MULTILINGUALISM AND TRANSLANGUAGING: CASE OF KISANGANI IN DRC

Dr MOSES NGONDOMBO LIKUME PENGONGO

PhD in Linguitics

Associate Professor at the University of Kisangani

(+243)815111848/854596107/982839453

ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics of multilingualism and translanguaging in Kisangani, a linguistically diverse city in the northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo. It investigates how languages interact across social, educational, and professional domains, and examines whether these linguistic practices foster integration, development, and unity among the city's multiethnic population. Kisangani is characterized by the coexistence of national languages—particularly Lingala and Kiswahili—alongside numerous indigenous tongues such as Lokélé, Enya, Bongando, Mbole, Boa, Komo and Tofoe, as well as French and English. Using a qualitative approach involving interviews, observations, and document analysis, the research reveals that translanguaging is a common and strategic practice among residents. It facilitates communication across linguistic boundaries, enhances comprehension in educational settings, and strengthens social cohesion in everyday interactions. While multilingualism is largely perceived as a unifying force, the study also highlights tensions between actual language practices and official monolingual policies, especially in formal institutions. The findings underscore the need for inclusive language policies that reflect the sociolinguistic realities of Kisangani and support the constructive use of linguistic diversity for social transformation.

One of the major effects of language contact is multilingualism, which refers to a linguistic environment where several languages coexist. This coexistence often gives rise to various linguistic phenomena such as borrowing, code-switching, code-mixing, calques, and others. Translanguaging, on the other hand, is a concept that encompasses different dimensions of multilingualism. It describes how bilingual and multilingual individuals draw upon their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning and engage with their environment. It also refers to a pedagogical approach that incorporates the use of multiple languages within the context of classroom instruction.

For data collection, we used interviews and survey questionnaires, which were administered to a convenience sample of 95 participants, including teachers and students from various secondary schools, colleges, and the University of Kisangani. The results, analyzed from a sociolinguistic perspective, reveal that multilingualism and translanguaging in Kisangani are key factors in fostering integration and unity among diverse communities. These practices not only facilitate communication but also enhance the assimilation of course content.

Keywords: multilinguilism, translanguaging, code switching, code mixing, calque

1. Multilingualism

Multilingualism refers to the ability of individuals or communities to use more than one language in daily life. According to Grosjean (2010), multilinguals do not use their languages in isolation but switch between them based on context, interlocutor, and function. In African societies, multilingualism is often the norm rather than the exception, and is influenced by historical, political, and educational factors. The functional distribution of languages in multilingual societies allows for different languages to dominate in specific domains, such as home, school, church, market, and administration (Batibo, 2005).

In Kisangani, this functional multilingualism is evident in the way Lingala is used in religious and informal urban settings, Kiswahili in trade and cross-ethnic communication, French in formal education and administration, and indigenous languages in family and community life.

2. Translanguaging

Translanguaging, a concept developed by Cen Williams (1994) and later expanded by García (2009), refers to the process whereby multilingual speakers use their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning, communicate, and learn. Rather than viewing languages as separate systems, translanguaging sees the speaker as having one integrated linguistic system from which they draw selectively depending on the context. In urban African contexts, translanguaging is particularly prevalent as speakers switch flexibly between languages to express themselves, negotiate identities, and foster inclusion. It allows for innovation, creativity, and fluid communication, especially in multicultural settings like Kisangani. Translanguaging also challenges traditional monolingual ideologies that dominate educational and institutional policies, by promoting the legitimacy of all languages within a speaker's repertoire.

3. Code switching

Code-switching is the practice of alternating between two or more languages, dialects, or language varieties within a single conversation, sentence, or even phrase.

It often occurs in multilingual or bilingual communities, where speakers can fluently move between languages depending on:

Leo tuko na exam ya linguistics, so lazima tu revise vizuri.

(Swahili: "Today we have a linguistics exam" + English phrase "so we must revise well.")

