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Godobé and the Godobé of Bangui:
A dialogue between Helma Pasch
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Helma Pasch & Germain Landi

University of Cologne

ama14@uni-koeln.de

landi.germain@ymail.com

1. Introduction

Sango is the national and official language of the Central African Republic (CAR) (Pasch 1994). The predominant language spoken by the youth on the streets of Bangui, the capital of CAR is a variant of Sango and it is labeled as the language of street children (Godobé). Sango

Godobé differs from Sango with respect to the manipulations employed by the speakers of the former. These diverse manipulations involved, which are characteristic of many so-called youth or secret languages, are outlined by Landi and Pasch (2015). These descriptions are based primarily on observations carried out by Germain Landi between 2011 and 2012, prior

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to the commencement of his PhD studies in 2014 at the University of Cologne. The motive for this research was to present findings on the manipulations involved in Sango Godobé for an international Workshop on *Youth Languages and Urban Languages in Africa* (Cologne, 30 May – 1 June 2012).

At the time, written information on the Godobé people was very scarce and that on their language practically non-existent. The linguistic manipulations characterized by Sango Godobé caught our linguistic sensitivities, and therefore necessitated an in-depth investigation of the ways and manner of manipulations involved. For lack of funds, “normal” fieldwork with paid language assistants was not possible. Hence, we had to develop ways of obtaining the required information. Unobtrusive observation of communicative situations where Sango Godobé is used is easier to discuss when sitting in Germany than to put into practice in Bangui. The main reason for this difficulty is that it is not easy to eavesdrop on conversations in conditions where speakers try to hide their language from outsiders. Clandestinely collecting linguistic data is not appreciated by members of a population who struggle hard every single day to survive, hence the observing linguist must exercise care.²

In the following dialogue, the whereabouts of the paper on Sango Godobé are discussed with a particular focus on how Germain Landi carried out fieldwork and how he managed to obtain the necessary data for analysis.

2. The dialogue

HP: In 2011 and 2012 you conducted fieldwork on Sango Godobé, in which you tried to find out what the language variant looks like, and what makes it different from common Sango,³ and even more from standard Sango, which has been highly influenced by the writings of Diki-Kikiri (1986) and by radio programs. The results of this research were published in a volume on urban youth languages (Landi & Pasch 2015). Please let us know how you carried out your research, and the sources of your data for the description of Sango Godobé. To begin, when you ask people in the street about Sango Godobé, what answers do you expect?

GL: In the street, people might answer briefly that Sango Godobé is “the language of the thieves of KM 5”, probably the most vibrant suburb of the capital Bangui, or that it is “the language of hustlers and of drugs addicts”.⁴ This attitude of normal people has been documented in the media, online as well as print, on

² This difficulty holds true somehow for all kinds of linguistic and anthropological research. After so many years of political unrest, the situation in the country is such that “nobody trusts anybody anymore” as Séraphin-Personne Feikere of the Institut de Linguistique Appliquée de Bangui said at the international workshop captioned *Perception et catégorisation – dénomination, couleur*, 9–10 November 2017 at the Université de Lorraine in Nancy.

³ The term ‘common Sango’ corresponds to Wald’s (1986: 56) ‘Sango commun’ and refers to the variant of Sango actually spoken in Bangui and the rest of the country, while standard Sango is practiced only by a relatively small group of people and used for written purposes.

⁴ This attitude towards the Godobé is, however, not only expressed by the better-off population in Bangui, but found its way also into scholarly literature. Titley (1997: 47) in describing the situation of constant instability and intimidations refers to the Godobé as “a criminal element” that in the popular residential districts surrounding the center of Bangui “preyed on the better off and the unwary”.

several occasions. For instance, on the occasion of 'Mother's Day' (*fête ti amaman*) on 31 May 1970, President Bokassa presents a speech on the value of an industrious life. At one point, he asks his audience repeatedly *godobé ayeke zowa?* which translates as 'What type of persons are the Godobé?' and every time the listeners answer in shouts unisono *zo ti nzi*, meaning 'they are thieves'. My elder brother recorded this speech on an audio-cassette and had me listen to it several times.

The weekly *Jeune Afrique* reported on May 5, 2013, that Michel Djotodia, president of CAR, following the looting of the town by young Godobé described them as scapegoats from the miserable suburbs of Bangui (*désœuvrés venus des quartiers miséreux de Bangui*), hustlers (*voyous*), former prison inmates (*libérés de prison*), jobless people (*chômeurs*) with empty stomachs.

