



On a Multiple Mother Tongues in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): The Case of the University of Kinshasa

Article Record

Claude Wakenge Malekani*

*Corresponding Author



Professor Malekani Kapele



Mr. Luzitusu



RECEIVED
2026-03-23

REVISED
2026-03-26

ACCEPTED
2026-04-06

PEER REVIEW
Double Blind

Abstract

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Mother Tongue

Multilingualism

Democratic Republic of Congo

Kinshasa

Lingala

French

Language Dominance

AI USE STATEMENT

No generative AI was used for analysis or results.

FUNDING

No external funding was declared for this work.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Not applicable for this article.

ETHICS

No ethics committee approval was required for this article type.

CONSENT

Not applicable for this article.

TRIAL REG.

Not applicable.

Crossref DOI: 10.34257/GJHSSG255189

How to Cite: Wakenge Malekani et al. (2026). On a Multiple Mother Tongues in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): The Case of the University of Kinshasa. Global Journal of Human-Social Science, 26(3), 1-15. DOI: 10.34257/GJHSSG255189

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Print ISSN 0975-587X



9 770975 587004

Online ISSN 2249-460X



9 772249 460013

Under the strict compliance and defined process of



METADATA CONTINUATION

AUTHOR CONTACT QR LEDGER


Claude Wakenge Malekani*



Professor Malekani Kapele



Mr. Luzitusu



ARCHIVAL RECORD

GJHSS · Vol 26 · Issue 3 · 2026

Article ID GJHSS-255189 · DOI 10.34257/GJHSSG255189

Print ISSN 0975-587X · Online ISSN 2249-460X

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Abstract

This paper set out to analyze the concept of Mother Tongue (MT) in a student community at the University of Kinshasa. The underlying hypothesis, based on the researchers' experiences and observations, was that the concept of MT as viewed and defined by UNESCO (1953) with a combination of chronological and competence meanings, could not be applied so straightforwardly to this study setting in DRC, where the dominant languages in the repertoires of a number of young people are not necessarily the first languages acquired as children. It was then posited that the regional language, in this case Lingala, or the official language, in this case French, or indeed any other second national language like Ciluba, Kikongo or Kiswahili, could take up the role of a MT, that is, with a MT effect. In this respect, a multiple MT has been naturally envisaged. The Democratic Republic of Congo is a multilingual country par excellence, with around 250* spoken languages, and in the capital city of Kinshasa, speakers of the four national languages, namely Ciluba, Kikongo, Kiswahili, and Lingala, interact daily in addition to the official language, French. No wonder any of these languages could end up emerging as the dominant one, depending on social backgrounds and domains of language use. Linguistic data were collected empirically as well as in classrooms, using both qualitative and quantitative observation and interview techniques, as well as a questionnaire with both open and closed questions. The informants were 100 sample students selected from a target population of the Department English and Business Computer Science, at the Faculty of Arts, University of Kinshasa. Using a number of psycho-sociolinguistic parameters to assess the dominant language (s) in the informants' linguistic repertoires, it has been realized that the examinees are truly bilingual in French and Lingala.

Keywords: *Mother Tongue, Multilingualism, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kinshasa, Lingala, French, Language Dominance, Sociolinguistics*

* Corresponding Author
Claude Wakenge Malekani

DOI
10.34257/GJHSSG255189

1. The problem

As in many multilingual countries in Africa, the concept of MT is difficult to define with regard to its double chronological and competence aspects, given that a number of people, particularly among the younger generations, use a nonnative language or a combination of two or three languages, one of them being necessarily the official language, as a MT or a multiple MT with a MT-effect.

It is, therefore, a problem to tell which language is a dominant one, or which background language to a multilingual speaker will be the main reference language in learning a target foreign language.

2. Aim, objectives and research questions

The aim of the study was to apply the concept of MT as defined long ago by UNESCO (op. cit.) and others with its double characteristic of a first language and a dominant one to the Congolese situation in Kinshasa, particularly at the University of Kinshasa.

