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Breaking taboos in doing fieldwork:
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1. Introduction

In 2016 and 2017 I taught African linguistics and German as a foreign language at the University of Kisangani (UNIKIS) in DR Congo as a visiting professor.¹ I used my spare time to carry out fieldwork on Zande language with native speakers some of who were students at the University, and some of whom worked in the administration. Two Zande stories

recorded by Evans-Pritchard should be used as a basis for questions. These stories in which homicide and cannibalism play a role were highly appreciated by Zande language consultants in Central African Republic, where I had used the subjects in preceding years in order to analyse complex grammatical constructions. While I expected that speakers of Zande in Kisangani would also love these stories, one of them was fairly unhappy with the topics,

¹ I want to express my deeply felt gratitude to the German Academic Exchange Service who generously funded the two trips to Kisangani.

homicide and *cannibalism*. Furthermore, I realized that I had not chosen the right language consultants for interviews on the university campus. Both the topics of the stories and the choice of language consultants meant breaking taboos.

In the present paper I want to discuss how I broke some taboos and why there were no ways to avoid this. Taboos were broken because I did not know about them, and when I learned about them, I had no chance to modify my research and make it appropriate.

The paper is organised as follows: My use of the term taboo is discussed in Section 2. Section 3 outlines the linguistic situation in Kisangani and the taboo-regulated difficulties to find speakers of Ubangian languages. The taboos concerning the topics of the given working texts are discussed in Section 4. Conclusions are drawn in Section 5.

2. Taboo

More than a hundred years after James Cook gave the first documentation of the word *tabu* in 1777 (Imber 2014: vii), the first scientific investigation of the subject 'taboo' was done by Sir James Frazer when editing the respective article (Frazer 1898) for the ninth edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (1875-89) (Radcliffe-Brown 1952). Frazer, who distinguishes between tabooed persons, tabooed acts, and tabooed things, says with regard to tabooed items that "taboos act, so to say, as electrical insulators to preserve the spiritual force with which [these items] are charged from suffering or inflicting harm by contact with the outer world" (Frazer 1911: 224).

Beattie (1968: 216) still distinguishes between breaking normal interdictions, the

sanctions of which are known by experience and the breaking of taboos which are sanctioned by ritual. According to him "we do not say that it is taboo to drive through a red traffic light".

While in anthropology taboo was for a long time defined as "consecrated, inviolable, forbidden, unclean or cursed" because of religious reasons, in daily life the difference between taboo and interdiction has become blurred, and taboo is often used as a synonym for "forbidden" or "socially inappropriate". Mary Douglas' (1979: 73) definition of 'taboo' reflects the current use of the term: "ban or prohibition", adding that the way the word is used in English and other European languages does not have much to do with religion, but denotes "a rule which has no meaning, or one which cannot be explained." Taboo systems uphold cultural systems, which are patterns of values and norms (Douglas 1979: 72), and breaking taboos entails social punishment, which may not be outspoken, but consist in the reactions by other members of the society, e.g. in keeping silence about the matter.

We may conclude that the range of notions of taboo goes from 'primal prohibition' as strictly defined by anthropologists like Frazer and Beattie and psychologists like Freud (1974) to the personal expectations of individuals that in a given place others refrain from doing specific things which they may do at other places. Inappropriateness is a matter of degree, and despite the given statements which reflect the use of 'taboo' in the notion 'unwanted or not tolerated way of doing things', a given behaviour is normally considered breaking a taboo only when it is socially highly inappropriate, e.g. walking naked in public, eating human flesh. In such cases the transgression of a taboo-border tends to be verbalized without

using the word 'taboo' ("das geht gar nicht!", "this cannot be tolerated!", "c'est impossible!") and also without giving the reason why. Quite often, such criticism is instead communicated to persons who are likely to agree the rejection of the behavior, than to the persons concerned. The higher ranking a taboo breaker is, the less likely he will be verbally corrected, and an uneasy silence may prevail which the taboo breaker may eventually sense.

In this text the term 'taboo' is used first in the sense of socially inappropriate behaviour, which threatens social stratification and which require different patterns of behaviour of people belonging to the different strata concerned. Breaking such taboos means disregarding given power relations (Metz-Göckel et al. 2015: 10). Although nobody has defined these rules, and nobody talks about them, the rules are obeyed without problems by both sides. It applies to the choice of language consultants and collaboration with them in order to produce a publication. Secondly, the term is used with regard to cultural values which are valid for everybody in the same way and which require the same behavioural restrictions, such as the taboos of homicide and cannibalism, the topics of stories which I had prepared as a basis of interviews about grammatical constructions. In both cases, taboos are double prohibitions, i.e. they must neither be broken, nor must the respective taboo breaches be talked about. Breaking a taboo may lead to social exclusion, i.e. while the effect of breaking a norm may teach the person concerned how to do better the function of a taboo is sanction (Metz-Göckel et al. 2015: 11).