Bouquiaux et al. (1978: 117) state explicitly that the term Godobé refers above all to young 'thugs' (*voyous*) or scapegraces who loiter around public places seeking occasions for petty theft. The term is, however, also used with reference to adults of up to 35 years of age.

HP: What is the earliest scholarly documentation of the term Godobé?

GL: That lexicon entry "Godobé" by Bouquiaux et al. is, to the best of my knowledge, the first documentation⁵ of the term. Eight years later, Diki-Kidiri (1986: 92) in an analysis of the role of Sango in the formation of the nation, mentions the Godobé and presents them as a highly disadvantaged group.

According to him, the young Godobé of Bangui are gangs who love music and are boisterous and engage in the nightlife of the black town (*les bandes des jeunes « godobé » de Bangui adorent la musique et la grouillante vie nocturne de la ville noire*). In doing so they behave very much like young people all over the world who prefer enjoying a vibrant life to hard work.

Street children were, however, living in Bangui long before they were mentioned in the literature. According to Triangle (2012), the first gangs of boys were observed in the 1960's, this soon saw a follow up of groups of girls⁶ and their numbers have been on the increase in the passing years.

HP: What is the meaning of Godobé, and what is the origin of the term?

GL: In written sources and on the internet, Godobé is used mostly with reference to street children who for lack of income are often forced to live on theft. We can see this, for example, in the title of a report by an NGO on street children in Bangui (CCFD-Terre Solidaire 2013) and in Landi & Pasch (2015). Kalck (2005: 41) in the historical dictionary of the Central African Republic, makes a distinction between children just living in the streets and delinquents, i.e. Godobé. Woodfork (2006: 146) defines Godobé as children who rely on their wits to live on the streets of Bangui, and who make their living by carrying out odd jobs for other people. When these sources fall short they also turn to thievery, begging or prostitution and many of them consume drugs. It should be well noted that Woodfork explicitly

⁵ In the preface to our paper on Sango Godobé, we erroneously quoted Diki-Kidiri (1986: 92) as the oldest source.

⁶ Today the girls among the Godobé are often called *Godobettes* by children and youths.

states that not all street children commit crimes, nor do they all use drugs. In Bangui however, people usually refer to both street children and delinquents by the term Godobé. An in-depth questioning of people about their personal experiences with Godobé reveals that the negative attributes of the Godobé are sometimes downplayed, people confess that it is not unusual to hire Godobé for jobs which nobody else wants to do. One such job is gravedigging, which entails permission for them to attend the funeral celebration. While people may admit that the Godobé are striving for paid jobs most of the time and are obliged to steal when they do not manage to earn enough money through legitimate means, they return to their old attitudes so long as they can ignore the economic difficulties of the Godobé.

As for the etymology of this term Godobé, there are two explanations. According to the NGO CCFD-Terre Solidaire (2013), there was once a merchant called Mr. Godobé who helped some homeless children by giving them little jobs. Before long, other children joined them, expecting to get the same support, and they continued to stay around Mr. Godobé's place. In the end, all these children were called Godobé. This story may well reflect historical reality, since in Bangui Godobé is a normal name for men), but at the same time it sounds like a piece of folk etymology and one cannot be really sure whether it reflects historical reality.

Bouquiaux et al. (1978: 117, 557) state that Godobé is a word of Gbayaorigin and that in Gbaya it means 'prostitute', i.e. it refers to persons of the lowest social rank.⁷ However, this

etymology is not given in the dictionary (Roulon-Doko 2008), and according to Roulon-Doko (p.c.) it is erroneous.

HP: Are the Godobé really as dangerous and bad people as is often said?

GL: The title of Sylvestre Seme's (2000) thesis *Les godobé de Bangui (RCA) ou la construction sociale de la délinquance juvénile dans la ville africaine*⁸ indicates quite clearly that the reputation of the Godobé as gangsters is above all a social construction. But because they tend to be involved in petty crime they have the reputation of criminals.

The institutions that care for the street children should bear responsibility; in Bangui street children are quite generally considered a criminal issue. For several years, different societal groups that engage with street children have made great efforts to solve these problems. On the one side, Christian churches and a number of NGOs (cf. e.g. Lazareva 2016) want to support at least the children among the Godobé and protect them against attacks by the population and the police. They also give them food, shelter and education in order to empower them so that they can be successful in their lives. On the other side, government, police and municipal administration want to protect the population from being robbed by Godobé, whom they consider criminals.