Our specific objectives and research questions were to find out: (1) which language(s) in the surveyed subjects' linguistic repertoires function as their MTs, (2) to see whether they have the same linguistic repertoires and the same MTs as their parents, and (3) in case their dominant language(s) is (are) different from their parents', why it is the case.

One psycholinguistic implication of the study would be the suggestion that both the teacher and the multilingual learner of a foreign language would refer to the actual learner's background dominant language rather than to his/her L1 in accounting for any interference problems. One pedagogical implication would be the suggestion that a multilingual approach to FL learning and teaching would be more appropriate than the currently used monolingual target language learning and teaching. This double implication contributes to the interest of the study.

3. Hypotheses

Two hypotheses naturally arose from the two objectives and research questions defined above:

- a. The MTs of the surveyed subjects will be multiple ones, reflecting their multilingual environment.
- b. The linguistic repertoires of the surveyed subjects will differ from their parents', given their differing domains of language uses.

4. Description of the Survey and Data collection

The target population of this investigation was the Department of English and Business Computer Science of the Faculty of Arts, University of Kinshasa. The University of Kinshasa is the largest in the country with twelve faculties, including that of Arts, with

around 15000 students. The total number of the target Department population was 1290 at the time of investigation, distributed in four classes.

As the aim of the investigation was to assess the subjects' sociolinguistic background rather than their academic performance as such, their homogeneity was not that relevant. In fact, some heterogeneity was thought to be kind of useful, and indeed insured by the four different levels of students, the common background being secured by their common multilingual situation dominated by French as the official language.

However, to reach a practical size of a sample from the total target population estimated at around 1300 subjects, we applied the mathematical formula suggested by Taro Yamane cited in Ahuja (op. cit.:186), which is:

$$N = \frac{n}{1 + n(e)^2} \quad (1)$$

where 'n' is 1.300 (the total number of students of English and Business Computing Department) and 'e' is .06 (confidence level), yielding around 200 students.

This number was further divided by two to keep 100 subjects. As regards the sampling from each department stratum, we applied the technique of proportional allocation according to which the size of the sample was kept proportional to the size of the stratum. The different strata were thus represented by N1-4 as follows: N1 = 35 (2nd year); N2 = 25 (3rd year); N3 = 20 (4th year); N4 = 20 (5th year); making 100 in total.

5. The relevant psycho-sociolinguistic factors

The definition of the psycho-sociolinguistic parameters to be used for assessing the relative dominance of each of the background language of the informants could not be done randomly. It was based on some relevant previous models, including U. Weinreich (1968); W. A. Stewart (1968); Chumbow (1984); and Malekani (2001).

Weinreich (op. cit.) proposed seven factors for rating the relative importance of each of a bilingual speaker's languages: a. relative proficiency; b. mode of use; c. order of learning; d. emotional involvement; e. usefulness in communication; f. function in social advance; and g. literary cultural value.

Despite the very relevance of factor (a) proposed by Weinreich (op. cit.), the relative proficiency, we found that it deserved a special investigation, using some language competence rating models, and we assumed further that this factor would be compensated for by all other factors combined. We also found that factors (e) and (g), those of usefulness in communication and literary cultural value were not specific enough.

Stewart (op. cit.) proposed a typology of language in multilingual countries, and used ten criteria for defining language functions and types at a national level. The ten proposed criteria are as follows: (a) official, (b) provincial, (c) wider communication, (d) international, (e) capital city, (f) group, (g) educational, (h) school subject, (i) literary, and (j) religious.

We did not find it useful to retain the proposed factors (a), (b), (f), (g), (i) and (j) for lack of specificity in the Congolese context.

Chumbow (op. cit.) was specifically concerned with the sociolinguistic factors determinant of interference in the study of a third or fourth language in Cameroun and Nigeria, two countries that are obviously similar to DRC with regard to their sociolinguistic situations.

