

## **Problems of (re-)contextualizing and interpreting variation in oral and written Shaba Swahili**

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### **1. CONTEXT AND INTERPRETATION**

During recent years, many sociolinguists have been arguing that talk, or linguistic form, and socio-cultural and linguistic context are to be seen as mutually constitutive phenomena. Context, then, is no longer regarded as something that is simply given or pre-established of which talk is a mere derivation or reflection. In fact, linguistic interaction is now commonly viewed as a dynamic process in which speakers signal to their interlocutors how to interpret what is being said. This process is often referred to as *contextualization*, a term coined by John Gumperz who characterizes it as follows :

(...) speakers' and listeners' use of verbal and nonverbal signs to relate what is said at any one time and in any one place to knowledge acquired through past experience, in order to retrieve the presuppositions they must rely on to maintain conversational involvement and assess what is intended.

(Gumperz 1992 : 230).

The verbal and nonverbal signs that speakers and listeners rely in the contextualization process are called 'contextualization cues'. A broad range of linguistic and

paralinguistic features may serve as contextualization cues. Gumperz (1992 : 231) considers the following as potential contextualization cues :

1. prosody, including intonation, stress or accenting and pitch register shifts;
2. paralinguistic signs of tempo, pausing and hesitation, conversational synchrony, including latching or overlapping speech turns, and other 'tone of voice' expressive cues;
3. code choice from among the options within a linguistic repertoire as in code or style switching or selection among phonetic, phonological or morphological options;
4. choice of lexical forms or formulaic expressions, as for example opening or closing routines or metaphoric expressions.

Contextualization cues play a crucial role at various levels of conversational inference, another concept introduced by Gumperz referring to

(...) the situated or context-bound process of interpretation, by means of which participants in an exchange assess each others' intentions, and on which they base their responses.

(Gumperz 1982 : 153).

First of all, contextualization cues, especially those listed under 1 and 2, signal how speech is divided into discourse units and how these discourse units relate to preceding and following units (Gumperz 1982 : 131, 1992 : 232). Second, cues may signal how the lexical content of utterances should be interpreted (Gumperz 1982 : 131, 1992 : 232-233). And thirdly, interlocutors rely on contextualization cues in signaling and inferring the activity type they are engaged in (Gumperz 1982 : 131, 1992 : 2-33).

The use of contextualization cues is, to a high degree, based on convention : interlocutors have to learn through communicative experience which kind of contexts are signaled by a certain contextualization cue. It is through acquiring such knowledge of contextualization conventions that one becomes a member of a specific speech community. Now, if knowledge of contextualization conventions is culture or community specific, this means that the non-native field

worker/researcher has to acquire or reconstruct this kind of knowledge in order to understand the people he is working with in the field. This is what we all do when we are in the field by observing what goes on in 'native' interactions. But the fastest, most effective, and also most interesting way of acquiring this kind of knowledge is through confrontation : by talking to the people and listening to them. As a speaker and a listener we have to cast ourselves into the same role as the people we are working with. We as well as they have to engage in the same kind of socio-cognitive activity : arriving at understanding through conversational inference. We have to actively contextualize what is being said, that is, we have to construct a frame of interpretation consisting of culture – specific assumptions in which what is said makes sense. Of course, we will often arrive at interpretations that differ from the ones intended by the other, but instead of viewing this as problematic we should try to learn from these 'mistakes'. This we can only achieve by being extremely attentive to the responses of the other and by making explicit our own working assumptions as clearly as possible. The form of our conversations with the other will therefore be in a way more dialogic, or rather confrontational, than normal, in the sense that less is taken for granted, and more is being questioned. In other words, what we should do is to make explicit the way we arrive at our interpretations and ask for comments and reactions in order to learn how the other arrives at his/her interpretations.

This way of doing fieldwork is, of course, very common in anthropology. The question is : can the same be done in linguistic fieldwork ? Anthropologists are interested in cultural beliefs and social habits, things that most people are very keen on talking about, especially when, as an anthropologist, you start asking questions which, willingly or not, will often sound provocative to those you talk to. People will then feel obliged to justify their acts and beliefs.

Things are, of course, a bit different for most linguists and especially for sociolinguists. Many of us are interested in features of language use that are not normally talked about<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> I should point out here that some of the phenomena investigated by sociolinguists are talked about in daily life. In bilingual or

However, dialogue can, indeed must, be an essential part of linguistic fieldwork too. I know many linguists, especially creolists, working within the generative framework who do fieldwork in creole-speaking societies. These people are often interested in the limits of the linguistic system : what is still possible, i.e. grammatical, and what is not. What these linguists do is eliciting grammaticality judgments of sentences that are highly marked, both in terms of being rare, seldomly used, and ambiguous, and therefore, difficult to interpret. Judgments regarding the grammaticality of these sentences can only be made if they are rigorously contextualized by the field worker. It is vital that the field worker makes sure that the informant contextualizes the sentence in the same way. So, the relation between field worker and informant must be a truly dialogic one of checking and cross-checking each other's interpretations.

