

# “Venezuela hawaii, chelsea!”

## Creative onomastic practice and playful (re)labelling in Langila from the Congo

Nico Nassenstein

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz

This contribution focuses on Langila, a language practice or “speech style” that emerged in the first decade after the millenium in the Congolese capital of Kinshasa, characterized by lexical creativity and specific phonological manipulative strategies. I analyze Langila speakers’ use of global place names, fashionable brands, and names of institutions, and to some extent specific (manipulated) personal names as pseudo-onomastic references from an anthropological-linguistic perspective, understanding “games with names” (Storch 2019) as a cultural practice that contributes to the novelty factor in specific ways of speaking in the Congolese capital of Kinshasa and in social media. It is crucial for the discussion of “labelling” and “branding” practices in contexts of cultural importance in African languages to consider why and how speakers use, manipulate, and recontextualize semiotic links to names of artefacts, places, and people – and how this changes the onomastic value of these named, unnamed, and renamed concepts in ludic interaction. The paper thus circles around two main research questions: How are “labels” (anthroponyms, toponyms) semantically and in terms of their referential and indexical use changed to creative lifestyle emblems and become part of the everyday lexicon? How are contexts of cultural importance named and (re)labelled by a speaker, drawing from “manipulated” repertoires that involve (partially homophonic) anthroponymic or toponymic references actually intended to mislead or to confuse the hearer? This contribution investigates the role of onomastic references that are used to denote and label central concepts in Langila.

**Keywords:** ludic language use, playful names, language manipulation, Congo, Lingala

*“Ah, perpendiculaire a Daihatshu, dis! Vietnam a Diesel! Mawampanga, e Swaziland biscotte Toulouse!”* ‘Father has passed away! The old guy is gone! Sadness hit us all!’ [my translation]. Arts.cd, 15 February 2021<sup>1</sup>

## 1. The emergence of a new communicative style in Central Africa: Langila

At the latest by the time when one of popular musician King Kester Emeneya’s (1956–2014) singers, Anéanti, announced Emeneya’s death in February 2014 in front of the cameras speaking Langila (see his statement in the epigraph), an emergent language practice from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, viewers realized that a new language had eventually gained ground, and that it was no longer restricted to a handful of young Congolese artists and dancers (see arts.cd 2021) using it in their lyrics, as was happening a few years before that time. But what is Langila and how did it actually emerge, spread, and develop across the

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1. This sentence refers to the death of the famous musician King Kester Emeneya as announced by one of the band members in Langila, honouring their band leader who had allegedly “invented” Langila. The epigraph given is translated by the authors into the base language Lingala, which functions as a “matrix” of Langila, interspersed with French: *Ah, père adayé, dis! Vieux akeyi* [or *adyé*; N.N.]! *Mawa mingi, esui biso tout!* This example already shows how Langila makes use of near-homophonous brand names, country names, and personal names: *Daihatshu* is the brand name of the Japanese car manufacturer Daihatsu Kōgyō K.K. and substitutes for the similar-sounding *adayé* ‘he died’; the toponym *Vietnam* replaces the similar-sounding *vieux* ‘old man’; the fashion label *Diesel* substitutes for the verb *adyé*, a synonym for *akeyi* ‘he went away’; the anthroponym *Mawampanga*, referring to the Congolese politician Mawampanga Mwana Nanga, resembles the Lingala *mawa* ‘sad’; the toponym *Swaziland* replaces similar-sounding *-swâ* or *eswí* ‘to bite; it has bitten’; the anthroponym Mbala Mbuta *Biscotte*, former soccer star, substitutes *bísó* ‘us’; and finally the place name *Toulouse* stands for French *tous* ‘all’. This short sentence gives a hint as to how Langila works linguistically and semiotically, and how important the ludic and creative usage of names here is. Interestingly, the translation of the Langila expressions given in the original source also contains Lingala ya Bayankee, the widespread sociolect used by street youth in Kinshasa (Van Pelt 2000; Nassenstein 2014), e.g., *adayé, adyé*, verb forms that are not common Lingala. This is intended as hint that Langila draws from the Yankee’s Lingala, and its lexical (and onomastic) creativity is based on existing lexical items in the Lingala ya Bayankee. This also means that a speaker must know Lingala ya Bayankee at least to some extent to be able to detect and trace creative processes in Langila, and how language users play with brands and names there. This is interesting in terms of the interdependency of young people’s speech styles in Africa in the same geographical areas. See <https://arts.cd/langila-lhindoubil-du-lingala-parle-a-kinshasa/> (last accessed 15 May 2022) for the original post.