He added the following factors to those proposed earlier by Weinreich and Stewart: (a) the functional role of the base language

(BL), (b) the role of the BL as a medium of learning the TL, (c) the geographical, cultural or ethnic relations with the TL, and (d) the extent of structural and phonological relatedness with the TL.

As we did not aim particularly at assessing the relative impact of the background or Base Languages on the particular target language, English, we did not find it relevant to retain Chumbow's factors (c) and (d), while restructuring (a) and (b) to make them more specific.

Malekani (op. cit.) provided an integrated selection of the criteria proposed in the three previous studies mentioned above, retaining a total of seventeen relevant factors in DRC context determinant of language dominance.

6. Results of the dominance configuration

The dominance configuration of the multiple mother tongues of the subjects involved in this study comprises seventeen relevant factors as follows, with corresponding results of the investigation:

1 The student's age; 2. the parents' L1s; 3. the order or language learning; 4. the frequency of language use at home; 5. the language mostly spoken with university friends; 6. the emotional involvement in language use; 7. the national status of the language; 8. the regional status of the language; 9. the official status; 10. the capital city status; 11. the primary school subject/medium of instruction; 12. the secondary school subject/medium of instruction; 13. the higher education subject/medium of instruction; 14. the mode of language use; 15. the language codification and standardization; 16. the function in social advance; 17. the informants' attitudes to languages.

6.1. The student's age

Age range	Numbers	%
18 - 19	27	27
20 - 21	40	40
22 - 23	18	18
24 - 25	15	15
Total	100	100

Table 1. The student's age

The table above shows that the age range of the surveyed students between 20 and 21 is predominant with 40%, followed by 18 – 19 students or 27%. The other two groups are aged 22 – 23 and 24 – 25 or 18% and 15% respectively. It must be said that the age differences here are not significant, insofar as they are all young adults, well above the 18-year bar where they are supposed to have consolidated their multilingualism.

6.2. The parents' L1s

Language	Number	%
Ciluba	13	35%
Kikongo	35	35%
Kiswahili	10	10%
Lingala	25	25%
French	8	8%
Others	9	19%
Total	100	100%

Table 2. The parents' L1s

It is clearly seen above that Kikongo (35%) is the predominantly L1 of students' parents in Kinshasa, followed by Lingala (25%). Ciluba (13%) and Kiswahili (10%) follow suit in 3rd and fourth positions. It is also noticeable that other languages than the four national ones constitute about one fifth (19%) of the total parents' population in Kinshasa, highlighting its multilingual character.

6.3. The order of language learning

First Language acquired	Number	%
Ciluba	7	7%
Ciluba+Lingala	9	9%
Ciluba+French	8	8%
Kikongo	6	6%
Kikongo+Lingala	7	7%
Kikongo+French	6	6%
Kiswahili	8	8%
Kiswahili+Lingala	9	9%
Kiswahili+French	9	9%
Lingala	11	11%
Lingala+French	12	12%
French	8	8%
Total	100	100

Table 3. The order of language learning

The table above shows that Lingala comes on top as a single L1 with 11% of L1 speakers. However, it is slightly superseded by the combination of Lingala+French with 12% of L1 speakers. This combination of French plus a second national language continues to the other three national languages with 9% for each pair. As French itself totals 8%, this means that in real terms French is the most currently learnt language as L1 in Kinshasa Student families.

6.4. The frequency of language use at home

The language mostly used at home	Numbers	%
Ciluba	9	9%
Kikongo	8	8%
Kiswahili	9	9%
Lingala	13	13%
French	9	9%
Ciluba+French	9	9%
Kikongo+French	7	7%
Kiswahili+French	10	10%
Lingala+French	13	13%
Lingala+Kikongo	12	12%

Table 4. The frequency of language use at home

The table above indicates that Lingala remains the main language acquired as L1 in Kinshasa with 13%, followed by another 13% where Lingala is combined with French to make 26%. Secondly, the table above also indicates the relative importance of French in combination with the other national languages, Kiswahili with French (10%), Ciluba with French (9%), and Kikongo with French (7%). The relative importance of the combination of two local languages, Lingala with Kikongo (12%) is indicative of the relatively large number of people from Kikongo and Lingala speaking areas in Kinshasa.