4. Code mixing

Code-mixing is the blending of two or more languages or language varieties within the same sentence, phrase, or even word—often without a clear boundary between them. Unlike code-switching, which can be intentional and often separates languages more clearly, code-mixing usually happens naturally when speakers integrate elements (words, phrases, or grammatical structures) from different languages into one continuous utterance.

5. Calque

A calque (also called a loan translation) is a word or expression borrowed from another language by translating it literally—word for word or component by component—rather than borrowing its sound. Instead of taking the foreign word as it is (like "pizza"), the borrowing language recreates it using its own words that match the meaning.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Language plays a vital role in shaping social relationships, cultural identities, and professional interactions. In multilingual societies, the interaction between different languages often leads to dynamic linguistic practices that influence social cohesion and communication across various domains of life. Kisangani, a major city in the northeastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), offers a rich and complex linguistic landscape that is ideal for examining such phenomena.

The present study seeks to investigate how different languages interact within sociocultural and professional contexts in Kisangani. More specifically, it aims to assess whether multilingualism and translanguaging contribute to the integration, development, and unity of the city's ethnolinguistically diverse population. Translanguaging, as a pedagogical and sociolinguistic practice, involves the flexible use of linguistic resources by multilingual speakers to make meaning, enhance communication, and construct knowledge. In contexts like Kisangani, where speakers often navigate between multiple languages daily, translanguaging may serve not only as a tool of communication but also as a strategy for social inclusion and cohesion.

Kisangani is known for its linguistic diversity, with two of the DRC's four national languages—Kiswahili and Lingala—being widely spoken by the local population. In addition, several ethnic languages such as Lokélé, Enya, Olombo, Tofoe, soko, Kimbole and Komo function as vernacular languages, reflect the city's multiethnic composition. French, the official language of the country, dominates the domains of administration, education, and formal communication, while English, as a foreign language, is gaining ground due to globalization and international education.

This article examines how these languages coexist and interact in Kisangani's multilingual setting. It also explores how speakers draw upon their multilingual repertoires in daily life and whether such practices enhance mutual understanding and contribute to social integration. By focusing on Kisangani as a case study, this research contributes to broader debates on language contact, multilingualism, and identity in urban African contexts.

1.1 Background of the Study

In multilingual settings, especially in African urban centers, language contact is a common reality. The co-existence of several languages within the same community creates opportunities for social exchange, but also poses challenges related to identity, communication, and access to resources. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in Africa, with over 200 languages spoken across its territory. Among these, four are officially recognized as national languages: Kiswahili, Lingala, Tshiluba, and Kikongo, alongside French as the official language. Kisangani, the capital of Tshopo Province in the northeastern part of the DRC, exemplifies this complex linguistic situation. It is home to

a multiethnic population where Kiswahili and Lingala dominate everyday communication, particularly in public, educational, and religious domains. Beyond these, a number of indigenous languages such as Lokélé, Enya, Tofoe, and Olombo are actively spoken within specific communities as vernacular languages. This diverse linguistic ecology creates an environment where speakers frequently engage in code-switching, code-mixing, and translanguaging—practices that allow them to move fluidly across languages to communicate effectively.

With increased mobility, globalization, and educational development, foreign languages such as English are also gaining importance, especially in professional and academic settings. As such, the city of Kisangani presents a fertile ground for examining how multilingualism and translanguaging practices affect every day social and professional interactions.

2.0 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the evident multilingual reality of Kisangani, there is limited empirical research on how language practices such as translanguaging contribute to social integration, development, and interethnic unity within the city. While multilingualism is often celebrated for its richness, it can also lead to communication barriers, linguistic exclusion, and even sociopolitical tensions if not properly managed. This study seeks to address the following key concerns:

How do speakers in Kisangani navigate between different languages in daily life?

To what extent do multilingualism and translanguaging facilitate or hinder communication in social, educational, and professional contexts?

Can these language practices foster greater unity and development among diverse ethnic groups in the city?

