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## THE TWO LANGUAGE MAPS OF THE BELGIAN CONGO

### Introduction

In 1948 the Jesuit father Gaston Van Bulck published a survey of all linguistic work done up till then in the Belgian Congo, called *Les Recherches Linguistiques au Congo Belge*. This survey contained a language map of the entire Congo. Two years later another language map of the Congo appeared, drawn by Gustaaf Hulstaert (Hulstaert 1950a). Although father Hulstaert - in order to facilitate comparison - adapted the layout of his map to that of Van Bulck, even a quick glance at the two maps makes clear that they are profoundly different. In the rather fierce discussion following the publication, the authors gave all kinds of reasons for this dissimilarity ranging from the trivial fact that they have not used the same blank maps, to divergence in goals and methods.

These reasons are not very convincing, though, but rather leave one with more questions than before. If Van Bulck and Hulstaert really did have differing goals and consequently wanted to make a different kind of map, then why did they start an endless discussion afterwards to determine "who was right after all"? Why were these maps so important to them and how could some small variations in opinion lead to such an important incongruity between two studies mainly based on the same documentation? A more profound analysis of the way in which the maps came into existence, shows the importance of both authors' views on language, culture and ethnicity. Moreover, it leads to the recognition of some implicit views on Africa and on the role European scholars gave themselves in that continent. Thus, this article will try and use the language maps as a starting point for a reflection upon scientific work done in the Belgian colony, or at least on some of it. It is not meant as a late criticism on either of the two scholars, nor will it result in a choice for one of the maps.

The first paragraph will quickly introduce the two maps. A second part concentrates on the relation between language and ethnicity in the world view of father Hulstaert and father Van Bulck. Although at first sight it is less directly related to the maps, the so called language problem of the Belgian Congo will be tackled in the third paragraph. Here, colonial science goes hand in hand with daily administration. Hence, the importance attached to the outcome of scientific studies and - vice versa - the influence political views could have on scientific results. Eventually, the fourth paragraph will paradoxically lead to attention for similarities between P. Hulstaert and P. Van Bulck in order to account for the differences between their maps. That is, a rather essentialist view on African reality implicitly regarded as being very manipulable blurred the border between scientific conclusions and wishful thinking. This made possible that some lapidary principles influenced the entire outlook of the two maps, even though at least Hulstaert was and still is famous for his sharp observations and his huge empirical knowledge of the languages of the Congo basin.

### 1. The maps

Before describing the two maps, it might be useful to briefly introduce their authors. Readers of the *Annales Aequatoria* are most probably familiar with father Gustaaf Hulstaert (1900-1990), founder of the research centre and journal *Aequatoria*. The life and works of this missionary-linguist-ethnologist-botanist have been commented on in the previous issues of the *Annales* (12(1991)7-8), especially by father H. Virck.

Father Gaston Van Bulck (1903-1966) is to a large extent a different kind of scholar than Hulstaert. He received a very elaborate academic education in linguistics, ethnology and "colonial studies" next to the usual schooling as a clergyman. In contrast to Hulstaert, he got his knowledge of Africa mainly from written documents, because he usually stayed in Europe to teach at the universities of Louvain and Rome (Pontificia Università Gregoriana).

Both language maps have a scale of 1:5.000.000 and have a thick black line dividing Bantu languages from non-Bantu languages. On Van Bulck's map, however, this line does not mark the non-Bantu enclaves in the Bantu area. The most remarkable difference is that Hulstaert's map consists of a limited number of homogeneous language areas, dominated by the huge Mongo block in the middle, whereas Van Bulck gives the impression of a

highly complex, fragmented linguistic situation. His map features seven differently shaded areas, for instance, where Hulstaert only shows the undivided Mongo group. Elsewhere, Van Bulck's map differs from Hulstaert's in having lots of small enclaves dispersed all over the country. An exhaustive description of all differences would not be very appropriate here. Moreover, they have already been discussed by the authors themselves in a series of articles following the publication of *Les Recherches Linguistiques au Congo Belge* (Hulstaert 1950a, 1954; Van Bulck 1952a). These articles gave five reasons for the divergence, which I will sketchily reproduce here with a little comment.

First, both authors would have used different blank maps. Upon closer scrutiny of the maps, though, it becomes clear that this could only have affected such details as the exact shape of smaller language groups or the precise location of some language borders. It is by no means an explanation for the divergence in general outlook.