6.5. The language mostly spoken with university friends

Language (s)	Numbers	%
Ciluba	8	8%
Kikongo	6	6%
Kiswahili	4	4%
Lingala	18	18%
French	12	12%
Ciluba+French	11	11%
Kikongo+French	8	8%
Kiswahili+French	7	7%
Lingala+French	26	26%
Total	100	100%

Table 5. The language mostly spoken with university friends

The table above reveals that the most commonly used languages on the university premises are Lingala+French (26%) and Lingala (18%). The other languages are not much used around the university.

6.6. Emotional involvement

The assessment of this variable was based on students' responses to the question on what language they use when they are angry, in their dreams, when they talk about love and sexuality, and on the sports grounds. Emotional involvement could surely be assessed

in other domains of life like dreams, but we believe that these three can measure it sufficiently.

language	Anger %	Love and sexuality %	Sports grounds %	Total %
Ciluba	6	6	6	18
Kikongo	4	4	4	12
Kiswahili	6	6	4	16
Lingala	8	10	12	30
French	7	7	10	24
Total	31	33	36	100

Table 6. Emotional involvement

The results indicated in the table above show that there is not much difference among three of the national languages, that are Ciluba, (18%), Kikongo (12%) and Kiswahili (16%), while Lingala and French stand out again as the main languages. It is significant to note that French, a nonlocal language, is also accountable for in this variable.

6.7 – 6.15 From the national status to the language codification and standardization.

The nine following variables are of a different nature: they have not been assessed on the basis of the students' responses, but rather on the researchers' evaluation of the specific functions and statuses of the languages concerned. The criteria used in these evaluations will be indicated shortly.

6.7. The National Languages

National languages are those languages that have been selected among others due to their political, economic, social, cultural and pedagogical powers, to help for national communication, integration and development. These are Ciluba, Kikongo, Kiswahili and lingala. (Malekani 2016). In this respect, at least two official documents that have endorsed this status may be mentioned: the Constitution (Art.2) and the National Conference (1992). The numbers of speakers of these languages are not settled, but some statistics have been put forward, which remain to be supported by further investigations: Gueunier (1992), citing Champion (1986), states that Kiswahili counts 23% of Congolese first language speakers, followed by Lingala with 14%, Kikongo with 12%, and Ciluba with 11%. According to Prof. Ndolo (1992), Lingala comes first with 37.46%, followed by Kiswahili with 27.49%, Ciluba with 19.3% and Kikongo with 15.75%. Prof. Kamwangamalu (1996) places Kiswahili on top again with 23%, followed by Lingala with 14%, Kikongo with 12% and Ciluba with 10%. As for Prof. Mukash (2002), 35% of Congolese people speak Kiswahili as their L1, 30% speak Lingala, 15% speak Kikongo, and 15% speak Ciluba. While further studies are required to confirm these tendencies, the present statistics place Kiswahili on top as the first Congolese L1, followed by Lingala, while Kikongo and Ciluba seem to dispute the third place. The literature of the choice of anyone of these 4 national languages to become a unique national one is even more controversial. The conference of Congolese linguists who gathered in Lubumbashi in 1974 for this purpose failed, keeping the status quo of the 4 national languages, despite the hot discussions between Lingala and Kiswahili, some arguing for the linguistic and pedagogical advantages of Kiswahili, and others supporting more the sociolinguistic, socioeconomic and political (under President Mobutu) advantages of Lingala. Ntahwakuderwa (1986) has advocated for Lingala as a unique national language, while Kamwangamalu (op. cit.) has supported Kiswahili. The language Observatory, of which we are members, maintains the status quo, while working on a move toward an enlargement of