By investigating these questions, the study aims to contribute to a better understanding of the sociolinguistic dynamics of Kisangani and provide insights that may inform language policy, education, and community development efforts in multilingual urban settings.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in sociolinguistic theories of multilingualism and translanguaging, which offer useful lenses for analyzing language use in diverse, multicultural environments such as Kisangani.

3.2 Literature Review

Several studies have explored the dynamics of multilingualism and language contact in African cities. This review synthesizes relevant works focusing on three major themes: multilingualism in urban Africa, translanguaging in educational and social contexts, and language as a tool for integration and development.

3.2.1 Multilingualism in Urban African Contexts

Urban centers in Africa are hubs of linguistic diversity, shaped by migration, colonization, education, and trade. Studies by Mazrui and Mazrui (1998) and Banda (2009) highlight how urban multilingualism functions as a survival strategy, enabling people from different linguistic backgrounds to communicate and coexist. In cities like Kinshasa, Nairobi, or Lagos, multiple languages are used interchangeably in daily life, often influenced by economic, religious, and generational factors.

In Kisangani, this diversity is heightened by its position as a regional crossroads, where speakers of Lingala, Kiswahili, and various ethnic languages coexist. However, few academic studies have focused on Kisangani specifically, creating a research gap that this study aims to fill.

3.2.2 Translanguaging Practices in African Settings

Recent scholarship has increasingly documented translanguaging practices in African classrooms and informal settings (Makalela, 2015; García & Wei, 2014). These studies show that translanguaging enables learners to access knowledge more effectively, boosts confidence, and reflects the linguistic realities of African students. In informal contexts such as markets, churches, and homes, translanguaging supports inclusive communication and strengthens interpersonal relationships.

In Kisangani, similar practices are observed among youth, religious leaders, and professionals who mix Lingala, Kiswahili, French, and local languages to convey meaning in contextually relevant ways. Yet, these practices are often misunderstood or undervalued in formal institutions, which still promote rigid monolingual policies.

3.2.3 Language, Integration, and Social Development

Language is more than a communication tool; it is also a means of social inclusion or exclusion. Scholars like Blommaert (2010) and Banda (2010) argue that access to multiple languages facilitates social mobility, civic participation, and interethnic harmony. Conversely, language barriers can create marginalization and conflict.

In a linguistically diverse city like Kisangani, the way people use language can either bridge ethnic divides or deepen them. By examining how multilingual and translanguaging practices operate in Kisangani, this study investigates whether language functions as a catalyst for unity or a source of division in the local context.

4.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, supported by elements of descriptive and exploratory approaches, to gain in-depth insights into how multilingualism and translanguaging manifest and influence social life in Kisangani. This design is appropriate because it allows for a comprehensive understanding of language use in real-life contexts and highlights the experiences and perceptions of local speakers.

4.2 Research Site

The study is conducted in Kisangani, a major city located in the northeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo. As a multilingual and multiethnic city, Kisangani is home to speakers of several national, vernacular, and foreign languages. Its diverse population and sociolinguistic complexity make it an ideal setting for exploring language practices and their implications on social integration, development, and unity.

4.3 Population and Sampling

The target population includes residents of Kisangani from different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. The study focuses on individuals who actively engage in multilingual communication in various domains, such as:

- Students and teachers (educational context)
- Traders and vendors (marketplace and economic context)
- Church members and leaders (religious context)
- Community leaders and public workers (social and administrative context)

A purposive sampling technique is used to select participants who are likely to provide relevant information on language practices. The sample includes approximately:

20 university students
20 secondary school teachers
20 market vendors
20 religious leaders
10 community elders

This gives a total of about 90 participants.

4.4 Data Collection Techniques

The following tools are used for data collection:

4.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with participants to gather their views, experiences, and attitudes toward multilingualism and translanguaging. These interviews allow for flexibility while ensuring that key themes are addressed.

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with participants to gather their views, experiences, and attitudes toward multilingualism and translanguaging. These interviews allow for flexibility while assuming that key themes are addressed.