The second reason is more fundamental. The authors called it the choice whether or not to include enclaves. As soon as Van Bulck thought to perceive the influence of a now disappeared language on the dialect of a contemporary tongue, or otherwise found some remnants of a disappearing language, he inserted a special enclave on his map. Although he claimed that linguistic documentation on the Katanga region was nonexistent when he drew his map (Van Bulck 1952a), the latter shows a multitude of small enclaves in that part of the Congo. And although these enclaves had to be presented far too largely in order to be perceivable, Van Bulck called his map more accurate and hence more scientific, because of this choice, presenting the linguistic situation in all its diachronic detail. Hulstaert, on the other hand, omitted everything that might disturb a neat representation of the major languages that were spoken in these days - or should be spoken in the near future according to him. The remainder of this article will largely be concerned with finding out why Van Bulck and Hulstaert adopted these choices and why they couldn't just accept each other's choice.

The use of different sources was cited as a third reason for divergence. The mere scarcity of linguistic documentation on Congo in their time, however, makes it very unlikely that they have used different sources. Moreover, the correspondence between Hulstaert and Van Bulck (to be published in a later issue of *Annales Aequatoria*) makes clear that they generally read the same works and that they used each other's results in their own comparative studies. Finally, empirical facts about the languages of the

Congo did not play any role whatsoever in their argumentation. It is consequently very improbable that new evidence would have changed their opinions, and hence the general outlook of their maps.

The fourth point is again more important and less obvious to refute as a reason for divergence. Here, Hulstaert reproaches Van Bulck with having grouped the Congolese languages following ethnological principles rather than linguistic ones. This criticism, which Hulstaert shared with the great linguist A. Meussen, is certainly correct, but cannot account for the differences between the maps, since Hulstaert himself confused linguistics and ethnology. Hereafter, it will become clear that this fourth reason is narrowly related to the second.

The last point in the list concerns the relation between languages and dialects. According to Hulstaert, Van Bulck has been too cautious here. The latter answered that the documentation was still too scarce to group all dialects into bigger clusters or "languages". Anyway, the distinction between language and dialect is very vague to my opinion and depends largely on personal, rather arbitrary decisions. This fifth reason boils down to the question whether or not to represent enclaves, and is consequently also related to the previous point. Let us now concentrate on the relation between language and ethnicity in the world view of both clergymen.

## 2. Language and ethnicity

Studies in the humanities in the Belgian Congo were often based on the implicit assumption that ethnical and linguistic borders coincide (Meeuwis 1997, p. 77). Although Hulstaert accused Van Bulck thereof, the remark is equally valid for himself. An ignorant reader of the following passage would swear that it originated from an ethnological study. It is, however, a fragment of the text that accompanies Hulstaert's language map.

1. Les Ghaya, souvent nommés au Congo Ngbaka, forment au Congo belge un bloc homogène, quoique séparés de leurs frères de l'A.E.F.: Ghaya-Manja ...

4. Les Furu ne forment qu'un petit groupe. Selon feu Mgr. Tanghe (...) leur langue se rattache au groupe Tshaden (Sara, etc.). Plusieurs petits clans sont dispersés au milieu des autres tribus de cette région, de sorte que notre carte n'en tient pas compte.

The difference between both authors, accounting for much of the divergence between the maps, lies in their exact views on ethnicity.

### 2.1. Gustaaf Hulstaert: the people's community

Father Hulstaert held a rather static view on the notion of "people". Peoples for him were natural communities having more or less the same language and culture. A people is a God-created all or none category, not always perceived as such by its members. According to Hulstaert it is the ethnologist's task to surmount local differences in language and culture in order to establish the exact outlook and spread of the different ethnic groups of the region he studies. (I consider the terms *ethnic group* – *ethnie* in French – and *people* to be synonymous, the latter usually being reserved for Europe.) Language and ethnicity are so closely related for Hulstaert, that the loss of a people's mother tongue would cause its total destruction and the intellectual and spiritual deterioration of its members. Hence, the ethnologist's task to make people aware of their ethnic affiliation and of the intricate value of their mother tongue. Of course, languages and cultures can diverge because of geographical reasons: different subgroups of a people can get isolated from each other. Although this evolution does not necessarily threaten the natural ethnic unities in a region, it certainly weakens their resistance against any corrupting "anti-popular" influences.