the number of national languages under the recommendation of a former Minister of Culture. It is worth recalling at this junction the criteria used for selecting National Languages. They include the size of the related population, the extension of the area covered by the speech community concerned (preferably cutting across ethnical boundaries), the availability of written materials (particularly pedagogical ones), and other factors like the relative political and sociocultural power of the community concerned in the country. A further point worth making is that the present 4-national language policy was influenced by the colonial policy prior to 1960, when the country got independent, though for different reasons: faced with a relatively large area to rule, The Belgian administrators conceived and promoted this scheme of four languages instead of one to avoid the arousal of a national feeling and move to independence, while avoiding, at the same time, falling down to ethnical identities which are more intertwined with local cultural values.

6.8. The regional status and Capital City

As the Capital City of Kinshasa has the administrative status of a province (called *region* here), we found it reasonable to deal with both the regional and Capital City statuses together as a single variable.

Geographically, the Kiswahili speech community area occupies a wider area, covering most part of Eastern Congo from the present province of Ituri to that of Haut Katanga, including the former provinces of Kivu and Katanga.

Lingala area comes second, with the whole of Northern Congo extending down West to include the large Capital City of Kinshasa. Kikongo area is third with the rest of Western Congo, including Kongo Central and part of Bandundu Provinces. Kasai mainly occupies the central part of the country. As this investigation took place in this very city of Kinshasa, Lingala will be given an advantage with the maximum score in assessing this regional parameter, while the other four languages share the minimum score.

6.9. The official status

French remains the unique official language despite the previous attempts to raise the four National languages to the official status by the National Conference (1992) and former President L. D. Kabila's will to make English a second official language as mentioned earlier. As such, it is the language mainly used in the government, the administration, the public media and business (including diplomatic encounters). French will, therefore, get the maximum score in this parameter, while the other languages score zero.

6.10. Primary school subject and medium

By the time our informants were at primary school (around ten to fifteen years ago), both Lingala and French were used as subjects here in Kinshasa, while Lingala was used as a medium of instruction up to the third year in some schools and French in others, French becoming the only medium of instruction everywhere from the third year. French would then slightly score more than Lingala, and definitely more than the other languages in this variable.

6.11. Secondary school subject and medium

At secondary school, French becomes more dominant everywhere in the country, including in Kinshasa. This was true when the informants were at secondary school (some five to ten years ago)

and the situation continues to the present day. French is both a subject and the only medium of instruction throughout the secondary school, except in English classes. French will definitely get the maximum score, while the other languages score zero.

6.12. Higher education

Here again, French will score more than the other MT competitors as it remains the main Higher education language both as a subject and a medium of instruction. As the other four languages are studied as optional courses in some departments of the Faculty of Arts, and are used on the Higher education premises, they will be granted equally the minimum score.

6.13. Mode of language use

French scores more than the other languages as it is widely used in its written form as well as in the spoken form, while the other languages are more used in their spoken forms. This situation prevails throughout the whole school career from primary to higher education. French will then be granted the maximum score, and the other languages the minimum one.

6.14. Standardization

In sociolinguistics we mean 'standardization' any process of language development whereby both linguistic forms and language communicative functions are readjusted to meet widely accepted norms. These linguistic forms should include phonological, morphological, syntactical, lexico-semantic and pragmatic features. The sociolinguistic functions could range from the basic ones like greetings, introductions, descriptions of objects, counts of numbers, simple questions and responses, etc. to more elaborate ones like comparisons, descriptions of events, expressions of feelings and ideas, etc. French should score more here again.