4.4.2 Observation

Participant observation is carried out in schools, markets, churches, and public meetings to record real-life instances of language use and translanguaging practices. This helps to supplement data obtained from interviews.

4.4.3 Document Analysis

The study also includes analysis of public signs, classroom materials, church announcements, and other written texts that reflect language practices in Kisangani.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data collected through interviews and observations are analyzed using thematic analysis. This involves organizing data into categories, identifying recurring themes, and interpreting the meanings behind language use patterns.

Key themes expected to emerge include:

- Language choice in different domains
- Reasons for translanguaging
- Perceived benefits or challenges of multilingualism
- The role of language in social cohesion

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to standard research ethics. Participants are informed of the purpose of the study and their rights, including anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Informed consent is obtained prior to interviews and observations.

5.0 DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This chapter presents and analyzes the data collected through interviews, observations, and documents analysis. The findings are organized thematically based on the research objectives and questions. The analysis highlights the patterns of multilingualism and translanguaging practices in Kisangani and their perceived impact on integration, development, and unity.

5.1 Language Spoken in Kisangani

The data revealed that the majority of participants are proficient in at least three languages, commonly:

Lingala
Kiswahili
French

Some also speak:

English (mostly students and educated professionals)

Ethnic languages (e.g., Lokélé, Enya, Tofoe, Komo, etc.)

Most respondents reported that they use different languages depending on the context:

Lingala: Used in social and religious settings

Kiswahili: Common in markets, informal trade, and cross-ethnic interactions

French: Dominates schools, offices, and administrative communication

Local languages: Used primarily at home or within ethnic groups

This confirms the functional distribution of languages in Kisangani and supports the observation that multilingualism is a daily lived reality for many residents.

5.2 Evidence of Translanguaging Practices

Participants reported frequent code-switching and code-mixing in conversations, especially when addressing diverse audiences. Examples include:

> *"In church, our pastor sometimes starts in French, moves to Lingala for emphasis, and uses Kiswahili to include everyone."*

 (Interview with a church member)

> *"At school, we explain difficult concepts in French but clarify in Kiswahili or Lingala so that everyone understands."*

(Secondary school teacher)

In marketplaces, vendors switch between languages based on the customer's linguistic background. For example, a seller might greet in Lingala, bargain in Kiswahili, and explain a product in French.

This translanguaging is not random, but a strategic and inclusive practice that enhances comprehension and participation across linguistic boundaries.

5.3 Multilingualism as a Tool for Integration

Most respondents agreed that speaking multiple languages helps them:

Connect with others outside their ethnic group

Avoid conflict or misunderstandings

Participate more fully in public life

One market vendor stated:

> *"If you don't speak Kiswahili, you lose customers. Language helps us work together peacefully."*

The data suggests that multilingual competence is perceived as a bridge, not a barrier. It allows individuals from different backgrounds to engage socially and economically, fostering a sense of shared identity in the city.

5.4 Challenges Identified

Despite the benefits, several challenges were also noted:

Linguistic exclusion: Non-speakers of French may be disadvantaged in schools or offices

Negative attitudes toward ethnic languages, especially among youth

Lack of institutional support for translanguaging in education

Some teachers feel pressure to stick to French, even when students struggle:

> *"The curriculum says French only, but students understand better when we mix languages. Still, we fear sanctions."*

This highlights a disconnect between policy and practice, where multilingual realities are not yet fully embraced in formal institutions.

5.5 Summary of Key Findings

Multilingualism in Kisangani is widespread and functional

Translanguaging is a common practice that improves communication

Language is perceived as a unifying factor when used inclusively

Formal settings still resist translanguaging, despite its benefits

Local languages are at risk of marginalization, especially among the youth

6.0 DISCUSSION

This chapter interprets the findings presented in Chapter 4 in light of the theoretical framework and the existing literature. The discussion focuses on how multilingualism and translanguaging operate in Kisangani and the implications of these practices for social integration, development, and unity.

