

Review

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Source: *Language*, Vol. 45, No. 3 (Sep., 1969), pp. 659-660

Published by: Linguistic Society of America

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/411449>

Accessed: 03-05-2016 14:29 UTC

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A grammar of Sango. By WILLIAM J. SAMARIN. (*Janua linguarum, series practica*, 38.) The Hague: Mouton, 1967. Pp. 284. \$21.75.

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Sango is a pidginized variant of a Ngbandi language of the Central African Republic. It is widely spoken as a lingua franca throughout the country and, in addition, is now being learned as a first language by children in Bangui, the capital city. The language is of particular interest because it is a pidgin based on an African vernacular rather than on a European language, and because its incipient creolization provides scholars with a unique opportunity to observe the dynamics of linguistic change, development, and elaboration.

The work under review is a rich compendium of materials on Sango presented in a format that is a cross between a taxonomic grammar and a grammatical dictionary. The work is divided into three major sections: phonology, word classes, and construction classes. The phonology section (31–54) includes a phonemic inventory with supporting minimal pairs such as *pé/bé* ‘to twist/middle’ and *ká/gá* ‘to sell/to come’, a note about vowel elision (which is impossible to understand), examples of ‘free variation’, and an outline of intonation contours.

The section on word classes (57–162) constitutes the body of the grammar. Six word classes are distinguished and are presented in ALPHABETICAL ORDER! The first so-called word class, ‘adjunctives’, includes everything that more or less modifies a noun or verb (yet to be described)—adjectives, adverbs, quantifiers, determiners, relative clause markers, and even impersonal pronouns. Since there is nothing morphological or syntactic to characterize the class as a whole, the chapter dissolves into a lexical study of specific adjunctives which are especially common. Throughout this chapter, as elsewhere, exemplification substitutes for explanation and generalization. For example, a list of 64 sentences illustrates the use of the restrictive/determiner/pronoun (?) *ní*, and there are 71 for the deictic *só*. None of these sentences is accompanied by a word-by-word gloss or labeled bracketing to aid the reader who might be willing to dig into the examples to conduct his own analysis. Similarly, the chapter on ‘connectives’ is an under-analysed, over-illustrated inventory of various prepositions and conjunctions. However, the chapters on nouns, pronouns, and verbs are straightforward and brief, since derivation and inflection are minimal in Sango. The only exception is the confused description of a verbal prefix *a*, which ‘is considered a pronoun only for convenience [sic] ... [although] it differs more from the personal pronouns than it is similar to them’ (140). The word class ‘sentence particles’ is simply a wastebasket for all the little pieces left over.

The section on construction classes (165–218) is the most coherent and in-

formative part of the book, for the author finally escapes from his sterile word classes and begins to work with constructions that have functional importance in Sango. The section starts with low-level constructions such as noun + adjective, works up to major functional slots such as subject and object, and finally proceeds past simple sentences to more complex sentences with subordination and coördination. There is a meaningful sequence in the order of presentation, which, together with the appearance of limited bracketing in the examples, makes it possible to actually learn something about the structure of Sango sentences.

The book concludes with a valuable collection of texts and a lexicon divided into native Sango words and French loanwords.

How is it that an experienced and prolific field linguist should produce a work so devoid of insight and imagination? How is it that a man who speaks Sango with near-native fluency and whose studies of the language extend back fifteen years should write a grammar that fails to exceed the level of observational adequacy? The answer lies primarily in Samarin's misguided research procedure, which crippled the work from the start. Samarin describes this procedure in the introduction to the book: 'This grammar was prepared inductively. Rather than using an informant from whom utterances were elicited and then experimented with by further elicitation, we used the corpus which was selected from the tape-recorded texts and letters. In one sense an informant was not necessary, for both Mr. Taber [his assistant] and myself already know Sango' (19). In spite of having this enormous advantage over the rest of us who struggle with exotic languages that we cannot speak, Samarin apparently made no use of himself as an informant. Rather, his grammar was 'objectively' produced—and here the passive is intended—from thousands of slips segmented from the large finite corpus and filed in various slots. The explicit reason given for working strictly from texts is that 'we wanted this grammar to be as representative of the whole Sango-speaking area as possible' (19). To be sure, texts can serve as a means of checking on idiosyncratic and dialect biases of individual informants—so can a multiplicity of informants, for that matter—but this is no argument in favor of basing a grammar entirely on text materials. Boas, under whose influence a generation of anthropologists collected and published a wealth of texts, labored under no such illusions. As the Voegelins have said (*IJAL* 33:276, n.): 'If Boas had thought that one derives a grammar from observation of sentences, he would have kept the students in the east to re-examine their texts rather than sending them to the west to do re-eliciting from informants. This suggests that neither the anthropology students nor their teachers derived their grammatical understanding of the language primarily from the texts which they had gathered ...'

Undoubtedly, Samarin's understanding of Sango goes far beyond what could be mechanically extracted from the texts in his collection. With a rich source book such as *A grammar of Sango* at his disposal, Samarin would have been the ideal person to prepare a dynamic, insightful Sango grammar. Unfortunately he did not choose to do so.