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On the development of tense-aspect markers in Lingala youth language: a microvariationist look at language change in the verb phrase

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Abstract: This paper examines language change in two Lingala youth languages from the DR Congo, Lingala ya Bayankee (sometimes referred to as Yanké) and Langila, focusing on processes of grammaticalization and replication. Speakers of Lingala ya Bayankee use a grammaticalized prefix *ké-* for the near/immediate future tense, derived from the verb *kokende* ‘to go’ and from a manipulated form of the same verb, namely the prefix *dyé-* from *kodyé* (with the same meaning). The emergence and development of this tense marker is traced and compared with the strategies used by Langila speakers. Moreover, the microvariationist lens through which changes in the tense-aspect system of Lingala’s youth registers are examined in this paper looks at different formation patterns of progressive aspect, with two dominant construction types in Lingala ya Bayankee; these are also compared to the strategies used by Langila speakers. While linguistic manipulations have long been the focus of sociolinguistic approaches to the study of adolescent language use, fine-grained differences in tense and aspect marking have received little attention. Here, this paper aims to take a first step, based on rich empirical data collected during various research stays in the urban environment of Kinshasa (DR Congo).

Keywords: tense-aspect-mood (TAM); Lingala; grammaticalization; language change; future tense; progressive aspect

1 Introduction: youth language in the Lingala-speaking areas in Central Africa

African youth language¹ practices have increasingly come into the focus of linguists over the past 20 years, including the speech styles of young speakers of Lingala, a contact language widely spoken in Central Africa (with an estimated 45 million speakers; see Figure 1 for an overview). In recent years, the study of youth language has been approached from different directions, depending on the research focus and interest, mainly using socio-linguistic and linguistic anthropological approaches. In contrast, this paper examines Lingala youth language with a structural interest in recent changes in the tense and aspect system, seen through the lens of microvariation.

The Lingala variety that is used in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (and, while slightly different, in Brazzaville, the capital of neighboring Congo) is the most widespread dialect of the language, especially in popular culture, mass media, police and military forces, and also among diaspora speakers. It serves

¹ Despite the extensive literature that has emerged in recent years, fundamental questions about the object of study, i.e., adolescents’ speech styles, are no less debated or controversial. For example, the question of whether “youth language” is a good conceptual choice and an appropriate term for these emergent “ways of speaking” or “registers” is repeatedly raised (for a detailed discussion, see, e.g., Yannuar et al. 2022). In some ways, youth language practices can be seen as “varieties” of their base languages, as is the case here with both youth language practices that are discussed. In some works, they are rather treated as contact varieties or urban varieties.

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Figure 1: The approximate area where the Bantu language Lingala is spoken.

as the main “template” of comparison for specific morphological markers in this paper. However, it has not been fully standardized, despite Congolese linguists’ meetings in the 1970s. The notion of one “standard” and different “nonstandard” varieties as is common with other languages in the Bantu area therefore does not exactly apply to Lingala (see also Nassenstein and Shinagawa in press; and also footnote 6).

Lingala ya Bayankee or Yanké (hereafter abbreviated LyB/Y), literally “the Lingala of the Yankees”, is a variety of Lingala used by several thousand young people in Kinshasa (and also in Kisangani, where it is commonly known as Kindoubil; see Wilson 2015) and has a high degree of relexification and linguistic creativity (for available works, see Kunzmann 2022; Nassenstein 2014, 2020, 2022; van Pelt 2000). In recent years, since the publication of a much-cited survey article by Kießling and Mous (2004), it has come more into scholarly focus (see also Kunzmann 2024).

Langila, the second variety studied here,² is a language game or play language based on LyB/Y, initiated by young dancers and choreographers, musicians, painters, university students, and others, and now used predominantly in digital communication via social media rather than in offline interactions. In some respects, Langila (itself a metathesis from Lingala) copies semantic manipulation strategies from LyB/Y.³ In other respects, Langila exhibits a high degree of unique phonological and lexical operations that have only been rudimentarily summarized in a single paper (Nassenstein 2015), but have been mentioned in several others (e.g., Sene Mongaba 2015).

In this short paper, I examine how LyB/Y differs from its base language, Kinshasa Lingala (KL), and from other Lingala youth languages such as Langila in terms of two temporal/aspectual categories, namely the near or immediate future and the progressive aspect. I also show how this can be analyzed using a microvariation

² Youth movements, lifestyle fashions, and innovative ways of speaking emerge(d) cyclically in Kinshasa: from 1955 to 1968, young speakers created and used a youth language called (H)indubil(l), after which LyB/Y emerged as a direct successor between 1970 and 1982, with the circle of speakers changing from 1982. From 2003, Langila emerged as a playful language practice by artists and students. For a historical overview, see Nassenstein and Hollington (2016).