6.15. The informants' attitudes to languages

The informants' attitudes to the languages concerned were assessed through the questions: a. how do you like Ciluba/Kikongo/ Kiswahili/ Lingala/French? to be answered by *a lot, a little, not much*; b. how important and useful is Ciluba/Kikongo/Kiswahili/Lingala/French, to be answered by *very important, slightly important, not very important*; C. why did you learn Ciluba/Kikongo/Kiswahili /Lingala/French? to be answered by *to communicate with native speakers, to find a job easily, it is a language of prestige, it is a mark of education, for social advance, for other reasons*.

6.15.1. How do you like the language?

	Ciluba %	Kikongo %	Kiswahili %	Lingala %	French %
A lot	45	40	42	80	78
A little	35	35	36	10	12
Not much	20	25	22	10	10
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table 7. How do you like the language?

6.15.2. How important and useful is the language?

	Ciluba %	Kikongo %	Kiswahili %	Lingala %	French %
Very important	48	45	40	60	82
Slightly important	27	20	25	22	12
Not very important	25	35	35	18	6
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table 8. How important and useful is the language?

6.15.3. Why did you learn the language after your L1?

	Ciluba %	Kikongo %	Kiswahili %	Lingala %	French %
To communicate with native speakers	32	40	45	50	46
To find a job easily	16	22	12	22	32
It's a mark of education	12	8	13	9	10
It's a language of prestige	10	10	10	9	5
For social advance	10	14	8	5	5
For other reasons	20	6	12	5	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Table 9. Why did you learn the language after your L1?

Tables 6.15 (a)-(b) clearly indicate that Lingala and French are the two languages most liked and found more important than Kikongo and Kiswahili, while the latter share about the same amount of interest and importance ratings. Similarly, French and Lingala are rated on top of table (c) regarding the informants' positive attitudes to them, particularly with regard to their motivations for communicating with native speakers and for finding jobs more easily. From a theoretical point of view, the model proposed long ago by R. D. Gardner (1979), showing the relationship between attitude, motivation and achievement, remains useful insofar as language achievement should reflect the level of language dominance in a multilingual situation. Furthermore, with regard to the most quoted distinction between the integrative and instrumental motivation by Gardner and Lambert (1979) the tables above show that the informants' motivations for the preferred languages, Lingala and French, are for some practical reasons like economic and social ones, though the application of this model to the Congolese language, Lingala may sound less relevant. In fact, it was pointed out earlier that Lingala is the dominant language in the capital city, Kinshasa. It is worth mentioning at this juncture that the implantation of Lingala in Kinshasa as well as in a large part of the country as a second Congolese language has not been a matter of random. It all started in the colonial period, where Belgians recruited most people from the provinces of Katanga and Kasai for working in the mines of Katanga, those of Kivu, Upper Congo and Bandundu for working in the agricultural plantations of tea, coffee, rubber and palm oil, while those of Congo central were mainly employed in installing the Matadi-Leopoldville railway. Thus the forest population of Equateur Province, who spoke mainly Lingala, were poured into the army, becoming the main military manpower who were spread across the country up to the independence and long after it to the present time. Other significant factors, including the adoption of Lingala by most Congolese musicians, and the long reign of Late President Mobutu with his long political rallies across the country, have added to the military language to make it a significant target of nonnative Congolese learners of Lingala for instrumental reasons.

7. Determining the MT-Effect

As the aim of the survey was to identify the dominant language(s) in the background linguistic repertoire, that is the language with the MT-effect or the language acting as the MT (which would not preclude the possibility of that language being the student's MT itself), we found it objective enough to assign grades to each of the parameters examined before, and present the aggregate scores obtained in a classifying table. But before that, we need to define the scoring principles.

7.1. The scoring principles

1. We shall operate on the basis of the five languages examined in the different (psycho)sociolinguistic parameters examined earlier, without denying the fact some other ethnic language might also be influential in some informants' repertoires.

The exclusion of the latter was simply motivated by their weak positions in the overall linguistic backgrounds of the informants.