Especially for sociolinguists interested in vernacular usage this dialogic approach does not seem a viable one, because vernacular speech tends to be used only in circumstances or contexts in which only 'natives' are present. Needless to say, this creates a problem – the well-known *observer's paradox* – for the non-native researcher wishing to record vernacular speech. Several solutions to this problem have been proposed :

1. prolonged immersion in the community, so that the researcher is no longer perceived as an outsider;
2. disregarding the first 10 or more minutes of a recording, a strategy based on the assumption that the effect of the presence of the researcher tends to disappear after a while;
3. recruiting natives as research assistants who record speech exchanges in which they themselves are participants.

In the Labovian research tradition where most data are collected through interviews, the interviewer/researcher

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multilingual communities, for instance, codeswitching is frequently, though certainly not always, commented upon in negative terms. Many other phenomena studied by sociolinguists, such as culture-specific intonation patterns (cf. Gumperz 1982), however, are the product of more or less unconscious processes and, hence, are not (or cannot) be talked about.

will try to trigger switches to the vernacular by having the interviewee talk about emotionally charged topics. In doing so, it has been found, the interviewee is less aware of his speech and will produce vernacular speech (or something quite close to it).

This may solve the problem in the sense that one ends up collecting the kind of data one is looking for, but it does not solve the problem of how to interpret the sociolinguistic variation found. This can only be done by entering into a dialogical relation with the speakers, either directly – by conversing with the speakers while still in the field – or indirectly after one has left the field.

The latter may require some comment : how can one enter into a dialogic relationship with people who are not present ? At first sight this may seem impossible, but if one thinks about it, it becomes clear that there is nothing strange about it : it is, in fact, inevitable.

One only has to consider what happens in transcribing field recordings. Everyone with some experience in transcribing knows that transcribing is an interpretative activity. Sounds and sequences of sounds are often problematic in the sense that assigning a particular graphic symbol to a given sound is always to some extent a matter of arbitrary choice, because the graphic symbols used in transcribing are fixed and limited in number, while the spaces occupied by phonetic realizations of different phonemes often overlap. Then there are words or stretches of speech that are poorly articulated and that can only be interpretatively reconstructed with the help of preceding or following speech context. In other words, what you have to do is listen to what is said by the speakers and talking back to them, as it were, by means of your interpretation of what is said – your transcription – and constantly checking it by ascertaining whether it makes sense in the broader context of the speech exchange you are transcribing.

An interesting and stimulating discussion of this dialogic approach can be found in Tedlock (1983 : 321-338). As a linguistic anthropologist, Tedlock (*ibid.* : 324) argues for regarding interpretation as dialogue. According to him, anthropologists should, in their analyses and writings, listen

to the recorded texts in the same way as the speakers/listeners involved in the production of the text and in doing so make specific efforts to recreate the temporality of the text and clarify by which means this is achieved in the analysis. Recreating the temporality of the text is essential because if this is not done, the text is presented as an a-temporal unit instead of as a process which it actually is: an activity in which the speaker/writer contextualizes units with other units.

Some people will be prone to argue that an interpretative approach such as the one outlined here has the disadvantage of never being sure whether one has arrived at the interpretations intended by the speakers/listeners participating in the speech event under analysis. This criticism can be countered quite easily if one realizes that the very same problem is also present in the original event: you can never really be sure whether your interpretation of what your interlocutor has said matches with his/her intentions. In face-to-face interactions we are constantly and actively constructing meaning out of what is said: the interpretations we arrive at are by no means fixed but may change – sometimes quite dramatically – depending on the context in which we think they should be evaluated. In short, the work of linguistic analysis – in the field or at home – and the work of conducting interaction are both processual and interpretative in nature (cf. Fabian 1995)<sup>2</sup>.

The interpretation of written texts in languages without a standardized way of writing presents specific problems. In written Shaba Swahili, for instance, we find a high degree of variation in spelling, the segmentation of words, and the use of interpunction. In his study of a written Shaba Swahili document, Fabian (1990) attacked this problem by having the text 're-oralized' by a native speaker of the language, who read the text aloud. The rationale

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<sup>2</sup> I should add here that although it is possible to arrive at different interpretations of a given utterance that are all valid in the sense of being possible within the socio-cultural context in which that utterance was produced, there is the danger of overinterpretation (cf. Eco 1992). In our interpretations of recorded conversations we should be careful not to rely on knowledge that was clearly unavailable to the participants in the original event.

behind this procedure is that Fabian (1990 : 2) sees the text as « rooted in orality » and, therefore, can only be fully appreciated if it is performed by reading it aloud. Many, but certainly not all, ambiguities and puzzling features of the text could be solved in this way.