³ Langila and LyB/Y are interdependent in that they draw from the same linguistic resources, but also in that their speakers are in constant contact and that those who style their language with Lingala ya Bayankee also use some Langila resources and vice versa. I am grateful for a question from Maarten Mous (in a panel discussion on youth language held in Blantyre in 2022) regarding the relationship between these two practices (see also Kunzmann 2024).

approach to morphosyntactic change in youth languages (Marten et al. 2007; Shinagawa and Abe 2019; among others). Similarly, I am interested in how grammaticalization in the verb phrase can contrast or overlap with processes of general morphosyntactic change in the Bantu language Lingala. This article presents some tense-aspect markers that behave differently in two varieties of Lingala, namely LyB/Y and Langila (youth languages), helping us to understand within a microvariationist perspective how young speakers' language use deviates from the common urban variety in Kinshasa. It not only contributes to the field of “youth language” studies in two ways – presenting fresh data on two understudied Lingala-based youth languages and conceptualizing “youth languages” as more than a collection of lexical items or manipulative morphological deviations – but also to the theoretical framework of “microvariation”, so far investigated by drawing on well-known language groups (such as Germanic and Romance languages).

Methodologically, data on LyB/Y were collected in Kinshasa in the DR Congo (a total corpus of several hours of recordings was produced) and include ethnographic fieldwork (between 2009 and 2012), qualitative interviews with street youth in Kinshasa (in March 2022), recorded dialogue, and social media data. Data on Langila include interviews with speakers (collected primarily in 2010) and a corpus of more than 17 h of video footage from YouTube and other online media. Sets of sentences and dialogues were also collected.

2 General morphosyntactic changes in Lingala ya Bayankee/Yanké

In addition to changes in the use and formation of tense-aspect markers and processes of grammaticalization, LyB/Y exhibits numerous morphosyntactic changes (beyond the often-cited “deliberate manipulations” in phonology, morphology, and semantics that range prominently among scholars), which will be listed here only briefly. One example is changes in the noun class system, where noun class 7a (marked with the prefix *ki-*) has taken over new functions and noun class 12 (marked with the diminutive prefix *ka-*) is productive in contrast to ordinary Lingala. In addition, French lexemes and definite articles are frequently borrowed or adopted as a whole, as in *lifanto* ‘child’ (French *l'enfant*), *lemoro* ‘mother, elderly woman’ (French *la mère*), and *lapolis* ‘police’ (French *la police*), affecting the noun class assignment and number marking of these nouns. There is a slight tendency towards analytic constructions in derivational processes in the verb phrase (as analyzed by Kunzmann 2022). There are also changes in the tense-aspect-mood system, such as the realization of certain affixes or emergent and grammaticalized markers, as studied in the present paper. For a brief overview of morphosyntactic changes in LyB/Y, see Nassenstein (2022).

3 Grammaticalization chains and grammatical transfer

Comparatively few contributions to date have examined morphosyntactic variation in African youth language practices beyond the general interest in linguistic “manipulations”; these notable exceptions in the growing literature on African youth and their language practices include Gunnink (2014) for South African tsotsitaal in Soweto, Nassenstein (2014) for LyB/Y from western Congo, Shinagawa (2019 and others) for Kenya's Sheng, and Mulumbwa (2009) for Kindubile from southeastern Congo (to name just a few). The reader of this special issue may wonder why the study of youth languages spoken in Africa might benefit from adopting a microvariation framework that has often been applied previously to Germanic and Romance languages, and more recently to other Bantu languages, by examining specific parameters of morphosyntactic variation (e.g., in Southern Bantu languages by Lee et al. 2021). Barbiers (2008: 4) is in favor of examining syntactic microvariation and suggests that

more fine-grained data are necessary to investigate minor morphosyntactic differences between closely related language varieties, and the number of data and language varieties involved should be large enough to test hypothesized correlations in a reliable way. In the words of Kayne, large-scale microcomparative syntactic research comes closest to a language laboratory where one could do experiments with languages by altering minor properties of a language and observe which other properties change as a result of this.