2. Each language will be given a maximum score of three points given to the first language in that parameter, the next language being given two points, and the third just one point.
3. Any other language after the first three ones will be given zero.
4. The language considered to be equal with another one will score the same in that parameter.

7.2. The aggregate scores for the MT-Effect

No	Parameters	Ciluba	Kikongo	Kiswahili	Lingala	French
1	Informant's age	0	0	0	0	0
2	Parents' L1	3	3	0	2	0
3	Order of language learning	1	1	1	3	2
4	Frequency at home	1	1	1	3	2
5	Use with Univ friends	1	0	0	3	2
6	Emotional involvement	1	0	0	3	2
7	National status	0	1	3	2	0
8	Regional status	1	1	1	3	2
9	Official status	0	0	0	0	3
10	Primary school use	1	1	1	2	3
11	Secondary school use	0	0	0	0	3
12	Higher school use	1	1	1	1	3
13	Mode of use	1	1	1	1	3
14	Standardization	1	1	1	1	3
15-16	Attitudes	1	1	1	2	2
17	Attitudes	1	1	1	2	2
Aggregate scores		14	13	12	28	32

Table 10. The aggregate scores for the MT-Effect

8. Results and discussion

The aggregate scores for the MT-effect of the informants' background languages examined clearly indicate that these students are truly bilingual in French and lingala, the two languages emerging significantly from their repertoires with scores of 32 and 28 respectively on the psycho-sociolinguistic parameters considered.

It is worth pointing out that the two languages emerge more from the rest at the lower part of the table that include the parameters concerning language use at school and other public places. One may find it surprising that a second/official, that is nonnative Congolese language, French, comes on top of the list, but one easily understands this phenomenon, at the same time, when one considers the overwhelming use and influence of French in Congolese schools.

The second position of Lingala should not surprise either, given its status as the regional language of the capital city, Kinshasa, where most informants were born and have grown up.

As regards the scores of the other three languages, it is interesting to note that they score roughly the same on the aggregate table, suggesting that each informant uses one of them as a third language at the expense of the others. This means, for example, that a student with Ciluba parents would be mainly bilingual in French and Lingala, but slightly trilingual with a third language, Ciluba.

9. Conclusion

This study was aimed at applying the concept of MT as defined long ago by UNESCO (op. cit.) with the double meaning of a First language acquired in the childhood and the language one is the most competent in.

The setting of the study has been the University of Kinshasa, where a large number of students were born and grew up in Kinshasa, the capital city, using extensively Lingala as the regional language, and French as the official language.

The specific objective was threefold: (1) to find out the dominant language(s) in agreement with the second meaning of UNESCO's definition, (2) to check if this dominant language coincided with the parents' L1 or their own L1, and (3) to find out why this dominant language would be different from L1.

A double hypothesis naturally arose from this triple objective, that is (1) the MT of the surveyed subjects would be a double or triple one, reflecting their multilingual environment, and that (2) the linguistic repertoires of the surveyed subjects, including their dominant language (s), would differ from their parents, given their differing domains of language uses.

The target population of this investigation was the Department of English and Business Computer Science of the Faculty of Arts, University of Kinshasa, involving a total number of the target Department population of 1290, but reduced to a sample of 100 students, using a mathematical formula suggested by Taro Yamane (op. cit.), and distributed to four strata corresponding to four students' levels.

Through a set of psycho-sociolinguistic parameters based on models suggested by Stewart (op. cit.), Chumbow (op. cit.) and Malekani (op. cit), we came to the conclusion that the students surveyed are truly bilingual in French and Lingala, the two languages scoring 32 and 28 points on an aggregate score chart, against Ciluba, Kikongo and Kiswahili, lagging far behind with 14, 13 and 12 scores respectively.

The double hypothesis has thus been confirmed, with the precision from the first hypothesis that bilingualism rather than trilingualism is more reflective of the situation, even though each student has clearly shown to be able to communicate in a third language.

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