According to Hulstaert, the colonial regime in the Congo formed such a threat to the people's community. He was convinced that the "artificial" Belgian state tried to replace the "natural" ethnical structures in the colony by slowly imposing the use of some lingua franca. This would result in the loss of the proper language and eventually in the complete adoption of French. Inspired by his Flemish nationalism, he compared the francisation of the Congo with the situation in Belgium. In the first part of the twentieth century, in theory there was freedom of language use. Whomever wanted to profit from higher education, though, or wanted to reach a certain political or social importance, had to be fluent in French. According to Hulstaert, this kind of hypocrisy was exported to Congo, and it was this aspect of colonialism he criticised and acted against. One of his instruments in this struggle was his language map. This allows us to respectively further explain the second and fifth reason for divergence between the maps given in the above paragraph, at least as far as Hulstaert is concerned.

Hulstaert's language map depicts an ideal situation, rather than the actual one, in which monolithic linguistic (and hence ethnic) blocks are no easy victims for language loss. Of course, the existence of a lot of enclaves does not fit in such an ideal. Here, linguistic cartography was complementary to another of Hulstaert's activities, viz. linguistic unification. In order not to desintegrate, the large areas on the map needed the centripetal force of a highly standardized "cultural" language variety. Also part of this program was Hulstaert's enormous production of school manuals in his self-made standardized variety of the Mongo language. Grouping dialects into languages and tribes into peoples is in this philosophy the linguist-ethnologist's first and foremost task.

## 2.2. Gaston Van Bulck: the big puzzle

For Gaston Van Bulck, all disciplines of the humanities formed one big puzzle, the solution of which has to be found in a remote past, perhaps at the beginning of mankind. The distribution of tribes and accompanying cultures and languages on the African continent is the result of an endless series of migrations and intertribal conflicts. Peoples are by no means well-established, God-given categories, but are the highly variable outcomes of a history that, however chaotic, can be mechanically reconstructed by taking into consideration every piece of information available. His classification of the Bantu languages in *Les Recherches Linguistiques* is often presented in terms of an extended battle-metaphor, reflecting his view on today's languages as winners in the survival of the fittest. His classification of the Chanda-languages is an example of this (also remark how a linguistic classification is again represented in terms of ethnic groups):

l'avant-garde: Mono, Togbo, Ngobu  
 les Banda centraux: Mbanja, Ngbuğu, Langha de Libenge, 'Nghaniti  
 débris dispersés de diverses tribus

Other examples are:

D'autres Ekonda ont été assujétis sur le Ruki et le Lutlaka (=Momboyo), où ils sont devenus vassaux (Nkole) des Nkundu.  
 Les Mgbati sont venus de la Haute Likati en deux colonnes: ...  
 Pour le groupe envahisseur des Abarambo (=Auro) on distingue:

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1. L'avant-garde, les Amiangbwa, "ils sont les termites"; 2. les Mâya et les Ndigé; 3. ...  
 a) Dans la plus grande partie du territoire primitivement conquis, ils sont restés indépendants et leur langue y est prédominante; b) ... ; c) Ndigé, restés chez les Mangboen, furent Mangboenisés et perdirent leur langue.

In his Ph.D. dissertation *Beiträge zur Methodik der Völkerkunde*, Van Bulck criticised what he calls "Schematiker". The passage reads as a negative comment on Hulstaert's work before it existed.

Der "Schematiker" sieht nur noch die Bildung der Kultur in isolierender Abgeschlossenheit, die spezifischen Eigentümlichkeiten, die fest mit dem ganzen Wesen des Volkes verachsen sind, das Fortbestehen der heimatlichen Kultur im Laufe der Wanderungen. Nicht nur die Akkulturationserscheinungen in den Grenz- und Mischgebieten, sondern auch die Entwicklungsformen innerhalb der Kulturgebiete wird er vernachlässigen. Er bestrebt sich, überall die Kontaktgebiete und die Mischkulturen zu meiden und nur einfache Hauptgebiete zu finden, wo die Kulturinheit noch quasi isoliert mit ihrem ursprünglichen reichen Volkstum auftritt.

To avoid a schematic approach to a reality which is a priori very complex, one has to bear in mind every little detail! In cartography this means representing every possible clue for the reconstruction of cultural history, in other words: every enclave. For areas on which little or no linguistic documentation existed, Van Bulck might have used other kinds of information, such as birth rate indexes, in order to establish his map. He thought that a language with a high birth rate (I use this metonymical construction on purpose) is automatically a language in expansion and vice versa. Today, language loss is more likely to occur in areas with a high birth rate, such as Africa, than elsewhere, which proves Van Bulck to be wrong on this point. Van Bulck probably supposed a mother-daughter relation between a language and her dialects, rather than the part-whole relation of Hulstaert's theory.