In this context, documented youth varieties of well-described Bantu languages provide a solid basis for micro-variationist analyses in nominal morphology, verbal morphology, and syntax. In particular, the relatively well-documented cross-varietal forms and structures in language groups such as Sabaki (with Swahili), Nguni (with isiZulu), and so on, therefore provide good “laboratory conditions” for these fine-grained inter-varietal studies in Barbiers’s sense. For the study of Lingala, the microvariationist perspective may mean examining the expression of certain grammatical features in closely related varieties that have only slightly divergent features. In the present case, this is illustrated by examining tense and aspect in two youth languages or registers. Specifically, this paper is concerned with the near or immediate future tense and the progressive aspect, which in KL both occur in the same pre-stem slot, unlike other tense-aspect categories, as Meeuwis (2020: 147) summarizes: “Most [tense-aspect-mood markers] are placed after the verbal root or base. Exceptions are the future marker *-ko-* and the contracted form of the present progressive *-zô-*, both prefixes placed after the SM [subject marker] and before the reflexive anaphora when it is used.” Both tense-aspect categories have given rise to new and different realizations in youth speech, which hypothetically can also be attributed to the pre-stem position in which both are marked.

Grammaticalization scenarios for both tense-aspect markers are common in Bantu languages (and beyond), as seen in numerous linguistic contexts. The specific case that occurs in LyB/Y, where two verbs *kokende* (used in all varieties) and *kodyé* (its creative manipulation in LyB/Y) that denote ‘to go’ are grammaticalized to a near or immediate future tense, does not occur in the urban variety KL. However, crosslinguistically, this is a common process in which “a form used for an action (‘to go’) is also used to denote a grammatical concept (future tense)” (Kuteva et al. 2019: 4). The same authors list the source “GO TO” and the target “FUTURE” (Kuteva et al. 2019: 468) as recurrent developments.

Already in common KL, the urban base language, the progressive is expressed with an auxiliary construction that was grammaticalized and contracted. The prefix *zô-* emerged as a contracted form of prefix *ko-* (infinitive) and *-zalı* (copula; for a more detailed analysis, see Meeuwis 2020: 50).⁴ Regarding the progressive aspect, which has a number of variants in LyB/Y and in Lingala, it should be noted that in the two youth language practices, speakers modify and diversify these contraction processes, resulting in different, slightly divergent forms – with different semantics. Lingala speakers, as will be shown below, build on and develop LyB/Y speakers’ modifications. That speakers of Lingala varieties use variants of a grammaticalized auxiliary construction is not surprising, for “progressives are expressed differently in Bantu ... from ‘have/with being’; [or] visibly derived from locatives ... [i.e., a] construction can be rendered as ‘to be in/at verb-ing’” (Nurse 2008: 139). In Lingala, it is the auxiliary of ‘to be’ which plays a central role. Kuteva et al. (2019: 130) give the grammaticalization path “COPULA, LOCATIVE > (5) PROGRESSIVE: ... Lingala *-zala* ‘be at’, copula > durative auxiliary” as a typical case – while the copula is indeed involved in Lingala, locatives are not. In the following, we discuss the two recent innovations in tense-aspect aspectual forms with concrete examples.

3.1 The immediate future tense (*ké-/dyé-* + verb stem/infinitive)

In common KL, which is the urban base language of the two special purpose registers discussed in this contribution, forms of the verb *kokende* ‘to go’ are often shortened to *-ké* when inflected in the present tense,⁵ while

4 Mabaka (1980: 26–27), who compares KL with the second major variety used upriver (“Missionary/Mankanza Lingala”), explains this change differently yet less exhaustively, saying that the infinitive prefix *ko-* is dropped and that the word-final *-a*, as in *nazá banda* ‘I am beginning’, changes to *-o*, giving *nazó banda* (examples and their tonality kept as in original).

5 The general distinctions of tense and aspect categories used in this contribution are oriented at Meeuwis’s (2020) framework for KL. He distinguishes two present tense forms (PRS1 *-í* vs. PRS2 *-á*) and two past tense forms (PST1 *-áki* vs. PST2 *-áká*). I am however aware of the fact that tense in Lingala is a debated topic; see Nurse (2008) versus Brisard and Meeuwis (2009) for different approaches.

realized as *-ke(y)í* in common KL, also listed by Meeuwis (2020: 174) as a frequent form in KL.⁶ In the urban variety, it is used exclusively to denote ‘to go’, either followed by a complement, as in (1), or by an infinitive, as in (2).⁷

- (1) *naké zándó* (Kinshasa Lingala)
 na-ké-Ø Ø-zándó
 SP1SG-go-PRS1 NP9-market
 ‘I have just gone to the market’
- (2) *mwána aké kolúka ndeko⁸ na yé*
 mu-ána a-ké ko-lúk-a N-deko na yé
 NP1-child SP3SG:ANIM-go INF-search-FV NP1a-sibling CON S3SG:ANIM
 ‘the child has gone looking for his/her sibling’