6.1 Multilingualism as a Social Asset

The findings confirm that Kisangani is a highly multilingual urban center, where residents navigate daily life using a combination of languages, including Lingala, Kiswahili, French, and various local tongues. This aligns with Grosjean's (2010) theory that multilingual individuals manage their languages depending on context, rather than keeping them separate.

In practice, residents view multilingualism not as a challenge but as a resource for building relationships, conducting business, and participating in society. This reinforces the idea proposed by Banda (2009) that multilingualism in African cities is a form of social capital—a key to survival, inclusion, and adaptability.

6.2 Translanguaging as an Inclusive Practice

Translanguaging, as evidenced by frequent code-switching and code-mixing in schools, churches, and markets, serves as an inclusive communicative strategy. Speakers in Kisangani draw on their full linguistic repertoires to make themselves understood and to ensure others are included.

This confirms García's (2009) assertion that translanguaging is a natural multilingual behavior and not a sign of linguistic deficiency. It allows speakers to bridge gaps between languages, express identity, and foster understanding—particularly in contexts where formal language policies do not reflect local realities.

Furthermore, translanguaging in education, though often unofficial, helps teachers reach learners more effectively. This aligns with Makalela's (2015) findings that translanguaging can enhance learning by using students' familiar linguistic resources.

6.3 Language as a Tool for Unity and Integration

One of the key findings of this study is that multilingualism and translanguaging in Kisangani are generally perceived as forces of unity. Language mixing in public spaces helps reduce ethnic tensions and creates shared social spaces. Unlike contexts where linguistic differences lead to conflict, Kisangani residents seem to embrace multilingualism as a common ground for interaction.

This supports the arguments by Blommaert (2010) and Banda (2010), who describe language not only as a communication tool but also as a political and social resource. When used flexibly and inclusively, language becomes a mechanism of integration in diverse societies.

6.4 Tensions Between Policy and Practice

Despite the positive impact of multilingualism in informal contexts, tensions remain in formal institutions such as schools and government offices, where monolingual ideologies persist. French continues to dominate formal education, often to the exclusion of learners who are more comfortable in Lingala or Kiswahili.

This gap between linguistic reality and language policy reflects what García and Wei (2014) refer to as a disconnect between institutional norms and multilingual practices. Teachers who practice translanguaging unofficially risk criticism or sanctions, even though these practices benefit learners.

If language policies do not evolve to reflect actual language use, the educational and social potential of translanguaging may be suppressed.

6.5 Implications for Language Planning and Education

The findings of this study suggest several implications:

Language policies should recognize and integrate local multilingual practices, especially in education.

Teacher training should include guidance on how to implement translanguaging effectively.

Local languages should be valued and promoted to prevent marginalization.

Public institutions should adopt inclusive language strategies to serve all citizens effectively.

If harnessed constructively, the multilingual reality of Kisangani can become a pillar of social cohesion, development, and national unity.

7.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 General Conclusion

This study set out to examine the interaction of multiple languages in the city of Kisangani and to assess whether multilingualism and translanguaging practices contribute to social integration, development, and unity among its diverse populations. The findings reveal that Kisangani is indeed a rich multilingual environment where individuals regularly navigate across linguistic boundaries using a combination of Lingala, Kiswahili, French, ethnic languages, and sometimes English.

The study demonstrates that translanguaging is a widespread and meaningful practice that helps individuals bridge communication gaps, express identities, and participate fully in social life. Whether in educational institutions, churches, markets, or homes, people draw on their full linguistic repertoires to communicate effectively. Far from being a source of confusion or division, this fluid language use fosters inclusion, understanding, and cohesion in a highly diverse urban setting.

However, despite the practical value of multilingualism and translanguaging, formal institutions still reflect monolingual ideologies, especially in education, where French remains the sole official medium of instruction. This mismatch between policy and linguistic reality may hinder the full benefits of linguistic diversity.