The fact that the youngest Godobé are only about six years old, and the occasional presence of babies (Triangle 2012) is the main reason why NGOs have found it necessary to extend their support.

⁷ There is no Gbaya dictionary available which would confirm that in Gbaya *godobé* is the equivalent for 'prostitute.'

⁸ This thesis was not accessible to Germain Landi.

Constant fear of persecution may be the instigation for the Godobé to continually create new words and syntactic constructions, which prevent outsiders from understanding them (Woodfork 2006: 146f). However, we are also aware that such urge for linguistic innovations is a feature which is characteristic for the so-called youth languages of Africa (cf. Nassenstein & Hollington 2015).

HP: How long has the term Sango Godobé been used to denote a variant of Sango?

GL: Diki-Kidiri's above-mentioned article is most probably the oldest scientific source about Sango Godobé, which he considers a slang (argot) of standard Sango or *sango courant*. He observes that specific words from Sango Godobé enter standard Sango, which reflects similar bottom-up development to what Nassenstein (2015) has noted with regard to the Langila variant of Lingala. This observation is quite important from a sociolinguistic point of view, since it documents the shaping of Sango by all layers of the society of Central African Republic and accepts even low-prestige variants as the source of innovations. Diki-Kidiri also mentions the influential role of Sango Godobé in popular music which can be observed in quite a number of videos on YouTube. A nice example is the video *Centrafrrique musique* from the group *Zokela – Hity Maïty* in which a number of words from Sango Godobé which are not used in standard Sango are heard. In the refrain, there is the following expression:

- (1) *Supu ti lo la a-kinda mbi.*
 sauce POSS 3s PRES SM-turn.over 1s
 'It is her mass (lit.: sauce) that knocked me down.'

In this clause *supu* refers to the stoutness of a woman who is knocked down by a very lean one. *Lo yeke na supu mingi* 's/he has much soup' is said about a well-built or strong person. In standard Sango and in more polite terms, one would describe such a person as *kono-ngo zo* (big-NOM person) 'a big, stout or fat person'.

Another Sango Godobé expression is the term *chambre à air* (< French) for the slip leaking out of the trousers.

- (2)
Tongana e hō na lege, chambre.à.air na gigi.
 when 1p PASS PREP way inner.tube PREP outside
 'When we go along the street, our inner tube (lit. 'leaking slip') appears outside.'

HP: Are there other denotations for Sango Godobé?

GL: Sango Godobé is occasionally called *double Sango*. But while in the last decades of the 20th century *double Sango* was characterized as a language of gangsters and criminals, as is the case with Sango Godobé today, it is now used to denote ludlings where words are manipulated by inversion of syllables, or by insertion of syllables according to specific phonological rules, i.e. the same type of manipulation that is practiced in Sango Godobé. It is practiced

primarily by children, but also by adults, some who may even organize events where participants compete with their capacity to produce and understand even long texts in double Sango (Voeltz 1992). The main difference is that the ludling double Sango is practiced in symmetrical communication⁹ to enable all participants to use and to “decipher” it, while the same manipulations in Sango Godobé aim at making speech unintelligible in asymmetric communicative situations.

HP: Where did you learn about the structures of Sango Godobé? How did you get the specific examples published in our article?

GL: Surprisingly to some, research on Godobé has not been a topic of research at the University of Bangui until now. Note that the first scholars who worked on the Godobé and their language did so when they studied abroad. The first is a description of the language by Sélézilo (1999) from Côte d’Ivoire and the second is a sociological study of the Godobé by Seme (2000) written in France.

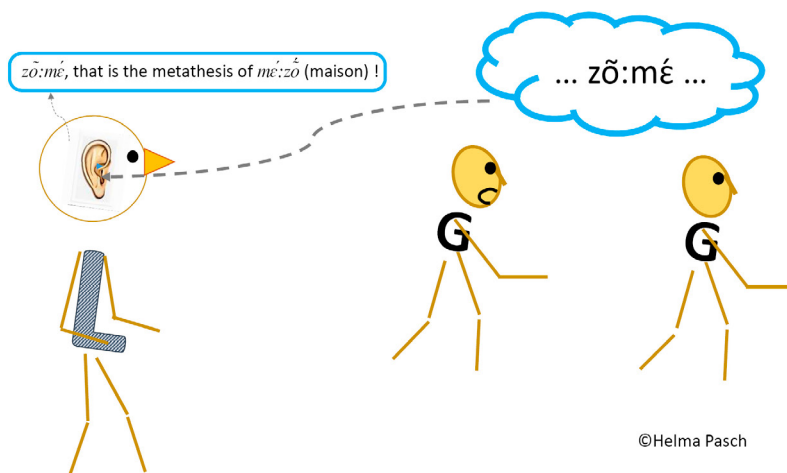
Since the speakers of Sango Godobé are in constant contact with other inhabitants of Bangui, nearly everyone has at least some knowledge of it. People may refuse to speak it but they can understand it to some degree. There were several occasions, where I could