In LyB/Y, the *ké-* form can be followed by the verb stem in contexts where it is used to express an immediate or near future (‘X will soon/shortly ...’), while in some cases, such as in first person plural imperatives (‘let’s go and ...!’), it can still express the literal ‘to go’, as seen in (3). In most other cases, its only function is as a near/immediate future marker, while literal translations with ‘to go’ no longer make sense, as in (4). This shows that the shortened form of the verb *kokende* has been grammaticalized and developed into a new preverbal tense marker, hypothetically as an analogous development to *aller* followed by infinitive in French (as in *je vais manger* ‘I will soon eat’).⁹ The question of whether this form can alternatively be categorized as proximative aspect will not be further discussed here – it resembles the English *go*-future, a grammaticalized form, rather than a typical proximative (König 2000).

- (3) *tokébamba ba-momie ya Kimbangu* (LyB/Y)
 to-ké(-)bám-b-a ba-momie ya Kimbangu
 SP1PL-NEAR.FUT-lay-FV NP2-girl CON K.
 i. ‘let’s go and lay (the) girls from the neighborhood Kimbangu’
 ii. ‘we will shortly lay (the) girls from the neighborhood Kimbangu’
- (4) *moto na nga akétaké penge*
 mo-to na nga a-ké(-)také Ø-penge
 NP1-person CON S1SG SP3SG:ANIM-NEAR.FUT-steal NP9-money
 ‘my friend will shortly steal money’
 ‘#my friend has gone to steal money’

Analogous to the widespread grammaticalization of *ké-*, which evolved from a shortened form of *kokende*, LyB/Y speakers grammaticalize a second verb that is a creative manipulation of the first, namely *kodyé* ‘to go, to leave’,

⁶ One reviewer made the valuable content that youth language data would best be contrasted with “Standard Lingala” data. It must be mentioned here that besides prescriptive missionary initiatives and Congolese linguists’ efforts in the 1970s there is no real “standard language” (as already indicated above). See Sene Mongaba (2015) for a discussion of varieties and variation in the language. The most common and most widely used variety is “Kinshasa Lingala” (even though “Missionary/Mankanza Lingala” comes closest to the idea of a “standard”), the variety which serves as contrastive standard-like variety here. Equally, a reviewer suggested that using the same sentences comparatively in KL and LyB/Y or Langila would be reader-friendly. However, since many sentences were not elicited and due to the fact that elicitation in youth language research is often not helpful, this suggestion cannot be implemented.

⁷ Examples follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Abbreviations used: # semantically unacceptable; * grammatically unacceptable; 1SG/2SG/3SG first/second/third person singular; 1PL/2PL/3PL first/second/third person plural; ANIM animate; CON connective/associative; DEM demonstrative; FUT future tense; FV final vowel; INF infinitive; LOC locative; NEAR.FUT near/immediate future; NP nominal prefix; O object (pronoun); PROG progressive aspect; PRS1 present tense 1; PRS2 present tense 2; PST1 past tense 1; PST2 past tense 2; S subject (pronoun); SP subject prefix.

⁸ The nasal prefix that occurs in classes 1a and class 9 can be considered an archiphoneme.

⁹ I am grateful to one reviewer for this idea of which I had not thought before.

derived from the French word of farewell *adieu* (realized as [adje] rather than the Standard French [adjø]), which is then transformed into a verb. Van Pelt (2000: 26) observes for this verb, which he spells *kodiyer*, with reference to Kukanda (1983) that it may alternatively be derived from Cilubà *diya*, ‘departure’ or from French *d’y aller* ‘to go there’. The verb *-dyé* denotes ‘to go’ when followed by a locative adverbial or a toponym, as in (5)–(8); in a few cases, usually when followed by the verb stem, it can either literally be understood as ‘to go’ or has become a marker for the immediate future, as in (9), with both readings possible. In most examples, the grammaticalized function has stabilized, with *dyé-* no longer or only weakly conveying an idea of ‘go’, as seen in (10). These examples can be understood from a contact perspective as a process of replication (Heine and Kuteva 2009), and as a specific pattern in which relexicalized LyB/Y forms undergo the same grammaticalization process (*kodyé* → NEAR.FUT *dyé-*) that has already taken place with analogous lexical material from the urban base language (KL *kokende* → NEAR.FUT *ké-*). This process can thus be seen as a case of grammatical transfer in the youth language.