The silence about taboos makes it difficult for an outsider to know and obey the respective rules.

Breaking taboos in context of German and European universities, is topic of a special volume (Kamphans et al. 2015) in which *sexual harassment, bullying, grade inflation* and *taboos in the governance of universities* are discussed. All of these items are also investigated in other publications, but as criminal acts, this one being to the best of my knowledge the only one that has the word taboo in its title. Investigations on similar taboo breaches in African universities are likewise discussed under the name of the respective criminal offence, e.g., sexual harassment (Norton Rose Fulbright 2013) or racism, victimization and bullying (UNISA 2018).

If in a given situation someone is afraid of unintentionally having broken a taboo and willing to repair the situation s/he might have no chance to do so because nobody comments about the taboo breaking, and nobody will explain why people react in given ways. When the taboo-breaker finally recognizes the situation, the best solution might be to go on, in order to avoid the confronting fact that everybody is even more at unease, the very solution of the Emperor in Andersen's famous tale (Andersen 1935-37).

Social inappropriateness of behavior is gradable and only serious cases are considered breakings of taboos, but the borderline is difficult to define. The use of the term taboo shows also degrees of applicability. In Europe, discussions about taboos and taboo breaches are fairly common in the mass media, e.g.: „Rote Ampel überfahren ist kein Tabu mehr“² (MPU), or „Burka-Verbot: Österreich macht Verschlei-

² "Failure to observe a red traffic light is no longer a taboo". (translation HP)

rung zum Tabu“³ (Hofer & Siebenhaar 2017). Here taboo is, however, not used according to the definition by Douglas, but in the sense of legal prohibition. In colloquial speech, the term is often used in statements where rather personal attitudes play a role than taboos in the sense defined above. If somebody declares, e.g.: *in this house smoking/meat/sugar is taboo* or *in my house dogs are taboo*, they underline their personal rejection of consuming tobacco, meat or sugar or of having dogs around, but do not refer to a general rule, although agreement with ideologies of certain groups may be expressed. Breaking such house rules is considered by some people breaking a taboo, while others regard it rather as a case of impoliteness or bad behavior.

It is noteworthy that in written reports or dialogues about taboo breaches which seriously violate moral or ethical values of the society, e.g. child abduction, the word taboo is normally not used, because what imports here is the degree of criminality and its correlation to the severity of penalty.

With regard to DR Congo, the range of topics called taboo appears much more restricted than

in Europe. It comprises primarily aspects of sexuality, be it homosexuality,⁴ violation of women and men,⁵ menstruation,⁶ AIDS⁷, but also often tattoos⁸ and sorcery.⁹ These taboos are discussed, however, more on western than on Congolese websites. In Congolese texts the term taboo is mostly used with regard to the overcoming taboos in sexual education¹⁰ and with regard to political discussions¹¹, where “sans tabou” means ‘without secrets’. Cannibalism with regard to DR Congo does not normally belong to the topics discussed in the internet. If at all, it is a topic of anthropological studies (Travis-Henikoff 2008). And when I asked people about it, they would evasively respond that they had no personal experience, that it may have existed in the past, but does not exist anymore. Homicide, however, is discussed openly when there has been an incidence of manslaughter and people express their dismay with it, as I could observe when in 2016 a taxi-driver was killed in Kisangani.

Respect of hierarchies is highly important in the whole country and the respective rules are learned reinforced and internalized within the family. For foreigners it is often difficult

³ “Burka-ban: Austria makes wearing a veil a taboo”. (translation HP) (accessed 28.02.2019)

⁴ “I even managed to negotiate that two men can stay in one room; a taboo in Congo”, (<http://www.followtheshadow.de/crossing-congo-the-stream/>), (accessed 28.02.2019).

⁵ “Sexual violence is a taboo in Congo” (<https://jeppechilder.com/stories-series-jeppe-schilder-photography/2016/1/24/sexual-violence-is-a-taboo-in-congo>), (accessed 28.02.2019).