observe unobtrusively speakers using Sango Godobé.

Sango Godobé is definitely not a secret language, and besides its reputation as a medium for gangsters, it still has a bad reputation. The prestige of the language is, however, improving and it is considered more of an appropriate means of communication, which journalists and politicians use when it is convenient for their purposes.

My first encounter was in the street where I (L = linguist) heard a conversation of two young Godobé (G) in which the word [zõ:mé] (a metathesis of ‘maison’) was uttered. I realized immediately that this was a typical Sango Godobé item and I tried to follow the speaker and his interlocutor unnoticed trying to get the rest of the conversation, but unfortunately without any chance to get more data.

Fig. 1. Overhearing a Sango Godobé word in a conversation of two young men in the street



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⁹ At given moments, where one speaker utters a piece of manipulated speech which the interlocutor has to “decipher” these situations are asymmetric. But since roles keep changing the communication as a whole is symmetric.

The second encounter was on my way to town on a motorbike taxi. There was a fairly big woman sitting behind me as a second passenger.¹⁰ The driver who observed that there was heavy pressure on the rear wheel and that driving the motorbike was difficult because of her weight made the following remark to her alluding to her obese stature: *lezba* which is derived from *balèze* 'stout, strong, fat' (< French) by metathesis: "*Soeur, mo ke lezba!*" The woman did not understand and the driver repeated his critical remark, now with the adjective in its basic form *balèze*, which she then understood. This scenario shows that the taxi driver (T) uses a Godobé form although he does not consider himself a Godobé. It might indicate further that the woman does not know Sango Godobé at all, or that she is not well-acquainted with it to decipher an unexpected utterance.

A friend of mine has a motorcycle repair shop. Certain Godobé who have a friendly relation with the owner loiter around the workshop. They converse with him – in common Sango – and when there is a need they give him

a hand. Amongst themselves, they also speak common Sango most of the time. However, when they do not want the clients in the shop to understand them, they use manipulated forms of Double Sango. It goes without saying that the shop owner understands Sango Godobé fairly well.

Once when I was waiting for my motorbike to be repaired, one of the Godobé sneaked into the workshop looking suspiciously around. The mechanic (M) was alarmed and said in a warning voice *ala sara ange na petit so* (3p make attention PREP young.man DEM) 'be careful with that guy'. The Godobé who overheard the warning turned around and left the repair-shop saying: *mbi zi gere awe* (1s seize leg already) 'I am already gone', which in common Sango would be expressed by *mbi gwe awe* (1s go already).

Fig. 2. *La grosse femme* – the big lady



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¹⁰ It is not unusual in Bangui that motorbike taxis take two passengers.