- (5) *Naôdyé Dallas, y’odyé wápi?* (LyB/Y)
 na-ô-dyé Ø-dalás y=o-dyé wápi?
 SP1SG-PROG-go NP9-Dallas S2SG=SP2SG-go where
 ‘I’m going to [the neighborhood] Yolo, where are you going?’
- (6) *yaya, namóní il faut todyé kayú*
 yaya na-món-í il_faut to-dyé Ø-kayú
 NP1a.big_brother SP1SG-see-PRS1 must SP1PL-go NP9.work
 ‘buddy, I see we gotta get to work’
- (7) *mokolo mókó na-o-dyé mbása*
 mo-kolo mókó na-o-dyé N-bása
 NP3-day one SP1SG-FUT-go NP9-Europe
 ‘one day I will go to Europe’
- (8) *nadyé (ko)téka baplan na nga na kuwait*
 na-dyé (ko)-ték-a ba-plan na nga na Ø-kuwait
 SP1SG-go INF-sell-FV NP2-thing CON S1SG LOC NP9-small_shop
 ‘I have just gone to sell my stuff (off) to a cheap shop’
- (9) *moto, todyépatrouillé na wénze wâná*
 mo-to to-dyé-patrouillé na Ø-wénze wâná
 NP1-person SP1PL-NEAR.FUT-patrol LOC NP9-market DEM2
 i. ‘buddy, let’s go look for (=steal) some food on that market’
 ii. ‘buddy, we will shortly look for (=steal) food on that market’
- (10) *Bodyétéka baplan na bínó?*
 bo-dyé-ték-a ba-plan na bínó
 SP2PL-NEAR.FUT-sell-FV NP2-thing CON S2PL
 ‘will you shortly sell [all] your stuff?’
 ‘#will you shortly go to/and sell [all] your stuff?’

3.2 The progressive aspect (*ô-* vs. *-zá* + CON + INF)

In Missionary Lingala or Mankanza Lingala, the prescriptive and more formalized varieties characteristic of the corpus-planning interventions by missionary linguists, the progressive aspect is expressed with an inflected form

of the verb *kozala* in the present tense, followed by an infinitive, as seen in (11) (this is also how it is used in Bible translations). The urban variety KL has produced the contracted and grammaticalized form *-zô* mentioned above, which is illustrated in (12).

- (11) *bandeko bazalí kolúka bomengo* (Missionary/Mankanza Lingala)
 ba-N-deko ba-zal-í ko-lúk-a bo-mengo
 NP2-NP1a-sibling SP2-be-PRS1 INF-search-FV NP14-fortune
 ‘the brothers/sisters are looking for a treasure/fortune’

- (12) *bazôluka yé na quartier na bisó* (KL)
 ba-zô-luk-a yé na Ø-quartier na bisó
 SP2-PROG-search-FV O3SG:ANIM LOC NP9-neighborhood CON S1PL
 ‘they are looking for him/her in our neighborhood; he/she is wanted in our neighborhood’

The *zô*- progressive has not remained the only variant in KL: due to numerous free variants of the inflected copula that have developed in urban settings (see Meeuwis 2020: 175 for KL: *nazalí* ‘I am’ ~ *naalí* ~ *nayalí* ~ *nazá* ~ *naá*), speakers form the progressive in different ways (as the inflected copula is one component of this form), some of which are closer to the “traditional” missionary form, such as (13a), others that are more contracted, as in (13b) and (13c), and yet others can mix forms that seem to have less acceptance by speakers, as in (13d).

- (13) a. *tozá kobéta balle*
 to-zá ko-bét-a balle
 SP1PL-be INF-hit-FV ball
- b. *to(y)alí kobéta balle* (cf. Meeuwis 2020)
 to-(y)al-í ko-bét-a balle
 SP1PL-be-PRS1 INF-hit-FV ball
- c. *tozôbéta balle*
 to-zô-bét-a balle
 SP1PL-PROG-hit-FV ball
- d. *?tozá béta balle*
 to-zá bét-a balle
 SP1PL-be hit-FV ball
 ‘we are playing soccer’

From these different forms, which are widely used in Kinshasa, young LyB/Y speakers have developed two variants of the progressive in fast spoken interaction that serve different functions. The first of these drops or omits the first consonant of the grammaticalized and contracted urban form by retaining the falling tone: *zô* → *ô*. Examples of this phenomenon can be seen in (14)–(17), with (17) taken from a song containing LyB/Y speech. In all these examples, the activity is still ongoing and occurs at the moment of speaking.

