NOTES

The Dictionary and the Historian

Jan Vansina
Universiteit Katolieke te Leuven

Despite their uninviting aspect, dictionaries make for engrossing historical reading. Seemingly dull compilations conceal an ample description of a society and its culture at a given moment in time. Each entry in the original language constitutes a bit of information. For African languages the amount of information varies between one thousand or fifteen hundred entries in the shorter vocabularies to as many as eighty thousand for the fullest dictionaries. Anything less than a thousand words may be considered to be only a wordlist, the longest of which rarely exceeds five hundred items. Most dictionaries seem to contain between six thousand and thirty thousand entries. The extent of information is astonishing because the form is usually so condensed that it consists only of a gloss as translation of the term given. The best dictionaries contain explanations of the gloss, references to relevant publications, and examples taken from everyday speech as well as from literary usage,[1] and they begin with a short grammatical introduction. Unfortunately, this kind of dictionary has been and remains all too rare; usually the gloss is unnecessarily laconic. Even so, the most exciting as well as the most trivial information is to be found in these tomes. For example, we learn from the 1652 Kongo dictionary (7200 entries) collected or recopied by van Geel, both that the Kongo were matrilineal—a fact stated nowhere else for the old kingdom—and that playing cards was a popular pastime.[2]

The natural first approach to a dictionary, then, is to use it to reconstruct a *situation* rather than to document change or events. Because the compilers usually were totally unconscious of the historical value of their labors, these documents are often more valuable than any other source about this point. Hence, when van Geel listed *unguri,* 'kinship', confirmed elsewhere that the prefix *u-* indicates the abstract, and had another entry *nguri,* 'mother', he did not realize that he was telling us that the Kongo were matrilineal. Moreover, he added to the glosses examples under both *unguri* and *nguri* with the expression *a nkama,* 'chiefdom', 'chief'. This leads to the suspicion that chieftaincy also was matrilineal. He did not, however, have an entry under *nkama* to confirm this. From other sources we know only that *royal* succession was bilateral but nothing certain is known about chiefdoms.

The reconstruction of situations, even of a late date (especially on the eve of or shortly after the imposition of colonial rule) is of major importance in African history. The first use of the dictionary is the entry as it stands. From a Kuba dictionary of 1929—and only from that source—we learn that the dignitary *muyuum* "is the one who relates or enumerates all the traditions and history of the tribe." While doing this "he stands at a distance with his back to the king who never sees his face."[3] Van Geel listed under *unkete* as examples of skills, bakers, musicians, surgeons, ship captains, judges, flutists, woodcarvers, and rhetoricians. Under *kisumbisa,* 'trader', he named slave traders, wine merchants, butchers, fishmongers, booksellers, shopkeepers, grocers for spices, clothes sellers, perfume dealers, and pharmacists. Even 'archive' is mentioned as an

expression derived from *elundilu,* 'treasure'! Difficulties sometimes arise because of the terse, and even cryptic, form of the gloss. *Nzimbu,* 'money', as listed by van Geel, will not allow the claim that the shells *nzimbu* filled all the functions of modern money. The entry *nselele,* 'syphilis', tells us that this disease existed, but the term may also include yaws or other similar afflictions. Still, the simple entry can tell us a great deal. Van Geel found it necessary to mention 'plebeians, lower classes' as *musa a nsansala,* thereby showing that these existed, something which confirmed our suspicions derived from the mention of revolts during this same period. One could multiply such examples *ad infinitum.*

A further use is to group entries which bear on a single subject, such as kinship, trade, or color. Often new facts can be deduced from this exercise. Kongo kinship terms strongly suggest that they were matrilineal because the mothers' and sisters' sides are so heavily stressed: e.g., *kisangila nguri* (from *sangila,* 'to contribute,' + *nguri,* 'mother') meant 'half brother with the same mother.' Significantly, van Geel failed to include a corresponding entry for half brothers with the same father.