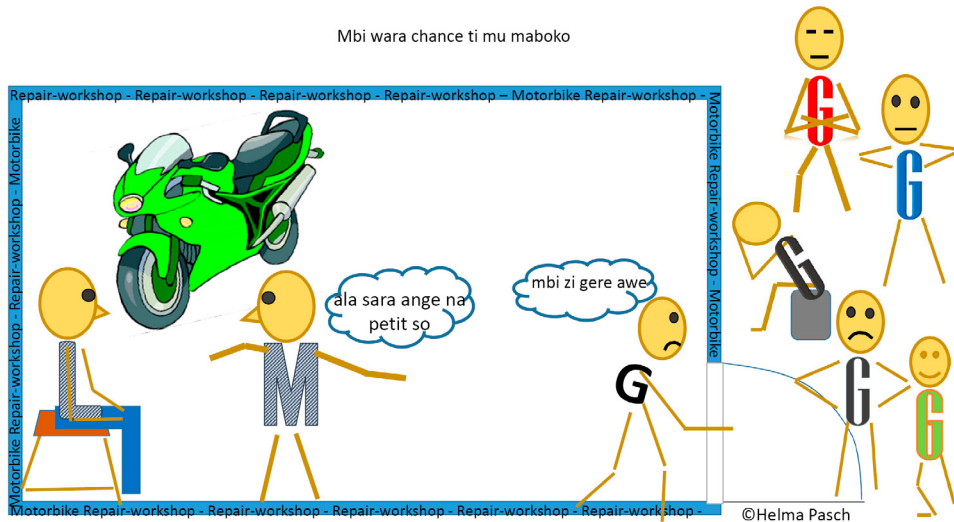


Fig. 3. Godobé at the motorbike repair shop

My fourth spontaneous observation was at a very busy street where I waited to board a taxi. On the opposite side of the street, there was a woman of about 30 years of age who was also waiting for a taxi. There, a slightly older man stopped and said to the woman:

- (3) *Le ti mo a-mu réseau awe...*
 eye ross 2s sm-take already

‘Your face has already been connected to the power source.’

Another opportunity to observe interactions in Sango Godobé availed itself at a funeral ceremony on my neighbor’s premises. Lying in bed at night in my house, I could hear the songs of the Godobé and their communication among themselves and with other people. During this ceremony they playfully manipulated Sango more intensively than they do on other occasions.

Although I was acquainted with Sango Godobé, I was not able to follow the conversations because the speakers were too far away from the house, speaking unclearly while facing the opposite direction. All I could make out in the end were a number of typical words such as *Jack Bauer*: for a drink with a high percentage of alcohol, (which in common Sango is called *ngbako*) or a short statement like *ake deuxportant* ‘it is very important, it is even more important’. *Jack Bauer* is the lead protagonist of an American television series and is often portrayed as their most capable agent. In Bangui people connect him with huge consumption of alcohol, which explains the metaphorical shift of the name. *Deux-portant* is a playful derivation of *un-portant* (/ɛ̃port’ã/), a deliberate misrepresentation of the homophonous *important*, making the number word *deux* ‘two’ as opposed to *un* ‘one’ the marker of comparison (Landi & Pasch 2015: 216).

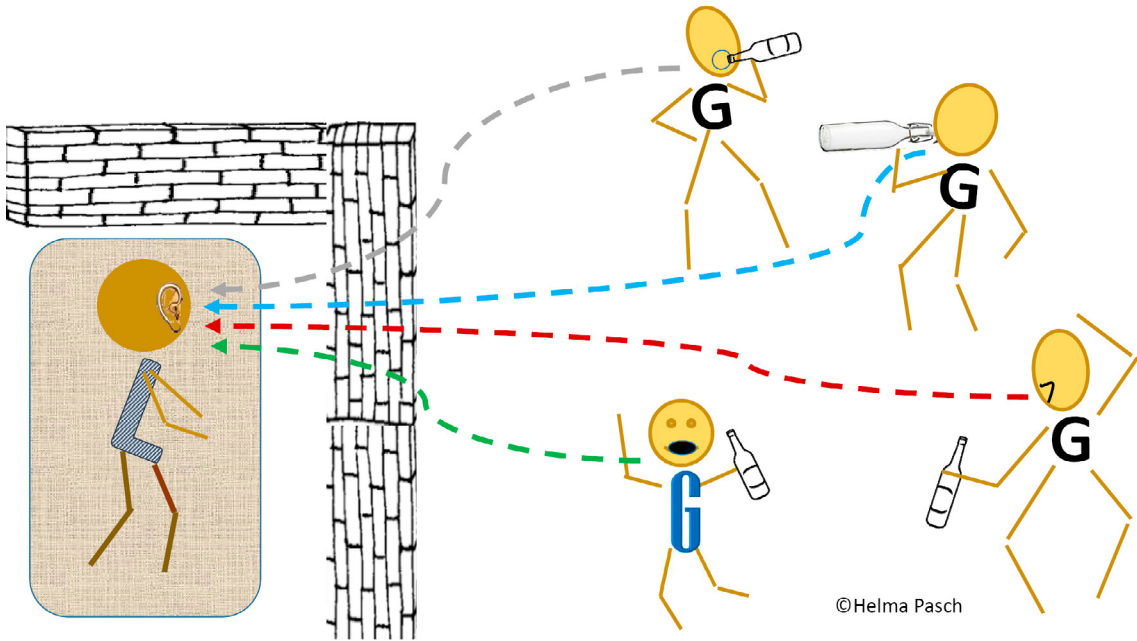


Fig 4. Listening to Godobé while in bed

HP: What were the special experiences investigating usages and forms of Godobé and what are your expectations with regard to the results?