Congolese capital, Kinshasa, and within the diaspora over a short period of time – and how did it turn into a fashionable language practice across social media, too?

The language label *Langila* itself is a metathesis of its base language, the similar-sounding Bantu language *Lingala* (tonally spelt *Lingála*), a language spoken by at least 40 million speakers (Meeuwis 2020) as a first, second, or third language in western parts of the DR Congo, in northern parts of the Republic of the Congo, in northern Angola, along the borders of Central African Republic, and in the north-western tip of Uganda. *Lingala* has become famous due to the Congolese music industry since the 1940s, with the musical styles *rumba* and *soukous* popularized over large parts of the African continent and in the diaspora. The creative modification of the glottonym *Lingala* → *Langila* in order to “invent” a new language already points to the playful and creative nature of this linguistic practice, and to the fact that modifying and adapting known onomastic references and changing their semantic content serves as a major principle in lexical creation. In initial studies on *Langila*, this linguistic practice has mostly been described as “youth language” or “youth language practice” (Nassenstein 2015) or as “slang register” (Sene Mongaba 2015: 444), as initially, after its emergence around 2003, it was predominantly used by young dancers, choreographers, university students, and better-off adolescents in the capital, Kinshasa. Speakers would predominantly use it not only for its playfulness and as a sign of outspoken creativity (allowing them to form new words based on the phonological and semiotic principles of the language), but also because of its concealing character, qualifying as a secret language (see for instance Storch 2011 on a pan-African perspective).

However, over time, the community of practice changed remarkably. Beyond children and teenagers, more and more adults began to communicate using *Langila*, first in the streets of the Congolese capital, then spreading to other Congolese cities, and from there increasingly using the variety in social media such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and several other platforms. With a changing community of practice, especially between 2009 and 2020, *Langila* no longer qualifies as “youth language practice” or “register” but must rather be considered a “way of speaking” (based on Hymes 1964, 1989) or a “speech style” of *Lingala*, or a specific “communicative style” – a concept elaborated by anthropological linguist Gerrit J. Dimmendaal (2022a: 77) in his work on emergent languages in Africa, defining “speech style” as “the meaningful deployment of language in order to achieve particular communicative effects or social meanings”, whereby it also “refers to degrees of formality, or to variation according to audience or context of speech” – while he states that “communicative style” “as a concept focuses on the interactional dimension of speech styles” (ibid.). For a summary of Hymes’ framework, the ethnography of communication, see also Nassenstein & Völkel (2022: 10) and Dimmendaal (2022b).

Rather than classifying or categorizing Langila among other Lingala varieties or speech styles in Africa, the present contribution focuses on the role and function of names and labels in Langila, investigating how users of this speech style transform the process of denotation. This goes along with semantic shift and with a detachment of the denotator from the denotate, i.e., the extralinguistic entity or physical determinable commodity that is meant by the use of a specific sign is no longer referenced. As will be shown in the following sections with numerous examples, Langila users manipulate, "collect", and re-interpret common designations from the base language Lingala, but also from neighbouring languages such as Kikongo, Kiswahili, and Cilubà, and also the official language French, as well as English; they play with the objects of reference and the semi-otic/semantic processes of denotation/designation and connotation, and a non-initiated hearer's misled connotations of words that are (unexpectedly) used in new contexts.

This seems to be a little or barely studied topic in onomastic research (and does not feature prominently or remains unmentioned in overview works such as Hough 2016, Ndlovu 2022a, Puzey & Kostanski 2016, or vom Bruck & Bodenhorn 2006), whereby names no longer keep their referential function but are desemanticized and henceforth recontextualized based on their mere phonological form, yet still trigger their semantic connotations when now applied to new (semantically even more) "arbitrary" referents. As to my knowledge, similar cases of "recycling names" have only been analyzed for Southern African youth languages in Ndlovu's (2022b) and Hurst-Harosh's (2020) work. In other works on manipulative strategies in African context-bound registers and styles (Storch 2011), similar processes are sometimes hinted at but not discussed in much detail. In another contribution, Storch (2019) focuses on the ludic character of naming practices and speakers' creativity in name-giving contexts, a field of research related to the present work.

Fieldwork on Langila was carried out first in the years 2009 and 2010 in Kinshasa during a three-month research stay focusing on Lingala registers, which led to a more extensive study (Nassenstein 2014) of the closely related Lingala ya Bayankee, a speech style used in the streets of Kinshasa by lower social strata (first studied by Van Pelt 2000). This initial fieldwork was based on free recordings, recorded interactions of young dancers, and elicited sentences, whereas fieldwork in more recent years was carried out online, including qualitative interviews, WhatsApp chats, and multimodal exchanges, as well as analysing YouTube video clips. Altogether this led to a corpus of more than 18 hours of video material – conversations, TV shows, discussion groups, comedy performances – which were then sorted and categorized.