In summary, multilingualism and translanguaging in Kisangani act as powerful tools for integration, social development, and unity, but their potential can only be fully realized when language policies and practices are aligned with the lived linguistic experiences of the people.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Language Policy Reform

Educational and administrative language policies should formally recognize the multilingual reality of Kisangani. This includes allowing room for translanguaging in the classroom and promoting the use of local languages in public communication.

2. Teacher Training

Teachers should be trained in multilingual pedagogies, including how to use translanguaging effectively to improve comprehension, learning outcomes, and inclusion among students of diverse linguistic backgrounds.

3. Community Awareness

Community members, especially parents and leaders, should be sensitized to the value of linguistic diversity. This includes fostering positive attitudes toward local languages and multilingual practices, especially among the youth.

4. Further Research

More empirical research should be conducted in other Congolese cities and rural areas to better understand how language practices influence social development, especially in contexts of cultural and ethnic diversity.

5. Promotion of Local Languages

Efforts should be made to document and preserve local languages such as Lokélé, Enya, Tofoe, and Komo, which are at risk of being overshadowed by dominant languages. Cultural institutions and education systems should promote their usage in both spoken and written forms.

7.3 Final Remark

In a multilingual country like the Democratic Republic of Congo, embracing and strategically managing linguistic diversity is not a luxury but a necessity for social harmony, equity, and national unity. Kisangani offers a clear example of how linguistic diversity, when supported and valued, can become a unifying force rather than a dividing one.

REFERENCES

1. Baker, C. (2011). *Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism* (5th ed.). Multilingual Matters.
2. Banda, F. (2009). Critical perspectives on language planning and policy in Africa: Accounting for the notion of multilingualism. In L. Tollefson & M. Tsui (Eds.), *Language policy, culture, and identity in Asian contexts* (pp. 29–49). Routledge.
3. Batibo, H. M. (2005). *Language decline and death in Africa: Causes, consequences and challenges*. Multilingual Matters.
4. Blommaert, J. (2010). *The sociolinguistics of globalization*. Cambridge University Press.
5. Canagarajah, S. (2013). *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. Routledge.
6. Chen, S. (2007). Interlanguage requests: A cross-cultural study of English and Chinese. The Linguistics Journal, 2(2), 32-52.
7. García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
8. Grosjean, F. (2010). *Bilingual: Life and reality*. Harvard University Press.

9. Guthrie. M, the classification of bantu languages, University of London, international African Institute, London, 1967.
10. Kamwangamalu, N. M. (2010). Multilingualism and codeswitching in Africa: Implications for language planning and education. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 30, 123–135. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190510000074
11. Makalela, L. (2015). Translanguaging as a vehicle for L2 learning. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 36(6), 500–514.
12. Makoni, S., & Pennycook, A. (2007). *Disinventing and reconstituting languages*. Multilingual Matters.
13. Mazrui, A. M., & Mazrui, A. A. (1998). *The power of Babel: Language and governance in the African experience*. University of Chicago Press.
14. Mawanga, D. M. (2019). *L'usage du code-switching dans les écoles secondaires de Kisangani* [Unpublished undergraduate dissertation]. Université de Kisangani.
15. Mpoyo, M. K. (2012). Translanguaging practices in Congolese classrooms: A challenge for monolingual education policies. *Revue Congolaise des Sciences de l'Éducation*, 5(2), 45–60.
16. Musaba, B. K. (2021). Multilingualism and national integration in Kisangani: A sociolinguistic perspective. *Revue Africaine de Linguistique Appliquée*, 12(1), 77–93.
17. Mufwene, S. S. (2001). *The ecology of language evolution*. Cambridge University Press.
18. Ndibu, M. (2006). *Le français en Afrique noire: Un demi-siècle de francophonie*. Karthala.
19. Nzita, R. (2010). *Le multilinguisme urbain en République Démocratique du Congo: Cas de Kinshasa et Kisangani* [Unpublished master's thesis]. Université de Kisangani.
20. Pearson, E. (1986). Agreement/disagreement: An example of results of discourse analysis applied to the oral English classroom. International Review of Applied Linguistics, 4(1), 47-61.