes to speaking. It comes in third position after Kituba (25.20%) and Lingala (22.99%). French is used orally by 78/361 people surveyed (21.60%).* The ethnographic background will certainly shed light on the Frenchification of the Bantu names in the Republic of Congo. Prior to that, I shift first to methodology.

3. Methodology

This descriptive study comprises two main components: construction of frenchification as a linguistic theory and its deconstruction. Consistent with the contextual and structural approach, the analysis of Bantu names will include the denotative and connotative meaning, the internal structures as well as their syllabic structures.

4. Construction

The main distinctive features of frenchification consist of cross-vernacular languages assimilation, vernacular language-French alteration, and Vehicular language-French alteration.

4.1. Cross-vernacular languages assimilation

The term previously used to mean the cross-vernacular languages assimilation is indirect frenchification (A. Ngalouo-Antso, 2018). The alteration of the Bantu languages orthography observed here doesn't involve a direct interference of the French language. The local personnel of the colonial registry offices merely assimilated the local names from one vernacular language to their native languages. In such a practice, no attention is neither paid to the bearer's ethnic group, nor is the assimilated name always a perfect translational equivalent of the source. The examples below illustrate the assimilation of *Ngungwel* (B72) names by *Embosi* (C25).

Table 1: Assimilation of *Ngungwel* personal names by *Embosi*

	<i>Engungwel</i> (B72)		Frenchification	<i>Embosi</i> (C25)
	Name	meaning		
1.	<i>Obōm</i> <i>O-bōm</i> V-CVC	Killing	Obami O-ba- mi V-CV-CV	<i>Obambi</i> <i>O-Ba-mbi</i> V-CV-CCV
2.	<i>Eba</i> /E-ba/ V-CV	Jealousy	Ebata /E-ba-ta/ V-CV-CV	<i>Ibara</i> /I-ba-ra/ V-CV-CV
3.	<i>Nduṅa</i> /Ndu - ṅa/ CCV - CV	The best friend is an animal	Ndouniama /Ndu-nia- ma / CCV-CVV-CV	<i>Ndoniama</i> /Ndo - nia - ma/ CCV- CVV- CV
4.	<i>Ngampru</i> /Nga mpru/ CCV- CCCV	The tombs guardian	Nga-mpourou /ṅga - mpu - ru/ CCV- CCV- CV	<i>Nga-mpo-ro</i> /ṅga - mpo - ro/ CCV- CCV- CV
6.	<i>Osob</i> /O - sob/ V- CVC	Incantation	Ossibi /O - si - bi/ V - CV- CV	<i>O-se-bi</i> /o-se-bi/ <i>O- se - bi</i> V- CV- CV
7.	<i>Ngwel</i>	The small carp	Ngouélé	<i>Ngolo</i>

	/ŋgwél/ CCCVC		/ŋgwe – le / CCVV - CV	/ŋgo - lo/ CCV- CV
8.	<i>Ondia</i> /O- ndya/ V- CCVV	The White man	Ondiala /Ō- ndja – la / V- CCCV- CV	<i>Ondélé/ O-nde-le/</i> <i>O-nde-le</i> V-CCV- CV
9.	<i>Ngokob</i> /ŋgo- kɔb / CCV- CVC	The cashier	Ngobaka /ŋgo – ka – ba / CCV- CV- CV	<i>Ngokaba</i> <i>ŋgo – ka – ba /</i> CCV- CV- CV

The frenchification of *Ngungwel* (B.72) names consists in expanding their syllabic structures with one more syllable at the end (in bold). The frenchified names have the same length as *Embosi* names; they share the same syllabic structure. The occurrence of the pre-nasal consonants in the orthography of the frenchified names is particular to cross-vernacular languages assimilation. Actually, pre-nasalisation doesn't exist in the Germanic languages system including French as discussed in the next subsection.

4.2. Vernacular language – French alteration

In this type of alteration the orthography of Bantu names is distorted as a result of the contact between the French native speakers and the Bantu vernacular languages. The main features of the vernacular languages-French alteration are pre-nasalisation, substitution and the repetition of consonants.