- (14) *kokobar aôboté lifanto* (LyB/Y)
 Ø-kokobar a-ô-boté li-fanto
 NP1a-grandfather SP3SG:ANIM-PROG-beat NP1a-child
 ‘grandpa is beating the child’

- (15) *bayaya baôkátá momie*
 ba-yaya ba-ô-kát-a Ø-momie
 NP2-elder_brother SP2-PROG-CUT-FV NP1a-female
 ‘the elder guys are raping a girl/woman’

- (16) *poro aôbayé tshweke*
 Ø-poro a-ô-bayé Ø-tshweke
 NP1a-father SP3SG:ANIM-PROG-drink NP9-liquor
 ‘the older man is drinking whisky (liquor)’
- (17) *babe, tonight, nga naôboma yó*
 Ø-babe tonight nga na-ô-bom-a yó
 NP1a-baby tonight s1SG SP1SG-PROG-kill-FV o2SG
 ‘baby, tonight I am finishing you (sexually)’
 (Lyrics in “Pesa” by RDC Soldier)¹⁰

The second type of construction widely used in youth language is an emphatic form that is less contracted than the *zô-/ô-* progressives. Instead, the short copula *-zá* is used, followed by a connective *ya* and the infinitive. Sometimes the French phasal polarity item *déjà* is also inserted and slightly modified to *deyá* (in the latter, the acute accent marks a high tone – unlike in the French orthography), as seen in (18) and (19). The difference with the more common prefixed form *-ô* is that this periphrastic structure expresses a present perfect progressive (or a progressive reading of a present perfect), describing events that began some time ago and that are still ongoing and whose effects are still being felt at the moment of speaking. By adding *deyá* to the construction, the iamitive aspect can be expressed. While LyB/Y speakers make a clear difference between these two constructions, the periphrastic form is not very common in KL, and was introduced only recently by musicians such as Félix Wazekwa (from whose lyrics [19] is taken), who also had a major influence on innovations in LyB/Y.

- (18) *mista azá (deyá) ya kobayé nwa* (LyB/Y)
 Ø-mista a-zá deyá ya ko-bayé n-wa
 NP1a-buddy SP3SG:ANIM-be already CON INF-drink NP9-marijuana
 ‘my/our close friend has already been smoking marijuana’ (implying: and is therefore now “high” and may no longer be available for specific operations)
- (19) *bozá deja (deyá) ya kosauté, 10 ans de fidelité na primus*
 bo-zá deyá ya ko-sauté 10 ans de Ø-fidelité na Primus
 SP2PL-be already CON INF-jump 10_years_of NP9-loyalty with P.
 ‘are you already jumping (for some good time), 10 years of loyalty with Primus beer?’
 (Facebook page “les fans de felix wazekwa (monstre d’amour)”)

Motingea (pers. comm.) assumes that the construction of inflected copular verb (*kozala*), *deyá* ‘already’, connective, and infinitive (shown here as an analytic progressive structure) arose by analogy with common adjective forms that require the connective in predicative use (e.g., *ezá ya kitóko* ‘it is beautiful’) and can also make use of deverbative derivations (as in *ezá ya kopola* ‘it is rotten’ from the infinitive *kopola* ‘to rot, to go bad’), which also expresses a situational passive (*Zustandspassiv* in German).¹¹ The emergence of this construction has also contributed to a finer gradation in the marking of progressives among urban Lingala speakers of Kinshasa and the “Yankees”.

4 A glimpse at Langila: “same-same or different?”

It is promising to check whether the youth language Langila, which developed in response to and often structurally builds on the much older LyB/Y, exhibits similar examples of grammaticalization and grammatical transfer. While LyB/Y has numerous examples of contractions and truncated grammatical markers, Langila tends

¹⁰ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mcJf4uNQ8qE> (accessed 25 August 2022).

¹¹ This explanation for the origin of this construction is logical; the author fully agrees with André Motingea Mangulu and thanks him for the fruitful discussions in Blantyre, Malawi.

to replace lexical stems with partially homophonic nouns (names of people, places, products, etc.), often leaving the grammatical bound morphemes of a word unaffected. Based on elicitations (and construction of Langila sentences), attempts were made to express the near or immediate future with either *koaleman* ‘to go’ (equivalent and manipulated form of *kokende*) or *kodieudonné* (equivalent and manipulated form of *kodyé*). In examples (20) and (21) it becomes obvious that these verbs only mean ‘to go’ but never express a (grammatized) near or immediate future (see the forms marked with asterisk). Example (22) shows the pattern of future tense formation in Langila as invariant, always using of the prefixed tense marker *ko-* as in KL (neither of the two other forms would work here). The last line of the examples shows where some of the words originally derive from.