⁶ “Menstrual hygiene in the DRC: a taboo?” (<https://ponabana.com/en/menstrual-hygiene-sin/>), (accessed 28.02.2019).

⁷ “Il ne faut plus que le VIH-SIDA soit un tabou en République démocratique du Congo” (<https://reliefweb.int/report/democratic-republic-congo/j-ai-contamin-plusieurs-personnes-du-sida-par-ignorance>), (accessed 28.02.2019).

⁸ “While tattoos are generally considered a taboo in Congolese society, the designs share the stories of their bearers”, (<http://www.francescavolpi.com/tatoos-democratic-republic-of-congo>), (accessed 28.02.2019).

⁹ “La sorcellerie est un sujet tabou en Afrique”, (<https://www.afrik.com/la-sorcellerie-une-realite-africaine>), (accessed 28.02.2019).

¹⁰ “L’objectif a été de briser le tabou qui existe entre les parents et les jeunes adolescents sur l’éducation sexuelle”, (<http://www.adiac-congo.com/content/sante-de-la-reproduction-les-eleves-sensibilises-leducation-sexuelle-complete-51108>), (accessed 28.02.2019).

¹¹ “Sans tabou, Alain Akouala a répondu à la question sur la transparence de l’environnement des affaires au Congo”, (<http://adiac-congo.com/content/forum-des-pme-accueil-favorable-par-les-chefs-dentreprise-du-projet-de-zones-economiques>), (accessed 28.02.2019).

to know such rules, which are normally not explicitly taught, and one needs good friends to correct inappropriate behavior and explain how to avoid breaking these rules in a given situation. For example, one easily gets the impression that whenever people hear music they dance to the rhythm or at least shake their head, or move a hand or a leg. One easily overlooks, however, that certain people do not do that. In the eyes of academics, for example, any dance-like movement outside a dancing event is not appropriate behavior for university teachers, “*ce n’est pas professoral*”, and should be avoided in any case.

3. The linguistic situation in Kisangani

In Kisangani, Kiswahili and Lingala are by far the most important languages, in particular for oral communication. The third language is French, the primary medium of written communication,¹² basically the only medium in higher levels of administration and the only medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary education. In the city centre, French is also an important language for oral communication in Catholic and Protestant Churches, it is used in hospitals, on the market and in shops, in particular when talking to Europeans. Occasionally Arabic is used by Arab traders, and English is used by people from overseas and on the university campus by students who are practicing. One does, however, not hear Ubangian languages when walking along the streets or on the markets, and even in the residential neighbourhoods they are rarely heard.

Many people have no good competence of their ethnic languages but are only fluent in Swahili or Lingala.

The chance to teach at the University of Kisangani (UNIKIS) was attractive to me because I expected to find speakers of Ubangian languages in the town with whom I could work on their languages. Before my first visit, colleagues had told me that in Kisangani there live many speakers of Zande, Nzakara, Ngbaka, Mbane and other Ubangian languages. Even among the university students there would be numerous candidates and whom they could introduce to me.

But when I arrived not a single one was introduced to me, and for several weeks I could not find any, and the colleagues could not help me. It took me some time to get an idea why it was so difficult to introduce to me speakers of Ubangian languages.

3.1 University students

Students of linguistics are encouraged to write their B.A. and M.A. theses about their ethnic tongues, a situation which made me look forward to get data from such theses and their authors. This also did not lead to good results, because the number of students of linguistics is not high and most of them are speakers of Bantu languages. Like other inhabitants of Kisangani many students do not feel competent in their ethnic¹³ tongues, but have Kiswahili or Lingala as their first language. In their theses, they prefer to write about these two languages or about French or English. It fol-

¹² In the churches, Lingala and Swahili prayer books are used, but while people read texts written in these languages, they normally do not write such texts.

¹³ They call the language of their home villages or their forefathers their ethnic languages even if they do not speak them.

lows that there is only a very small number of theses on non-Bantu languages¹⁴, and most of the authors had left university and Kisangani and could not be contacted.¹⁵

Students of linguistics and their teachers agree that doing proper fieldwork means to go to rural areas and work with language consultants in the villages, preferably with old persons who memorize linguistic forms which the younger generation has forgotten. It is not quite clear where this concept of the ideal linguistic consultant originates which was already rejected by Jaberg & Jud (1928: 241) when they began to work on the *Linguistic and Ethnographic Atlas of Italy and southern Switzerland*.¹⁶ Its general acceptance at Kisangani explains why only students who have the financial means to go to their home village during holidays and do fieldwork there are prepared to work on their ethnic languages. Even students who claim to be competent speakers of their ethnic language are reluctant to rely on their linguistic competence for their theses. When in 2016 I found a young man who had written a B.A. thesis on his mother tongue Mbane (Kimanga), he was ready to be my language consultant on condition that he could go to his village, use my questionnaire and present the answers of the villagers to me. After some discussions, he agreed to be my language consultant, but with much reluctance. I had the impression that his reluctance resulted not really from lack of linguistic competence but rather from the fact that he as a young person and a trained linguist living

in Kisangani was not the right person to give information on the Mbane language.