## 2. The phonological and lexical principles of Langila

Emergent languages in Africa display a multitude of creative processes in terms of phonological, morphosyntactic, and lexical change and adaptation (Dimmendaal 2022a). Creative speech styles are often a reflection of speakers' multilingual heteroglossic repertoires (especially but not uniquely on the African continent) and of their exposure to and trajectories through translingual ecologies. Among Langila speakers, the following (a) sentences can be heard; here contrasted with their corresponding realizations in “common Lingala” as spoken in the capital Kinshasa (b), in order to demonstrate how speakers modify Lingala:

- (1) a. *O-zô-bayernmunich mwána bokiló?* (Langila)  
 SM2sg-PROG-drink a\_little\_bit alcohol  
 ‘Are you taking a small drink?’  
 (*Bayern Munich* ‘FC Bayern Munich’; Ling. *mwána* ‘child’; *bokiló* ‘in-law’)
- b. *Ozôbayé mwá boki?* (Lingala ya Bayankee/Kinshasa Lingala)  
 ‘Are you taking a small drink?’
- (2) a. *Na-riodejaneiro fortuna ba-yayatouré, langila e-débordé,*  
 SM1sg-laugh strongly NP2-elder Langila SM3SG:INAN-be\_full  
*e-kibomango biscotte!*  
 SM3SG:INAN-kill OM1PL  
 ‘I laughed so hard, older brothers, Langila is overwhelming, it killed us!’  
 (*Rio de Janeiro* ‘R.’; Fr. *fort* ‘strong’; *Yaya Touré* ‘Ivorian football coach’; *Kibomango* ‘military camp in Kinshasa’; *Biscotte* ‘Congolese football player’)
- b. *Nasékí/Narigolé fort bayaya, langila edébordé, ebomí bísó!*  
 ‘I laughed so hard, older brothers, Langila is overwhelming, it killed us!’
- (3) a. *Est-ce que ba-petrous ya kitokimosi ba-zaire hawaii?*  
 QM NP2-girl CON pretty SM3PL-be here  
 ‘Are the pretty girls here?’  
 (*petrous* ‘girlfriend’; *Kitokimosi* ‘neighborhood in Selembao, Kinshasa’; *Zaire* ‘former official name for the Congo’; *Hawaii* ‘H.’)
- b. *Est-ce que bapetite ya kitóko bazá áwa?*  
 ‘Are the pretty girls here?’

The examples given already offer a glimpse of word-formation practices and lexical change, as well as of toponymic and anthroponymic proper nouns that are re-contextualized. The overall principle of how Langila speakers operate with and manipulate language by “replacing existing linguistic material” may be labelled in different ways. While Wilson (n.d.) calls the main phonological strategy “alliterate

substitution”, I have used “onomastic substitution” in earlier works (Nassenstein 2015), while Ndlovu (2022b) prefers the label “partial homophony” in his innovative work on S’ncamtho, cited below, clarifying the underlying principle of linguistic modification in the Ndebele-based speech style (which resembles the processes found in Langila):

The part-homophony can be in two words from different languages as in the following examples; khaya [khaja] (12) which is Ndebele for ‘home’ and [khanada] Canada (11), and amasentimitha (15), which is a Ndebele adaptation of the English word ‘centimetres’, and amasende which is Ndebele for ‘testicles’. Proper nouns are also used as decoy lexis as in the example of Canada and Germany (25) in the data. The process is, however, restricted when it comes to word class. The decoy lexis should be of the same word class category, that is, nouns replace nouns as in iBrazil for ibra (29), verbs for verbs gebha (dig) (3) for geza (bath), locatives for locatives, ejemeni (in Germany) for ejele (in jail), and copulatives ngiyinatshural (I am natural) (20) for ngiyinatshu (I am available).