In conclusion, Hulstaert and Van Bulck both supposed a rather "mechanical" relation between language and ethnicity, in which ethnic conscience does not play a role in defining the latter. Language was not viewed as something people might use for constructing their own ethnic identity, but rather as an intrinsic characteristic of pre-existing ethnic entities. A people losing its language is lost according to Hulstaert, and just transforms into a

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different ethno-lingual unit, entering a new stage of the "Kulturgeschichte" according to Van Bulck.

### 3. The language problem of the Belgian Congo

The previous paragraph tried to make clear that the two language maps were to a large extent philosophical or scientific statements, rather than exact representations of the empirical knowledge of their authors. Especially Hulstaert's map had a clear socio-political goal. It fitted into the very popular, nationwide debate on the so-called language problem of the Belgian Congo. It was said that the linguistic situation of the colony was desperate, or at least far too chaotic. Two kinds of problems were generally cited. The first one concerned the quality of the languages spoken in the Congo. The idea that African languages would be primitive, lacking a decent grammar, was certainly outdated. Only the so called trade languages were usually considered to be insufficient for higher communication. The second was a quantitative problem. It was thought that too many languages were spoken in Central Africa. There was a general consensus that something had to be done. Opinions differed largely, however, on what an ideal linguistic situation would be like, and consequently on what an ideal linguistic situation might be like, and consequently on what exactly had to be done. As far as I know, an overview of this discussion has not yet been published, so it might be useful to give one here.

The attitudes on the language problem can be situated on three overlapping dimensions, viz.:

1. the kind of languages that had to be chosen and the degree of interference considered to be necessary or acceptable
2. the degree of linguistic unification they wanted to reach
3. the exact goals of language planning, i.e. the ideal linguistic situation

These dimensions will be discussed here.

In the Belgian Congo there were four big languages, used in contacts between speakers of different languages and to a certain extent also formed by these contacts. These are: Lingala, Kikongo, Kiswahili and Tshiluba. They are generally called *lingua franca* or *trade language*. Some people found that their general distribution was an advantage that had to be used by the colonial administration. Reducing the number of languages used in, amongst others, schools and law courts to these four would quickly solve the problem of the multitude of languages. Mere adoption of these languages, however, would not suffice, because of their alleged lack of structure and

lexical profusion. A possible solution, preferred by Mgr. De Boeck of Lisala, was to "clean these languages up" by making normative grammars introducing invented rules.

Opponents of the use of trade languages, such as Gustaaf Hulstaert, stated that these languages are too artificial and will never reach a sufficient quality. Moreover, since these tongues have no native speakers according to them, using them as official languages would imply that everybody would be educated in a foreign language, something especially the adherents of "indigénisme" strongly disliked. An alternative for trade languages were so-called "national languages" (*Langues de culture*), such as standard Mongo, Kuba or Bemba. The problem with these, was that they did not exist (yet). There were two possible solutions to this problem. The first is to actively unite closely related dialects by choosing one of them as the "correct" variety and then making normative grammars and dictionaries to be used in the schools of the entire language area. This was the preferred solution of Hulstaert and Van Bulck. Hulstaert showed this preference on his map by showing the national languages as if they already existed. For Van Bulck, this was a socio-political question, not to be mentioned in a scholarly publication. Van Bulck equally omitted the cursed trade languages Lingala and Swahili from his map, though. People like Leo Stappers on the other hand, found active linguistic unification unrealistic. They fancied a natural emergence of some national languages. The role of the language planner would be to provide certain varieties with sufficient prestige to impose themselves on the neighbouring dialects, by establishing important institutes and media in the area where these varieties are spoken.

To conclude the discussion of the first dimension in the debate, something has to be said about the use of European languages. In the articles and comments I read, almost nobody defended the general use of French. For some people that would be too unauthentic, a betrayal of the African cultures. Others saw French as a carrier of knowledge they preferred not to give into Congolese hands.

There were three possible answers to the question as to how far linguistic unification had to go. People like De Jonghe and De Cleene found that the Congo could only be efficiently managed if there was only one official language. Adversaries of this solution found that any attempt to impose a single language to everybody be a hazardous and unrealistic experiment. On the other hand, they found limiting the knowledge and use of the unitary language to a small intellectual elite socially unacceptable. An alternative

was picking out three or four official languages. Thirdly, one could allow the exact number of official languages to depend on the linguistic situation: first create national languages by means of unification, then see how many languages remain.

Finally, there were two opinions about what should be the ultimate goal of language planning. Should an ideal linguistic situation lead to a well integrated, easily manageable colony; or to a colony in which the colonised subjects have the best chances to develop themselves in their own culture? Especially in the discussion about the ideal language of education, the choice between a solution that is practically achievable and one that is ideologically justified, was very prominent. Lots of educationalists found it essential for the quality of schooling that the language of education be the mother tongue.