Beyond this, a grouping by formal etymological links is even more revealing. This requires that the phonology of the dictionary be adequately reliable. Regrettably, dictionaries for most of the Bantu languages are not so because of the lack of indications for tone, vowel quality, and vowel length. Still, the meanings may be related in such a way that the suspected identity of the root becomes almost certain. In van Geel's work *elambilu,* 'restaurant' (yes!), *kilamba mfundi,* 'baker', and *kilambilu nkaka,* 'half baked,' are related to *lamba,* 'to cook'; *kulamba mfundi,* 'to cook bread,' clinches it. Comparative Bantu can strengthen such cases. Thus *lamba* is related to modern Kongo *laamb,* 'to cook,' and *dáámb* or *dámb,* also meaning 'to cook.'[4] New facts often appear in this way. 'Trader' in Tio is *ngaankali* (or *ngaankira* for Sims).[5] But he has *ngankali,* the same term in fact, as 'slaver'. The other entry is derived from *kira,* 'to trade' or 'to succeed,' in the sense of being the successor to. But if the connection between trade and the transfer of goods is thereby illustrated, it is not proven that the Tio were still aware of it as late as the 1880s. Few people today, for instance, are consciously aware that 'spinster' and 'to spin' once had something in common and none that 'king' is a derivation of 'kin', so that this technique must obviously be used with some caution when one is seeking to extrapolate from one time period to another. By 1964 it was possible to establish a word list showing that the terms for 'metal' (e.g., 'iron', 'slag', 'raw ore in the ground,' and 'metal ring') were all derived from a single stem, thus proving that at one time the Tio had smelted iron. However, they had forgotten this art by 1963 and did not in fact recall anything about once possessing it.[6] The exercise was fruitful in that it linked physical proof (slag, etc.) of iron smelting in the area with the Tio but not so fruitful as to be able to date it. Yet this technique, if used with caution on material derived from dictionaries, is perhaps the most powerful tool available to enter into the mind of a given culture, even though the chronology may almost always remain uncertain.

The second basic approach to the dictionary is comparative and serves to indicate *change.* It is often forgotten how much of historical linguistics is built on the use of dictionaries. As is well known, many of Meinhof's errors in reconstructing Common Bantu stemmed from the geographical imbalance in the dictionaries and grammars at his disposal. It is not surprising that a leading program in Comparative Bantu studies thought it imperative to publish a complete list of dictionaries and grammars it had used.[7] This approach requires a solid grounding in linguistics, and for most historians the reconstruction of proto-vocabularies is not of paramount interest since these refer to a period well anterior to those in which they are interested. Yet the two techniques—the

search for loan words and the analysis of etymologies—are extremely fruitful, because they may deal with periods and questions of interest to a particular historian.

The case for loan words has already been made.[8] Loan words are of such importance that when dictionaries or word lists are not available it can be useful simply to list words scattered in ethnographic and other reports, provided that the limitations imposed by the lack of eventual linguistic quality are kept in mind. It is useless to compare forms which *may* be related in Bantu when the terms are given without vowel length, vowel quality, and tone, since at least twelve possibilities for difference exist. Wishful thinking then takes over. In such cases the meaning *must* be practically identical and packages of loan words should be sought rather than a few (or even one) isolated terms. The importance of the method itself arises from the fact that in practice loan words can be found and are so often associated with induced change.

The case of etymologies using different dictionaries is not so well known. For instance, the Bushoong word for 'clan', *iloonc,* seems to be an innovation. It is found only in the languages of the Kuba group and not in those of the Mongo group from which the Kuba group developed; hence the need to search for a cognate in Mongo vocabulary. The term is derived from *lilongo,* 'a forest clearing, a village.' To arrive at this one must first establish that in some other cases as well Bushoong words with *-nc-* in second position correspond to Mongo *-ng-*, even followed by the same vowel, all of which entails a long and tedious search, and, second, confirm that the prefix *i-* corresponds to Mongo *li-*, which is fairly clear. After this has been done the link appears. Since it is not known which form has the more archaic meaning this must be established by using circumstantial evidence and by using counterproof. The importance of the etymology is in its intimation of a link between descent and residence which under the circumstances argues for patrilineality rather than matrilineality *cum* virilocality. The dictionaries are used again to establish the divergence between the kinship terminologies in Mongo and Bushoong. They clearly show that the innovations are Bushoong. The same is likely for *iloonc* as well, on this and other grounds, including the fact that Bushoong and Mongo share other terms for 'village' and that a general distribution of terms for 'clan' over western Zaïre indicates that *iloonc* is isolated and has no relation (as all the others have) with etymologies indicating 'to procreate' or 'species'. It all suggests that at some time in the remote past the Kuba went from patrilineality to matrilineality.