(Ndlovu 2022b)

In Langila, the overall principle works in the same way, as I have expressed elsewhere; however, maintaining strict word class categories is no longer essential (e.g., the personal name *Jean-Claude Van Damme*, a Belgian actor known for action movies, can turn into a verb: *ko-jeanclaudevandamme* ‘to fit well, to sit well, to suit’,<sup>2</sup> replacing the verb *ko-fánda* ‘to sit (down), to reside, to suit’):

It [the process of onomastic substitution, NN] can be defined as a situation in which a name (of a person, concept or geographical name) replaces a similar-sounding standardized Lingala, Yanké or French word stem (or word), whereas a semantic link may be accidental, but not obligatory. (Nassenstein 2015: 90)

This also means that names that are used to designate “new” lexemes in Langila only keep a pseudo-referential function and have lost their semantic value, or semantic valence. The verb *jeanclaudevandamme* no longer refers to the Belgian actor but is based only on its phonological closeness and similarity to the common Lingala verb *-fánda*. Despite the “loss” or detachment of the denotator *jeanclaudevandamme* from its actual denotate ‘Belgian actor’, there may be connotations that can still be evoked for the hearer of the word. For instance, when used in a context of clothing and well-fitting clothes, the hearer may (potentially) think of actor Van Damme’s tank tops on his muscular chest and his well-fitting camouflage army pants. This is but one out of many different connotations that

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2. Verbal prefixes that display an infinitive are separated from the verb stem with a hyphen here to show where a root/stem begins.

could still play a role when a well-informed hearer, who speaks Langila, links associations (unconsciously) with a potential denotate. A hearer who is badly informed and does not know Langila will only think of the actor Van Damme, but not of any verb (or state) ‘to sit, to suit, to fit well’, let alone of clothing. Therefore, Langila can be considered a secret and an “obfuscating” practice, as it plays with the evoked associations and connotations of hearers who seem to understand what is said, but who can make no sense of what is uttered.

Hurst-Harosh (2020) presents similar findings from South African tsotsitaals, where speakers employ similar strategies to create new words and adapt meaning-making strategies of specific names. Yet it is not only proper nouns or names that are “manipulated” and modified in Langila – practically any given word, either in Lingala or in other widely used languages such as French and English, can be chosen to replace near-homophonic or partially homophonic words that are then used in Langila. However, using names is very popular as a lexicon-generating strategy, mostly due to their high social and verbal recognition value, strong indexicality and reference (which can then be detached or erased), and also to the deictic and metapragmatic functions of names that are maintained when turning names into lexical material.

In linguistics, *stricto sensu*, a distinction is drawn between “denotation” and “reference” based on de Saussure’s (1916) work<sup>3</sup> – even though in Langila both concepts come into play. While denotations of a lexical item are understood as their literal meaning (vs. connotations, i.e., implications and evoked associations), these content words are acts of identifying specific entities by a linguistic sign; they are also known as “referring expressions”. The latter is the concept commonly applied to proper nouns or names.

Proper nouns that serve as names or labels (of places, people, things) display a particularly clear and direct relationship between their linguistic “denotators”, i.e., the word used for a place or a person, and the “denotate”, i.e., the objects of reference. In many cases, this relationship is unambiguous and proper nouns thus identify a single entity, e.g., *Frankfurt* usually strictly refers to a place in Germany (a specific large city in the Rhine Main area), while *Joseph/Joe Biden*

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3. In some works, a difference is also made between denotation and designation. Often, a denotate of a linguistic expression or a word refers to single and more specific entities of a group (i.e., the “denotate”, German *Denotat*, of the word *language* would be specifically German, or French, or Lingala, or Japanese, while the “designate”, German *Designat*, would be the entire group or class of these elements and could thus mean any of them). The “denotate” (ranging in the field of de Saussure’s *parole*), contrasted with “designate” (ranging in the more abstract area of what de Saussure calls *langue*), denotes the specific cultural idea of an entity in a linguaculture, e.g., for speakers of Lingala, in a specific context in a semantic system. This narrow distinction between the two concepts is not always made in the present text.

usually clearly refers to a specific person (the US President and American politician in Washington). However, these denotators can at times become ambiguous: *Frankfurt* can likewise be a reference to a smaller city in the east of Germany on the River Oder, and *Joseph Biden* may not only be the name of the President of the United States but may probably also be the personal name of many other American citizens who are by no means politicians. Names are therefore in many cases also multi-referential due their non-exclusive nature and several possible referents may be linked to the referring expression (name). Context can clarify here. Sometimes, however, context is intentionally erased or omitted, and speakers play with ambiguities; in other cases, the referent is detached from the referring expression, and denotation becomes practically meaningless.