- (20) *ngaliema aleanan na palestine* (Langila)
 ngaliema aleanan na Ø-palestine
 s1sg go LOC NP9-house
 ‘I go home / I am going home / I will soon go home’
 (Ngaliena is a neighborhood in Kinshasa; *aleman* < Fr. *aller* ‘to go’; *palestine* < LyB/Y *palais* ‘house’)
 **ngaliema aleanan* + verb stem/infinitive (ungrammatical; not accepted)
- (21) *nadieudonné kodamejeanne mukendi*
 na-dieudonné ko-damejeanne mukendi
 sP1sg-go INF-eat a_little
 ‘I go/leave and eat a little bit’
 *‘I will shortly eat a little bit’ (ungrammatical; not accepted)
 (-*dieudonné* < LyB/Y -*dyé* ‘to go’; -*damejeanne* < LyB/Y -*damé* ‘to eat’, *mukendi* < KL *moké* ‘little, small’)
- (22) *okococacola kovenezuela expert comptable*
 o-ko-cocacola ko-venezuela Ø-expert_comptable
 sP2sg-FUT-be_able INF-come NP1a-expert
 ‘you will become an expert (in speaking Langila)’
 (-*cocacola* < KL -*koka* ‘can (do)’; -*venezuela* < Fr. *venir*)
 **odieudonné kovenezuela expert comptable* (ungrammatical; not accepted)

In terms of the progressive aspect, it will be interesting to see which variant Langila speakers use and whether they also use the prefix *zô-* or a shortened *ô-*, and also whether a periphrastic copula + (already) + connective + infinitive is used as in LyB/Y. Examples (23)–(25) show that Langila tends to use more analytic structures (analogous to those used in Missionary Lingala and other languages) with a variety of lexical substitutions replacing copula forms (KL *naké* → Langila *nazarias*, *nazaire*, *nazaiko*; all reminiscent of different names beginning with *za-*)¹² and followed by an infinitive. Example (26) shows a (shorter) synthetic form *aô* followed by a verb stem, which seems to have been introduced by analogy with and based on the LyB/Y prefix *ô-*.

- (23) *ozarias koparlementaire langila ya katimini* (Langila)
 o-zarias ko-parlementaire Ø-langila ya katimini
 sP2sg-be INF-speak NP9-Langila CON fake
 ‘you are speaking fake Langila’
 (-*zarias* < KL -*zala*; -*parlementaire* < Fr. *parler*; *katimini* < LyB/Y *kató* ‘fake’)

¹² An explanation of the origin of these three forms (which are only a selection of copular verbs in Langila) may be helpful here: *kozarias* refers to politician and former vice president Azarias Ruberwa; *kozaire* alludes to the similarity of the former nation-state Zaïre (before it was renamed DR Congo); and *kozaiko* refers to the popular music group Zaiko Langa Langa which was one of the most influential in the 1970s and 1980s.

- (24) *mercedes azaire kotanganika*
 Ø-mercedes a-zaire ko-tanganika
 NP1a-mother SP1:ANIM-be INF-read
 ‘mother is reading/studying’
 (*mercedes* < Fr. *mère*; *-tanganika* < KL *-tánga* ‘to read’)

- (25) *bisobe tozaiko kovivrefrais*
 bisobe to-zaiko ko-vivrefrais
 s1PL SP1PL-be INF-live
 ‘us, we are alive / we are living’
 (*-zaiko* < KL *-zala*; *-vivrefrais* < Fr. *vivre*)

- (26) *permis de conduire aô dayitshu*
 Ø-*permis de conduire* ao dayitshu
 NP1a-driver’s_license SP1:PROG die
 ‘father is dying’
 (*permis de conduire* < Fr. *père* ‘father’; *-dayitshu* < Engl. *die*)

For the second type of construction recurring in LyB/Y (expressing a progressive perfect or iative aspect), there are no attested forms in Langila; see (27) for an ungrammatical elicited example rejected by speakers.

- (27) **Ozarias dejano ya komanchester?*
 o-zarias dejano ya ko-manchester
 SP2SG-be already CON INF-eat
 ‘are you already eating (for a while)?’ (ungrammatical; not accepted)
 (*-zarias* < KL *-zala* ‘to be’; *dejano* < Fr. *déjà* ‘already’; *-manchester* < Fr. *manger*)

Why are there different variants of how the progressive aspect can be expressed in Langila, with numerous analytic or periphrastic constructions using the verbs *-zaire*, *-zarias*, or *-zaiko* plus infinitive, but also synthetic or contracted forms like *aô*, while LyB/Y (as has been shown) clearly favors synthetic progressive markers (unless a particular semantic reading is intended)? Or, put another way, acknowledging lexical creativity in Langila, why would speakers simply tend to use a form *aô* as in (26) instead of the more lexically innovative forms in (23)–(25), that is, *-zaire*, *-zaiko*, or *-zarias*?