Of course, in courses on linguistic methodologies students learn that when writing a grammar or analysing a specific linguistic problem they should not rely on information given by only one single speaker and – more important – not rely only on their own intuition. Only forms and constructions given by several competent speakers should be considered correct. But they were not taught to completely distrust their own linguistic competence. This means that they obey a rule which in the sense of Douglas (1979: 72) has no origin and cannot be explained, since nobody has formulated it. When asking students of linguistics to work as language consultants for me I had the impression of obliging them to break a taboo and give information without having sufficient competence.

3.2 Administrative staff

People working in the administration of UNIKIS and the professors cooperate without problems on administrative matters, they greet each other in a friendly way, but they don't socialize. The professors have definitely a higher social status. The organization of the main building reflects the social structure of the scientific and non-scientific university personnel. The administration is located in the ground level, some professors of the faculty of humanities have their offices in the first and

¹⁴ Prof. Arthur Cimwanga kindly gave me access to the theses written at the Faculty of Humanities of the last ten years.

¹⁵ Other than professors, administrative and cleaning personnel only registered students may enter the campus of UNIKIS. As soon as they have their exams, they are not allowed to go there.

¹⁶ They explicitly state that they do not want to document an 'original' dialect, but the current dialect with all mixtures and infiltrations, since there is neither a genuine nor a homogenous dialect.

the second floors¹⁷ and the rector's office is in the third floor.

At the same time, the people working in that building and in the rest of the university are convinced that all people are equal and have the same rights, and idea which is occasionally expressed in conversations. They obviously do not experience a cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) between the observable social stratification and the knowledge that all people are equal because the social stratification as such is never discussed and would probably be denied if somebody asks about it. Other reasons are made responsible for the given organisation of the floors and also for the communicative behaviour, e.g. that the administration employees have different jobs. "Ce sont nos agents", was a professor's explanation to my question why members of the two groups don't socialize. The fear to break the taboo of disturbing the established hierarchical order was quite probably what made it impossible for professors to find a qualified language consultant or me in the administration.

In order to do so it would have been necessary for my colleagues to interview a number of administration employees, each of whom would have to be asked whether they master their ethnic languages well enough for the respective job and whether s/he would be available during my planned visit. Such questions, in particular those concerning the linguistic competences, are normally only addressed to persons to whom there is a close relationship, which explains why my colleagues were shy to find language consultants in the administration. Furthermore, since people without

experience as language consultants cannot know whether they will be good in that job or not, it is no considered appropriate to confront them with such questions. A third reason is that it is not easy to select one person among the administration employees for a job and leave the others behind, who might consider the choice unfair.

The taboo preventing a professor from finding a language informant on the campus for was finally overcome when two of my students found a Zande speaker, Pepe,¹⁸ who worked in the administration, and introduced him to me. The fact that they are not part of the hierarchy of the university personnel facilitated the matter. Students have to consult the people in the administration in a similar way as they have to consult their professors when they need assistance or advice. Of course, asking one of the persons in the administration whether he or she would be interested to work as language consultant for a visiting professor is not a typical request for students, but it is a possible one when they have been sent by a professor. Professors can send students with different tasks to any institution within the university.

The question arises whether I could have avoided this taboo-breach. I had already begun to cooperate with Pepe when I realized that some people were uneasy with my doing so, although nobody would make any comment. Even when I began to become aware that my cooperation was highly unusual, I asked Pepe and also some professors, whether it was inappropriate to go on or whether I should stop. The answers were short "no, no, everything is fine, you may go on", but it was clear that this

¹⁷ Other professors have their offices in other buildings.

¹⁸ For protection of privacy the correct name is not given.

topic was not one for a discussion, but rather one of silence. The students, who assisted me, did not see any problem, but during the first days I felt a bit like the emperor without clothes when I went to work with Pepe in his office for interviews, each time going past other administrative employees who would not comment on such unusual behaviour. The way they greeted me indicated that they were happy with the situation.