As explained in the paragraphs above, the ludic and “manipulative” character of Langila is entirely based on the principle of partial homonyms and phonological substitution. In de Saussure’s (1916) terms, there is a difference between *apòsème* and *parasème*, stating that “[l]’apòsème est l’enveloppe vocale du sème. Et non l’enveloppe d’une signification” [the apòsème is the vocal envelope of the seme. And not the envelope of a meaning] (Saussure 2002: 105, cited in Youxiang Tu 2016: 48). The meaning, in contrast, sits in the *parasème*, and altogether de Saussure’s twofold distinction can be summarized as follows: “sème (the sign as a whole) = sème (or apòsème) (the vocal shell of the seme, vocal figure, the material part of the synchronic seme, corpse of seme, signifier) + parasème (or parasème) (signification, signified)” (Youxiang Tu 2016: 48, adapted). While the *parasème* is no longer accessible in Langila words, only the *apòsème* as phonological envelope remains. It is important to note – and this corresponds with observations in Langila – that an *apòsème* will not be a random sequence of phonemes (“formule phonique quelconque” after de Saussure) that occurs in the language, but a series that had at some point a *sème* incorporated (a sign). In Langila, the semantically “empty/emptied” *apòsèmes* did indeed once embody a *sème*, e.g., the sign of a Belgian actor.

### 3. On representation, substitution and the aestheticization of place names

The observation that Langila functions based on principles of substitution and the replacement of similar sounding words, verb roots or stems, or final syllables of lexemes, does not say anything about how speakers choose concepts, form new lexical material, and actually decide to innovate language. Yet, while speakers have a high degree of freedom in Langila to coin or adapt new linguistic material, the innovated forms (derived from onomastic expressions, etc.) must also be

spread across the community and have to be adopted by other speakers. Logically, speakers' free deliberate choices in deriving new lexicon from existing words and proper nouns gives way to synonyms and competing lexemes – indeed, often Langila has several possible and widely used synonyms for one specific expression, due to speakers' parallel outputs of creativity.

However, it is not only the emergent linguistic practice of Langila that is based on ideas of substitution and replacement. In music genres such as rap and hip hop, artists have also played with the same “montage principle” in order to bring two diverging yet (semantically) related concepts together, comparing, e.g., Congolese cities with European cities, or local food with international food, or Congolese musicians with international stars. This practice, which becomes evident in Dahmu Manero's (2014) rap song *Bandal c'est Paris* ('Bandal is Paris') is based on the common saying among *kinois* (as the inhabitants of Kinshasa are called) that the neighbourhood of Bandalungwa, a few kilometres from the city centre, is as modern and rich in terms of nightlife as Paris – which, of course, is intended as hyperbole by speakers. Manero bases his entire hip hop song on this “confrontation” between Bandal(ungwa) and Paris, and ironically continues to compare concepts of cultural importance in Congolese society with international products, localities, and people. Local musicians such as Koffi Olomide and Werrason are compared with Puff Daddy and Jay Z, American ketchup is said to correspond to Congolese homemade chili sauce, and names given to specific neighborhoods of Kinshasa (Limete, called Texas) also appear in the song, as do football clubs (Vita Imana), said to be the equivalent to Barcelona. The neighbourhood on the River Congo, Kinkole, is said to correspond to Miami, and so forth (see Figure 1).

Balobi Bandal c'est Paris; soki Bandal c'est Paris, sais que Kinkole est Miami [...]	They say the neighbourh. Bandal is Paris; if Bandal is Paris then the port of Kinkole is Miami
Koffi Olomide c'est Puff Daddy; Werrason c'est Jay Z; Chris Brown nabiso eza Fally [...]	The singer Koffi Olomide is Puff Daddy; the singer Werrason is Jay Z; our Chris Brown is Fally [Ipupa]
Nganda ntaba c'est Hamburger; Ketchup c'est Pilipili; Hollywood nabiso c'est Ngiri-Ngiri [...]	Goatmeat from the road is a hamburger; Ketchup is the local hot chili; our Hollywood is the vibrant Ngiri-Ngiri
Limete c'est Texas; V-Club c'est Barca; Bonmarché c'est Vegas	The neighbourh. Limete is Texas; our football club V-Club is Barcelona; our party spot Bonmarche is Las Vegas