One feels that the limit has been reached here in the practical and legitimate use of the dictionary because of the difficulty in establishing with some degree of validity which of the meanings found is most archaic. Yet sometimes one must go to the limit when, as here, it is the only clear evidence available. It is much easier to establish the common vocabulary in form and meaning for two related languages from a dictionary comparison. One then reconstructs a *situation*—the way of life in the ancestral community before the split. The later the split, the better the surviving evidence. The technique works well for the Kuba and the Mongo and provides some indication of how Kuba society looked in the fifteenth or sixteenth century.

If dictionaries are thesauri this should not prevent the sound application of the usual historical canons to them. It must be kept constantly in mind who wrote them and for what purposes. Most African language dictionaries are missionary endeavors designed for conversion and education. Hence the appearance of 'souls', 'angels', 'devils', and the like. Less obvious but equally natural is the existence of a stout catalogue of sins, often with special weight for the various forms of luxury. Some glosses are distorted. Van Geel translated *nkisi* as 'holy' whereas it really meant 'charm'. Unless dictionaries are practically complete the intended use precludes the application of content analysis to

find the main preoccupations of the society as suggested by their language. In any case large *corpora* of texts including proverbs are more suited to that technique.

A specific danger for the user of dictionaries stems from their very success. The temptation to continue forever to work so rich a lode must be resisted, for the effort expended can become immense and the results continually less. This rebarbative looking source enthralls its devotees to the point that the main question often becomes when to cease. Does one need any further argument in favor of the use of a source?[9]

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1. E.g., G. Hulstaert, *Dictionnaire Lomongo-Français* (Tervuren, 1957), pp. xxxix, 1949.

2. J. van Wing and C. Penders, *Le plus ancien dictionnaire Bantu* (Louvain, 1928). Adrien Willems (later called Joris van Geel) was a Capuchin missionary who arrived in Kongo in 1651 and died of wounds the following year. While there he recopied the dictionary probably composed by Emmanuel Roboredo, a Kongo priest. See P. Hildebrand, *Le martyr Georges de Geel et les débuts de la mission du Congo, 1645-1652* (Antwerp, 1940).

3. A.B. Edminston, *Grammar and Dictionary of the Bushongo or Bukuba Language* (Luebo, [1929]).

4. M. Guthrie, *Comparative Bantu*, 4 vols. (Farnborough, 1967-70), 3:486.

5. A. Sims, *Vocabulary of the Kiteke as Spoken by the Bateke (Batio) and Kindred Tribes on the Upper Congo: Kiteke-English* (London, 1888).

6. J. Vansina, "Quelques questions d'histoire des Tio (Batéké)," *Voix Muntu*, 4 (March 1967), p. 22. The eighteenth century is the most likely time for the Tio to have lost the art of smelting.

7. J. Doneux, "Bibliographie du programme Lolemi," *Africana Linguistica II* (Tervuren, 1965), pp. 199-221.

8. J. Greenberg, "Linguistic Evidence for the Influence of the Kanuri on the Hausa," *JAH*, 1 (1960), pp. 205-12. Since some linguists have believed that loan words between closely related languages cannot be discerned, examples for the Bantu areas of Africa are instructive. See, e.g., J. Vansina, "Probing the Past of the Lower Kwilu Peoples," *Paideuma*, 19 (1974), tables 4 and 5, which argue that the whole system of the four names of the marketing week were borrowed over a wide area and pinpoint the source to the market north of the Pool. Work in progress shows that it is unjustified to abandon the search for loanwords simply because two or more languages are closely related. One must, however, make careful use of the slightest irregularities to make points as well as work with *groups* of terms.

9. Because of their value high priority should be given to the publication of manuscript dictionaries from any period.