4. Texts with inappropriate topics

Pepe was quite interested to give information about his language, but he was not the person to give answers to a questionnaire concerning verbal conjugations, relative clauses or possessive or other grammatical constructions. He would prefer to read texts and have them recorded in audio-files, and he agreed to read two texts documented by Evans-Pritchard (1956, 1965). The first of these texts is about Zande cannibalism and the second about a man-killer, two stories which I had chosen because the speakers of Zande in Central African Republic (CAR) with whom I had worked five years earlier liked them very much.

The texts of these two stories which I showed Pepe were accompanied by glosses and translations in French. The printouts had been prepared in Germany before I went to Congo because it is very difficult to get texts printed in Kisangani. The glosses and the translations made reading cumbersome for Pepe and I removed them and had made new printouts. Now that Pepe could read more easily, he realized problems with the spelling and wanted the letter <r> to be replaced in all instances by <l>, and the script should be in a bigger font since he was short-sighted and had

no glasses. After all these changes were made, he was unhappy with the content of the stories, accepting neither homicide nor cannibalism as appropriate topics with regard to the Zande.

I explained that Evans-Pritchard (E.P.), editor of these stories, was most probably fooled because in those days. The interest of anthropologists focused on cannibalism and homicide, that the consultants would rather tell what E.P. wanted to hear than what was to the truth. This explanation was of no comfort to Pepe. He apparently realized that these stories had become a dangerous reality in themselves, since they had been published in Europe and were taken by me first to CAR and now to DR Congo, a reality which did not reflect the truth but which did harm to the Zande people. For him, cannibalism and homicide, in particular with regard to Zande people, were not possible topics of a tale. It is likely that he had been uneasy with the two topics from the very beginning, but that for several days he had been reluctant to say so. Unfortunately, my stay in Kisangani was almost over and there was no chance to prepare other texts by Evans-Pritchard in a similar way and have them printed. Pepe continued to read the stories and explain the structures, but he repeatedly expressed his frustration with the content.

After the Zande language consultants in Central African Republic had been so happy with the same stories I was at a loss and talked about that experience with an anthropologist. He laughed out loud and said: "No, no, it is not the Zande who practiced cannibalism in those days. We, the Mangbetu, were cannibals." For him talking about cannibalism, even with regard to his own ethnic group, was quite obviously not a taboo. But it must be taken into

consideration that as an anthropologist he has learned to distance himself from being affected by such taboo breaches.

The question arises again, whether could I have avoided breaking that taboo and in what way. Under the given constellations this would have been quite difficult. For lack of printing facilities it was not possible to prepare other stories, and to give up the project would not only have destroyed my own plans, but also the hopes and ambitions of Pepe, who for a number of reasons had a serious interest in working on his language. It appeared best to continue our work as if that problem would not exist. Pepe's trade-off consisted in providing two highly appropriate texts which were added in the publication (Degbe et al. 2018).

5. Conclusion

Although in DR Congo the term taboo is used less frequently than in Europe there is some similarity in the use and not-use of the term. It is actually used mostly with regard to minor taboos, and 'without taboo' means 'without secrets'. With regard to major taboos like violation, homicide, etc. the respective terms are used.

To do linguistic research on vernacular languages in an urban centre like Kisangani means breaking a methodological taboo, because the allegedly best variants of the respective language, which is mastered by old speakers in the villages are neglected. Of course, this taboo might be overcome by doing research in the respective villages, at least theoretically. The argument that my research on Mbane was aimed at speakers living in Kisangani, who are not longer fluent was difficult to understand. It does not make sense when

proper fieldwork means to make interviews with old persons and look for forms which are obsolete. In the end we had some sessions from which I could elicit data, but we were both unhappy: he with his tabooed role as a language consultant and I with the fact that he was not more relaxed in providing data.

Finding competent speakers is difficult because people may know the ethnic affiliation of others but they usually have no idea about their linguistic competence in the mother tongue. Within the university social stratification between professors and people working in the administration makes it basically impossible, that the former can find potential language consultants. Student can be of help and solve the problem.

Although one can never foresee their reactions with certainty, it is useful to supply the language consultant with enjoying stories. It appears however wise, to avoid stories on cannibalism and manslaughter with regard to the ethnic group of the language consultant.

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¹⁹ This website provides information about trainings for drivers in Germany who want to regain their revoked driving licence.