The answer has to do with the segmentation of words by Langila speakers, which they then playfully substitute. They first define what is a functioning “syllable” that can be (partially) replaced by a similar-sounding name or suffix. The Lingala verb *-zal* ‘be’ can easily be replaced by *-zaire*, *-zaiko*, or *-zarias*, and even the contracted prefix *zô-* in KL can be replaced by *-zaire* and other creative lexemes because of its partial homophony due to syllable onset. However, this no longer works when Langila speakers encounter the contracted LyB/Y progressive form *ô-*. Speakers no longer consider *SP+ô-a* “substitutable” syllable for further creative operations because of its brevity, and thus retain *aô* for third person singular progressive and *baô* for third person plural progressive. Other combinations of subject prefix and progressive form are then formed analogously, as seen in (28a)–(28g), at times with ambiguous results (e.g., in second person singular *ô bayern* ‘you are drinking’ the subject prefix and tense-aspect marker merge, and progressive aspect is no longer unambiguous because of the omission of most other tense and aspect markers in Langila).

- (28) LyB/Y: *petite aôbayé limba* → Langila: *petrous aô bayern limbambe*¹³
 Ø-petite **a-ô**-bayé limba Ø-petrous **aô** bayern limbambe
 NP1a-girl SP1-PROG-drink water NP1a-girl SP1:PROG drink water
 ‘the girl is drinking water’

¹³ In KL, this sentence would be realized as *mwána mwási azômela máyi*. In LyB/Y, the verb *-bayé* ‘to drink, to smoke’ is a semantic manipulation of French *bailler* ‘to yawn’ (due to the opened mouth when drinking). In Langila, *-bayern* displays a manipulation of *-bayé*, playing with the name of the popular soccer club from Munich, Germany. This is but one example to show the creativity of young speakers when modifying KL. As also anticipated by one reviewer – who is acknowledged here – this detailed semantic manipulation cannot be always shown or discussed in each case due to the limited extent of this paper.

a.	1SG:	na+ô	→ naô	<i>naô bayern</i>	‘I am drinking’
b.	2SG:	o+ô	→ ô	<i>ô bayern</i>	‘you are drinking’
c.	3SG:	a+ô	→ aô	<i>aô bayern</i>	‘(s)he is drinking’
d.	1PL:	to+ô	→ tô	<i>tô bayern</i>	‘we are drinking’
e.	2PL:	bo+ô	→ bô	<i>bô bayern</i>	‘you are drinking’
f.	3PL:	ba+ô	→ baô	<i>baô bayern</i>	‘they are drinking’
g.	3SG/PL [−ANIM]:	e+ô	→ eô	<i>eô bayern</i>	‘it is drinking’

This shows that Langila speakers build on and modify some structures of the other youth language LyB/Y speakers, but that some features in Langila in verbal morphology have emerged independently of developments in LyB/L (following other motivations).

5 Concluding thoughts: microvariation and interdependencies of youth language

A closer look at specific structural phenomena in youth languages from the Bantu area can help to trace how certain bound morphemes or periphrastic structures are transferred, modified, or substituted in related youth language practices based on (or “modeled” on) the same language. This also means, as has been shown to some extent in this paper on LyB/Y and Langila, that a focus on similarities and differences in particular registers or varieties can help to identify dependencies and connections between youth languages (as also discussed to some extent by Kunzmann 2024). In cases where grammaticalized forms of an emergent immediate future tense show recent developments, or where young people’s choices from a range of variants expressing a progressive aspect show tendencies for two different construction types to dominate their language, sociolinguistic overview studies based on ethnographic research or focusing on deliberate manipulative strategies will not be very helpful in tracing such kinds of linguistic change.

In the case of the Congolese youth languages Langila and LyB/Y, the relationship is clear (and less complex than, say, between South African youth languages), and analysis has shown that language change in the verb phrase does not occur to the same extent or in the same way; however, a fine-grained analysis of specific morphosyntactic features has yet to be done.

New horizons in studies of microvariation in African youth languages could be a focus on variation between speakers and the innovation and diffusion of specific new forms, or comparison of “similar” youth languages in different geographical areas (e.g., Kinshasa, Kisangani, and Brazzaville for Lingala-speaking youth), as tentatively done for Swahili by Nassenstein and Bose (2020). In addition, a focus on microvariation in Lingala youth language could shed light on the impact of Lingala on Swahili-based youth language practices in eastern DR Congo (e.g., Yabacrâne and Kindubile). Finally, we can ask: what can microvariationist youth language studies in Lingala tell us about linguistic variation and change in other Bantu languages (of wider communication)?

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