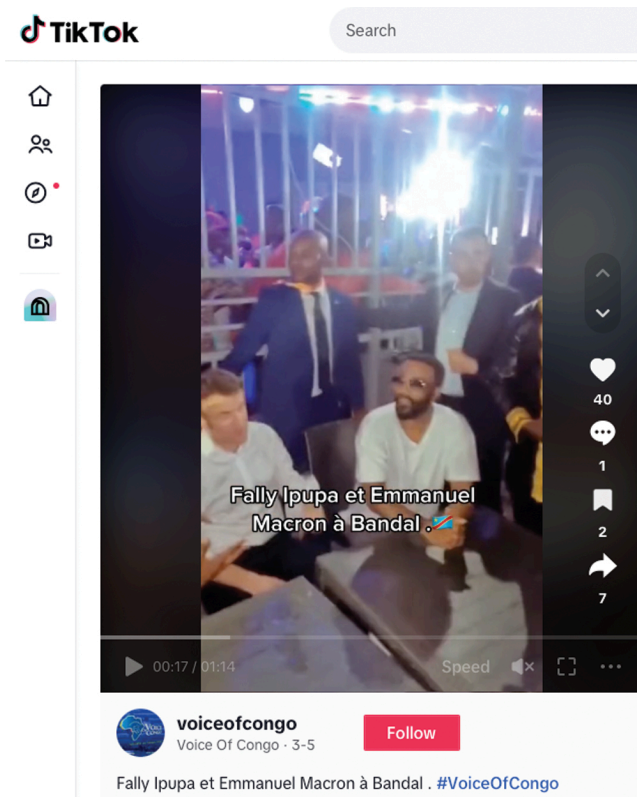
Figure 1. Lyrics of Dahmu Manero's (2014) song *Bandal c'est Paris* (my translation)

Yet there is more to it than simply setting up equivalents or replacing places, concepts, and people: Manero brings different lifeworlds a step closer together for people who are trapped in the megacity of Kinshasa (without resort or hope for social progress). He actually shapes common designations and names (as a speech act of name giving): Koffi Olomide has ever since often been called "Puff Daddy", and Bandalungwa (short: Bandal), the place of early residence and youth of the famous musician<sup>4</sup> Fally Ipupa, has ever since adopted the name "Paris", and it is commonly used today by most people to refer to the neighbourhood Bandalungwa.

What happens when labels and names lose their actual meaning and are semantically changed and recontextualized? In the case of the neighbourhoods of Bandalungwa and Paris, the substitution of one locality for the other turned into a mutual process: Whenever Congolese in online interactions in social media had conversations about the French capital, where many Lingala speakers reside and have settled, many would replace the city name with Bandal (as based on collected online data), influenced by Manero's song and also by musician Fally Ipupa's gaining popularity in DR Congo. The neighbourhood of Bandalungwa itself, in 2004–2008 still a sleepy and calm place with a few hangout places for partygoers, has become a wealthy area in some parts. Moreover, either as a result of the newly adopted/ascribed name "Paris" or as one of the causes that led to the "renaming" of Bandal, musician Fally Ipupa brought French President Emmanuel Macron to a *nganda* 'outdoor bar' in Bandal in early 2023 while on a diplomatic mission in DR Congo (see Figure 2), which to many Congolese citizens of Bandal actually seemed like a "birth certificate" proclaiming that Bandalungwa had now officially become a "second Paris". Lingala's emergence in the context of ongoing practices of (re)naming public space and developing creative linguistic practices is no coincidence but part of multilingual and creative scenarios of change and contact in Kinshasa (and beyond).

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4. The embedding and listing of names in Congolese popular music (see White 2008 for a solid study of dance music and politics) is an important cultural practice called *mabanga* 'stones', involving the reciting or embedding into stories of the names of listeners who are willing to pay for this public appraisal, as if "stones were thrown" by the singer into the crowd. The name calling in Congolese music can fill up to 15–25% of the actual lyrics and is also culturally important, not only in terms of its economic dimension and its generating of funding. Moreover, it is not only important to mention *le grand docteur Bobo Kitenge* 'the big doctor B. Kitenge', but in many cases it is also essential to say where he is based, e.g., *grand docteur ougandais Bobo Kitenge na Kampala* 'big Ugandan doctor (meaning: 'based in Uganda') B. Kitenge in Kampala' (invented example). Therefore, anthroponyms and toponyms often work together in *mabanga* practices in Congolese rumba music.



**Figure 2.** Musician Fally Ipupa brings French President Emmanuel Marcon to Bandal (Kinshasa, 2023). <https://www.tiktok.com/@voiceofcongo/video/7206864870837472518?lang=en> (last accessed 5 October 2023)

#### 4. Names, labels, and brands in Langila: A glimpse at the lexicon and creative practice

In postcolonial times, after independence, several African countries and cities were renamed, places and spaces that had received and went by colonial labels during the time of their occupation and exploitation (see Williamson 2023; for a broad overview volume, see Stolz & Warnke 2018). After independence, Léopoldville became Kinshasa, Stanleyville was turned into Kisangani, Costermansville became Bukavu, Élisabethville was changed to Lubumbashi, and even strategic small towns such as Thysville were renamed, the latter then labeled Mbanza-Ngungu. While some of the names were completely abolished and disappeared, others were no longer used in French but remained in use in Indigenous or contact languages; e.g. *Lipopo Kin Malebo* is one of several designations

in the language Label for Léopoldville/Kinshasa. A double toponymic reference to a single place was and is therefore not uncommon in the Congo (even though this diverges very much from the Bandal vs. Paris example discussed above).