4.2.1. Prenasalisation

Prenasalisation of a plosive or fricative consonant is a phonetic phenomenon which modifies a consonant by preceding it with a nasal consonant while creating a single phonological consonant. Thus, the sounds/ mb/, /nt/, and /mv/ stem from nasalisation. The investigation reveals that the Bantu prenasalised consonants are either turned into oral consonants or split from the nasal in the pronunciation by the native French speakers. An oral consonant is a consonant whose resonance cavity is the mouth, that is to say the air flow flows only through the mouth. “Nkono”, the name of the former goal-keeper of the Cameroon's nation soccer team during the world cup in 1982 for instance, was spelled as “N’Kono” by the French sport columnists. The connotative meaning of “Nkono” is “Lucky, destined for greatness”. As illustrated in the table below, prenasalised consonants of Bantu names turn into oral in the frenchified spelling:

Table 2: The alteration of *Ngungwel* prenasalised consonants into oral consonants

	<i>Ngungwel</i> (B72)		Frenchification
10.	<i>Mfo</i>	confab	Fo
11.	<i>Mburangō</i>	The lit one	Bourangon
12.	<i>Mpompjē</i>	Land of cemeteries	Popien
13.	<i>Mpoabja</i>	Land of hatred	Poabiala
14.	<i>Ngelefru</i>	Ashes Goddess	Galefourou
15.	<i>Ngelele</i>	The wailing Goddess	Guélélé

16.	<i>Mbintsēn</i>	The reliable one	Bitséné
17.	<i>Mbukwe</i>	Ritual name	Bouloukouet
18.	<i>Ntsjēnantsjē</i>	The harming fishbone	Tsiélantsiéle

Having discussed prenasalisation, I shift now to substitution.

4.2.2. Substitution

The Bantu names undergo the substitution of the vowels “u” for “ou” and “ɔ” for “o” in their internal structures in the process of frenchification. Similarly, the prenasalised /ŋg/ is substituted in the Bantu names for “gu” in the frenchified orthography. The examples in the following Tables illustrate the mentioned substitutions.

Table 3: The substitution of the Ngungwel “u” for the French “ou”

	<i>Ngungwel</i>		Frenchification
19.	<i>Mbuu</i>	I Borrow	Boulou
20.	<i>Ngalu</i>	The miracle- worker	Galou
21.	<i>Mabru</i>	Blessed with fertility	Mabourou
22.	<i>Ombiambu</i>	Hating people	ombiambourou

Table 4 The substitution of the Lari “u” for the French “ou”

	<i>Lari</i>		Frenchification
23.	<i>Bayundula</i>	Educate	Bayoundoula
24.	<i>Lumbuzi</i>	A bitter plant	Loumbouzi
25.	<i>Luzolo</i>	Love	Louzolo

Table 5: The substitution of the Ngungwel “ɔ” for the French “o”

	<i>Ngungwel (B.72)</i>		Frenchification
26.	<i>Mbaangɔ</i>	Panther fire	bango
27.	<i>Lɔɔ</i>	The delay	Lô
28.	<i>Ntsɔb</i>	dig	Tsiba
29.	<i>Ntchɔ</i>	scorn	Ntcho
30.	<i>Ntchɔɔ</i>	research	Ntchô

Table 6: the substitution of the Lari Nge and Ngi for the French “gue” and “gui”

	<i>Lari</i>		Frenchification
31.	<i>Ngetubaka</i>	The warned one	Nguetoubaka
32.	<i>Madiengila</i>	A wandering man	Madiengouila
33.	<i>Mangitukulu</i>	astonishment	Manguitoukoulou
34.	<i>Mayinguidi</i>	The guilty one	

Now that the substitution of the Bantu vowels and segment has been examined, this subsection closes with the repetition of the consonants.

4.2.3. The repetition of consonants

Apart from the above-mentioned features, the repetition of the single “s” in the internal structure of a Bantu name in the frenchified spelling is one of the main aspects of frenchification. The table below provides some illustration in *Lari*.

Table 7 the repetition of the single “s” of *Lari* proper names in the frenchified orthography

	<i>Lari</i>		Frenchification
35.	<i>Masamba</i>	palaver	Massamba
36.	<i>Basila</i>	Serve them	Bassila
37.	<i>Kusangisa</i>	unity	Kussangissa
38.	<i>Nsonsisa</i>	hurting	Nsonsissa
29.	<i>Balosa</i>	The rejected one	Balossa
30.	<i>Kusadisa</i>	Make work	Koussadissa

The above illustrations reveal the nature of the *Lari* names: nouns, verbs and phrases.