#### 4. Africanism

In his classic monograph *Orientalism*, Edward Said characterised the self-image of European orientalists as one of "a hero rescuing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation and strangeness which he himself had properly distinguished". In fact, this could be said not only of orientalists but of all scholars specialised in the overseas territories. Moreover, I think that the alienation from which the "primitive" populations allegedly suffered, could not only be caused by their moral and intellectual degeneration but also by the corrupting influence of colonialism. Thus, father Hulstaert saw himself as a kind of prophet who had the divine task to rescue the endangered cultures of the Congo basin. His scientific work not only aimed at describing and explaining the Congolese reality, but also at giving it shape, in a sense. This creative dimension of Hulstaert's work is by no means exceptional. In fact, it is typical for the scientific discourse Said calls *Orientalism*, and which we could call *Africanism*. The two language maps are good examples of Africanist works. Geography has often played a central role in colonial studies. Insubstantial phenomena such as language are objectified, made surveyable and manipulable, by putting them on a map. The flagship of the Institut Royal Colonial Belge, for instance, was the general atlas of the Congo, containing maps of about everything that was known about the region.

Thus, part of the explanation for why their maps are so different, lies paradoxically in something Hulstaert and Van Bulck had in common: they both worked in an Africanist tradition. Let us now specify a bit further

what kinds of perspectives on Africa and the Africans are implied in Africanism. First, Africanism is based on an essentialist, reductionist view on the Africans. The exact nature of such an essentialist view, however, could differ from person to person. For Hulstaert, an African individual is essentially a member of his ethnic group. Ideally, he shows every characteristic the European scholar ascribes to his people. Van Bulck rather searched the nature of an African in prehistory, where things such as language, race and ethnic soul were not yet mixed up. The fact that Van Bulck did not want to make a difference between synchrony and diachrony on his language map, is symptomatic for his essentialist view: in order to understand the African, we have to go back to his roots. Fundamentally he doesn't really change after all.

It is said above, that for Hulstaert an African should show every definitional feature of his ethnic group. If this was not the case, he was regarded to having lost his essence and to be in need of help. That is a second Africanist perspective on the subjects of the Belgian colony. Africanism justified colonialism by asserting that the African peoples are in a deplorable state from which they have to be released. They cannot do this themselves, because they lack scientific insight into their own situation. The following fragment from a letter of Hulstaert to Mgr. De Boeck about the lack of linguistic insight of the Mongo, is illustrative of this view:

L'explication des noirs est un peu la même partout; chacun tire sur son côté. Et il n'y a pas qui ont un aperçu global dans ces questions. Il n'en est d'ailleurs pas possible: ils n'en ont pas eu la formation.

This implied – and that is a third Africanist view – that the African reality can be easily manipulated and positively changed by "those who really know Africa".

By way of conclusion, let us consider how this essentialist view on a reality regarded as being highly manipulable, influenced the making of the maps. When reading both clergymen's texts about the maps, it becomes clear that they have used a limited number of lapidary principles to solve nearly all classificatory problems. As has been said, empirical facts are never cited. For Hulstaert, the most central principle was: grouping as much as possible. Why he has adopted this principle, should have become clear when reading the second paragraph of this article. The exceptions on his map, that is, the few areas where Hulstaert shows a less homogeneous situa-

tion than Van Bulck, are located in the possible expansion domain of his favourite Mongo language. In a letter to Mgr. De Boeck, Hulstaert admitted that his conclusions are mainly based on this one principle:

Contrairement à d'autres, j'ai comme principe: grouper le plus que possible. En cas de doute donner la préférence à l'unification. Parmi tous les éléments, donner priorité à la langue. Je me base donc sur un axiome, un apriorisme si vous voulez.

Van Bulck's classifications are largely based on written documents, rather than on personal investigation. When he found contradictions between different authors, he used exactly the opposite solution from that of Hulstaert to solve his problem. He would choose for the more scattered and complicated representation, being convinced that this is a priori the most advanced and correct one. He would never take the risk of becoming a "Schematiker", who could be accused of not taking into consideration every detail of the Kulturschichte.

Using the two language maps, I have tried to show how the colonial situation, socio-political views and the general tradition of the sciences of the overseas territories have influenced scholarly work in the Congo. A huge discrepancy in the outcome of two linguistic studies has upon closer scrutiny proved to be due to some minor differences in opinion.

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