Practices of renaming have also occurred in more local urban contexts; the naming of places with new names recalls the tradition of young people renaming large parts of the city of Léopoldville, now Kinshasa, at the time of independence. The so-called Bills, an autarchic group of violent youth, were the leaders of anti-colonial protest in the 1950s, and continued to utter their resistance against dictator Mobutu Sese Seko's system until the late sixties. The Bills' lifestyle worlds were mainly influenced by US-Western movies from the 1950s, particularly in terms of their dress code, lifestyle emblemization, and also language. A lot of vocabulary in the Bills' language (Sesep 1990), the Hindubill or Indoubill, was actually derived from lexical material from Western movies, as well as from recurrent anthroponyms and toponyms in these media (for a detailed ethnographic account of the Bill movement, see Gondola 2016).

Other place names such as Tulsa, Texas, Santa Fe, Nevada, and Dallas also gained in popularity in Central Africa and were used by young Lingala speakers for gang and group names, if not for toponyms, across the city Léopoldville, today's Kinshasa. Some of them have survived the Bills, being maintained until today and still designating specific neighbourhoods in the megapolis of Kinshasa with its population of 18 million: Dallas is known by all inhabitants as the designation for the neighbourhood of Yoló, while Pakadjuma is a shantytown that carries the Western movie label as its official name. Both toponyms and to a lesser extent, “artist names” (as pseudonyms of famous individuals) of people are influenced by urban and youth culture, and by media flows online and offline.

#### 4.1 “Miami, Aleman, eZaire ...” – Lexicalized toponyms and global frames of reference?

Renaming and relabelling the city is a practice that has continued until today. Again, among Langila speakers, the reference to global or far-away places plays a role in everyday discourse; not so much in actually referring with a foreign place name to a local place (e.g., a neighbourhood of Kinshasa or a province of the DR Congo), but rather as a replacement strategy for similar-sounding words. Elsewhere, I have analyzed this as a strategy that conveys a degree of cosmopolitanism or “worldliness” to the hearer of these names, which have been de-contextualized and only continue to stand as mere phonological remnants:

The habit of using city names (Miami, Jakarta, Venezuela → *venezwéla!* ‘come!’) as well as country names (Germany → *alemán!* ‘go!’) thereby expresses both the striving for a certain kind of “worldliness” and the impact of a globalized youth culture on Langila. (Nassenstein 2015: 90)

Specifically, widely diffused toponyms that convey an idea of a well-informed and cosmopolitan speaker are recurrent in Langila. As elaborated upon in Section 3, some of the places and spaces ranging prominently in Langila refer to favourite travel destinations (or “eldorados”) of many young Congolese, or to places known from movies, soap operas, or music clips. In only a few cases, places that evoke negative associations (*lifelo* ‘hell’) could be found in the available sources. The following overview lists some examples of toponyms that are often used by Langila speakers as “onomastic substitutes” or “partial homophony”:

**Table 1.** Names of cities, countries, and other places

Langila lexeme	Gloss	Lingala equivalent	Toponymic origin
<i>venezuela</i>	‘Come!’	Fr. venir	Country name Venezuela
<i>-zaire</i>	‘COP; to be; it is’	-zalı, -zala	Former country name Zaire
<i>hawaii*</i>	‘here’	áwa	US state Hawaii
<i>popokabaka</i>	‘because; so that’	mpó, pó	Congolese city Popokabaka
<i>-bengazi</i>	‘to call’	-bênga	Libyan war and petrol area Benghazi
<i>toureffel</i>	‘tour, trip, travel’	Fr. tour	Eiffel tower; Paris
<i>-tanganika</i>	‘to read’	-tánga	Lake Tanganyika
<i>-bangamoyo</i>	‘to fear’	-banga	Tanzanian city Bagamoyo
<i>miami</i>	‘hunger’	mya (youth lg.)	American city Miami
<i>aleman</i>	‘Go!’	Fr. allez!	German nationality, allemand
<i>kin makambo</i>	‘Kinshasa’	Kinshasa	Saying <i>Kin makambo</i> ‘Kinshasa means trouble!’
<i>chelsea</i>	‘sex worker’	tshel (youth lg.)	English football club/city Chelsea

\* A slightly adapted form of *hawaii* is *awariyou* from the English greeting “How are you?”

#### 4.2 “Rihanna, Maradona, or Mère Sylvie?” – Using anthroponyms in lexical creation

Less often, anthroponyms also play a role – whenever their name matches the phonological (and alliterative) characteristics of the term that is to be replaced, or to be concealed. The following list collects several examples of anthroponyms that are recurrent in Langila.