GL: It was a new experience to find that it is possible to engage in fieldwork just by observing spontaneous speech. It takes more time than elicitation sessions with a language consultant, and you never know whether you will have specific data you are after, but the data that you get are reliable and valuable. In the end, you may happen to get data which you had not expected before and for which you did not even seek.

Let me make the following concluding remarks. I think that anyone with a good command of common Sango and who is acquainted with the word-formation patterns of Sango Godobé can do such kind of research.

It is important to know that certain aspects of Sango Godobé can also be investigated on the basis of music videos in the internet. As I mentioned earlier, most musicians sing in common Sango with Sango Godobé expressions interspersed as shown above in the first example and in the following lines (transcribed, glossed and translated) from a popular song. Note that here the expressions from Sango Godobé consist of words of unknown origin which do not exist in common and standard Sango, like *sepele* 'slender, lean', of loanwords from English, like *fair play*, or French in a specific new reading. For example, *chambre à air* 'the part of the underwear which peeps out at the back from under the pants. The latter term is used as a term of tender term of address and so are *sepele*, *sac à main* 'handbag' and *ye ti kua* 'working tool'.

- (4) *Matinda, sepele ti mbi*
M. slender poss 1s
‘Matinda, my slender [woman]’
- (5) *Sac à main ti mbi*
bag at hand poss 1s
‘My handbag, i.e. my darling who is inseparable from me like a woman's handbag from her hand, who walks hand in hand with me.’
- (6) *E a-sepele e ke na beauté naturelle.*
1P PL-slender 1P COP PREP beauty natural
‘We slender women have the natural beauty.’
- (7) *Tongana e hō na lege,*
when 1P pass PREP way
‘When we pass by’
- (8) *a-yeke iri e oo a-mannequin ti premier choix*
SM-COP call 1P EXCL PL-model poss first choice
they are calling us "top models".’
- (9) *Tongana e hō na lege, chambre.à.air na gigi:*
when 1P pass PREP way inner.tube PREP outside
‘When we pass our pants peep out from beneath the trousers.’
[lit. a part of the inner tube is outside and visible]
- (10) *Ndembo ti samba ni a-hunda ti lo gi fairplay*
rivalry poss co-épouse DEF SM-ask 3s only
‘Rivalry with other women needs fair play, i.e. no violence.’
- (11) *Ye ti kua: Sepele ti mbi oo chambre à air ti mbi*
thing poss work/ leanness poss 1s inner.tube poss 1s
‘My working tools: my slenderness and my peeping pants’
- (12) *ye ti kua ti Mbi oo, bata ni na mbi femme*
thing poss work poss 1s protect ANAPH PREP 1s woman
my working tools: don't destroy it on my behalf [lit.: protect it for me, woman].’

What fascinates me most is that Sango-Godobé has gained a certain prestige, which has made the former so-called “gangster language” a “cool” means of communication, which journalists and politicians use in some specific contexts. I would not be astonished if our two publications on this language will increase the prestige of Sango Godobé even more.

I hope that students of linguistics in Bangui will follow and appreciate the two new ways of obtaining linguistic data: observing and evaluating spontaneous conversations, and evaluating texts from the internet and particular YouTube videos. The advantage is not only that they get different types of data, but also that it makes research far more easily affordable.

HP: What was the language of communication between you and the speakers of Sango Godobé?

GL: I did not communicate directly with the Godobé but observed them, and whenever I had specific questions I asked some non-Godobé people who are competent in the variant, for instance, the motorbike mechanics, for clarifications.

HP: What attracted your interest in Sango Godobé?

GL: I have been living in Bangui for a long time and knew about the language but during my studies at the university it was never a topic of linguistic study. My interest in the structures was roused by the invitation to participate in the workshop on urban youth languages in Cologne in 2012 and to present a

paper on Sango Godobé. That was a wonderful chance for which I am very grateful.

Abbreviations

1p	1st person plural
1s	1st person singular
ANAPH	anaphoric pronoun
COP	copula
DEF	definite marker
EXCL	exclamation
PL	plural marker
POSS	possessive
PREP	preposition
PRES	present tense
L	linguist
G	Godobé
M	mechanic
T	taxi driver

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