4.3. Vehicular language-French alteration

Vehicular language-French alteration is an aspect of frenchification which consists in the frenchification of Bantu names from a vehicular language. As exemplified in the tables below, the words of the vehicular languages come from the assimilated vernacular languages. In other words, the Bantu names undergo the assimilation into *Lingala* or *munukutuba* before frenchification. The vehicular language alteration shares all the distinctive features of the studied other types of frenchification: the alteration of prenasalised consonants, substitution and the repetition of consonants. With time constraints, I will concentrate on the double expression of the plural as a particular feature of the vehicular language-French alteration. The analysis is based on the streets names: Bangangoulous and Babembés in Ouenzé (the 5th district); and Makouas in Poto-poto (The 3rd district)¹¹⁶ of Brazzaville.

4.3.1. The double expression of the plural

As already mentioned, the Bantu names have their singular and plural forms in the vernacular languages from which they derived. These forms alter when the names are assimilated by the vehicular languages and frenchified as elucidated in the table below.

Table 8: the double expression of the plural in Engungwel-French alteration

		<i>Engungwel</i>	<i>Lingala</i>	Frenchification
31	Singular	<i>O-ngungwel</i>	<i>Mongangulu</i>	Bangangoulou
32	Pural	<i>A-ngunwel</i>	<i>Bangangulu</i>	Bangangoulous

In this table the frenchified name **bangangoulous** exemplifies the double expression of the plural. The prefix *ba* is the plural marker in Engungwel so is the final mute “s” in

¹¹⁶ Cf. A. Ngalouo-Antso’s “Frenchification of streets and landmarks names”, n.d. 2024.

French. Embedded in the frenchification process here is also the substitution of “*u*” from the Bantu name for “*ou*” in the frenchified.

Table 9: the double expression of the plural in Akwa-French alteration

		Akwa (22)	Lingala	Frenchification
33.	Singular	Osi-akwa	momakwa	makoua
34.	Plural	Asi-akwa	Bamakwa	makouas

The frenchified name **makouas** takes a mute “*s*” at the end as would a French noun following the grammatical agreement rule. Importantly, one can notice the substitution of “*wa*” from the final syllable of **makwa** for “*oua*” in the frenchified word.

Table 10: the double expression of the plural in Beembe-French alteration

		KiBeembe(H11)	Munukutuba	Frenchification
35.	Singular	mubémbé	mubémbé	Béembé
36.	Plural	Babémbé	Babémbé	babémbés

In this Table the frenchified name is overloaded with the double expression of the plural. The prefix “*ba*” is the plural marker in Beembe as it is the case in Congolese as well as in many Bantu languages. The final mute “*s*” is the plural marker in the French language. This section closes and paves the way for the issue on the deconstruction.

5. Deconstruction

Frenchification is first and foremost an ideology, a metropolitan influence on the Africans. Paraphrasing E. Hobsbawm (2004, p. 4) I would say that any policy always finds the words for its expression. The Bantu should free their minds from the metropolitan domination in the same way, in years gone-by, they fought for the independences of their countries. It is in that context, as stated earlier, the Africans should be linguistically conscious. Today there are still people who mistakenly assume that their African names have French versions, meaning the frenchified are their names in French. That is an erroneous belief because frenchified names are merely homophones; they do belong neither to the Bantu lexicon nor to the Germanic. It is revealed in the light of the analysis that frenchification is a predictable process. Therefore through the reversal mechanism the frenchified names can be unfrenchified.

For instance, the initial oral plosives and the fricative like *f*, *v*, are often prenasalised in Congolese languages. The substitution is the reverse in Bantu languages; this suggests the vowels combination “*ou*” and “*oua*” in the internal structure of the Congolese names are to be substituted for *u* and *wa*. The final mute *s* doesn’t exist in Congolese languages; neither the consonants is doubled in the internal structure of Congolese names.

Besides, errors may occur in the unfrenchification process if the scholar is not a native speaker of the language he investigates in Chomskyan (1965) sense. Differentiating /*o*/from /*ɔ*/ in the frenchified word for instance, may seem unpredictable for a non- native.

Conclusion

At length, the discussion has revealed that the frenchification process is predictable and it can be deconstructed. Through the reversal mechanism, the frenchified names can be unfrenchified. To avoid errors in the unfrenchifying process the native speakers' linguistic competence is worth applying. The research calls for the Bantu and the Congolese's linguistic consciousness for language is the manifestation of our behavior. Their engagement will be an impulse to spare the Bantu names from distortions and the linguistic landscapes of the Congolese and African cities from showing the visual representations which are devoid of sense. The decision-maker the area linguistic policy should do everything in their power so that the teaching of African languages be inserted in the curricula from primary school to university. In this framework, the present paper is conceived as a contribution to the existing research projects on preserving African socio-cultural resources in general, the Congolese in particular.

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