**Table 2.** Names of publicly known people and individuals

Langila lexeme	Gloss	Lingala equivalent	Anthroponymic origin
<i>-jeanclaudevandamme</i>	‘sit, fit, suit’	-fánda	Belg. actor J.-C. Van Damme
<i>pepe-kalle</i>	‘fine, alright’	pépélé	Late musician Pépé Kallé
<i>-zaidingoma</i>	‘COP; to be’	-zalí; -zala	Late politician Arthur Z’ahidi Ngoma
<i>-zachariebababaswe</i>	‘COP; to be’	-zalí; -zala	Politician and media host Zacharie Bababaswe
<i>-zarias</i>	‘COP; to be’	-zalí; -zala	Politician and rebel Azarias Ruberwa
<i>-tshekevara</i>	‘to check; control’	-chequé	Revolutionary Ché Guevara
<i>yowerimuseveni</i>	‘you’	yó	Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni
<i>-zangamobutu</i>	‘to miss, to lack’	-zanga	Son of former President Mobutu, Nzanga Mobutu

#### 4.3 “Alpharomeobetazol and Motorola!” – Brand names of goods, institutions, and fashion

Equally, denotations of luxury items, but also of daily life goods and institutions, fashion brands, and technical gear are used by Langila speakers to play with similar-sounding words and create new lexicon. The following list collects a few of these ergonyms and labelled institutions:

**Table 3.** Names of products, institutions, fashion items, and other “everyday” entities

Langila lexeme	Gloss	Lingala equivalent	Product- / instit.-based origin
<i>motorola</i>	‘person’	moto	Mobile phone company Motorola
<i>telecom</i>	‘no; NEG.’	té	Mobile phone usage telecom
<i>salami</i>	‘greeting’	salam (youth lg.)	Expensive salami sausages
<i>groupe- electrogene</i>	‘group; gang’	Fr. groupe	Fr. groupe électrogène ‘generator’
<i>machinedeguerre</i>	‘machine; process’	Fr./Ling. machine	Fr. war material, heavy weapon
<i>tv5</i>	‘no; NEG.’	té	Fr. television chain TV5
<i>-dame-jeanne</i>	‘to eat’	-damé (youth lg.)	Fr. balloon bottle made of glass
<i>mercedes</i>	‘mother’	Fr. mère	Car brand Mercedes
<i>-bayernmunich</i>	‘to drink, to smoke’	-bayé (youth lg.)	German soccer club FC Bayern

## 5. Concluding thoughts

The playful character of Langila is characterized by “games with names” (as elaborated by Storch 2019 for predominantly Kenyan contexts) that circle around denotations of cultural importance in Lingala, French, and other languages in Kinshasa and lead to creative practices of word formation, as shown in this concise contribution. When detaching the semantic value or content of a near-homophonic or partially homophonic concept, as is common in Langila, positive/negative connotations are often still maintained and intentionally used to meet and obfuscate the counter-expectations of hearers who are not initiated. These processes of obfuscation and confusion, guaranteeing secrecy and concealing knowledge, trigger and evoke specific images with the hearer when uttered by a creative and initiated speaker. Names that are reminiscent of specific cultural contexts of importance in Congolese culture transport, on the one hand, positive language ideologies of cosmopolitanism, vast knowledge, and established links to different entities (on the speaker’s part), and display a repertoire of names and contexts the speaker is acquainted with, and worlds he is proficient in. However, on the hearer’s part, Langila speakers’ use of existing names, labels, and contexts produce a certain incongruity (unlike in conlangs such as Klingonian where lexical material does not evoke feelings of familiarity with words). In contrast, in Langila, known words and familiar concepts are used as a priming strategy for misled connotative asso-

ciations for the hearer (as a sort of cognitive priming; expectations are then not fulfilled as the hearer must struggle with the complete incomprehensibility of Langila speakers’ conversations or written exchanges). Unlike other contributions in this collection (see Storch; Neethling, both this issue) where clear and evocative associations are triggered, Langila is based on the detachment of the semantics of denotation, and on cognitive dissociation.

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## Abbreviations

CON	connective	PL	plural
INAN	inanimate	PROG	progressive aspect
NP	nominal prefix	QM	question marker
NP2	nominal prefix of class 2	SG	singular
OM	object marker	SM	subject marker

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## Address for correspondence

Nico Nassenstein  
 Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien  
 Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz  
 Forum Universitatis 6  
 55099 Mainz  
 Germany  
 nnassens@uni-mainz.de

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