## 2. INTERPRETING VARIATION IN ORAL AND WRITTEN SHABA SWAHILI

In my own research on Shaba Swahili<sup>3</sup>/French codeswitching I was confronted with still other problems. The aim of my research project was to find out how a specific form of linguistic variation, Shaba Swahili/French codeswitching, functions as a discourse strategy (cf. Gumperz 1982). In some way or another, therefore, I had to get to the meaning of codeswitches. I was planning to that by various means. The major strategies were :

1. playing back recordings to participants and directly questioning them about the meaning of individual codeswitches and
2. applying a sequential analysis (Auer 1984), in which the interpretation of individual switches relies on the way in which the switched material is related to preceding and following linguistic context.

After having made my first recordings of informal conversations, I began my analysis by playing the recordings back to the participants asking them questions like : « Why do you use a French word here ? ». I had to give up this approach because it did not yield any interesting results. People just did not know why they used a given French word at a given point in the conversation. After having thought about this for some time, I came to the conclusion that the inability of speakers to attach specific meanings to individual switches must be due to the characteristic pattern of Shaba Swahili/French codeswitching. Codeswitches to

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<sup>3</sup> Shaba Swahili is a restructured variety of Swahili, spoken in Shaba or Katanga Province in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the former Zaire.

French are very high in frequency. This frequent switching back and forth between Shaba Swahili and French is, in fact, the norm in daily conversations and may be seen as the product of unconscious processes of lexical choice that are hard to bring under introspective evaluation.

Despite the fact that speakers found it hard or impossible to 'explain' or evaluate individual switches, I was not prepared to give up the idea that these switches were meaningful in some way. I decided to concentrate on finding out what role individual switches play in creating textual cohesion. Building on concepts and methods developed in Halliday & Hasan's *Cohesion in English* (1976), I studied the ties of lexical cohesion of Swahili and French nouns. Lexical cohesion is achieved by means of reiteration of which there are four types (Halliday & Hasan 1976 : 274-292) :

1. repetition (a word followed by the same word),
2. a word followed by a (near-)synonym or hyponym,
3. a word followed by a superordinate term,
4. a word followed by a general word (a word which may refer to a whole class of objects, such as *thing* or *stuff*).

In the presentation of my analysis, I tried to do justice to the temporality of the text by choosing to list all the nouns of the text in a tabular format in the order in which they appear in the text. I showed that the cohesive ties between the nouns clearly served a rhetorical function by highlighting the motives of the speakers. Of course, this I was able to do only because I could rely on contextual knowledge that I had gained in my contacts with the speakers involved.

To illustrate my method of analysis I will present here a case study taken from my dissertation (de Rooij 1996). The text fragment below consists of one single conversational turn. The fragment is divided in numbered clauses. The speaker is a young woman, Fidélie, who is in her early twenties. She is explaining here how, according to the bible, a true Christian should dress and behave. She does this in response to criticisms raised by her brother and a friend of his earlier on in the same interaction. They particularly criticized those



Christians who think that in order to be a good Christian it is necessary to wear fine clothes and to observe certain food taboos.

# (1) M1/MU BIBLE BEKONASEMA

- [1] *moi* < *nous* *nacondamner* *bale* *bantu*  
 I we disapprove of those people  
*ba marites* *moya mingimingi*, *ma(h)ibi*  
 of rites DET very many, these  
*na (h)ibi mabizhila eh?*  
 and these food taboos TAG?
- [2] *byote bile bible (h)airecommander.*  
 all these bible it does not demand.
- [3] *Mungu akaumba bintu*  
 God he made things
- [4] *biko (h)apa dunia*  
 they are here on earth
- [5] *tukule,*  
 that we may eat,
- [6] *tukunywe, (1.0)*  
 that we may drink
- [7] *et puis, paka mu bible bekonasema, (1.0)*  
 and further, right in bible they say,
- [8] *il faut eh* <  
 it is necessary ehr <
- [9] *njo eh Mungu, ni Mungu wa richesse, (0.5)*  
 TOP ehr God, is God of riches,
- [10] *ni Mungu wa or,*  
 is God of gold
- [11] *ni Mungu wa argent. (0.5)*  
 is God of silver.

- [12] *donc* (h)ii richesse yote (h)ii  
 therefore this riches all this  
 inatuappartenir shi batoto yake.  
 it belongs to us we children his.
- [13] (1.0) *et puis,* Mungu ashina Mungu  
 and further, God he is not God  
 wa buchafu  
 of filth
- [14] *mais c'est un Dieu de la propreté.* (1.0)  
 but it's a God of DET cleanliness.
- [15] *du, [donc] il faut* pa kumuomba  
 so, it is necessary in praying to him
- [16] *unavala bien,*  
 you dress well,
- [17] *unatokelea bien ku bo< macho wa bantu.*  
 you go out well LOC ?< eyes of people.
- [18] *ça alors ça v< itaattirer* na bantu  
 that then that ?< it will appeal with/to people
- [19] *wa bamuomba Mungu.*  
 who (they) pray to (him) God.
- [20] *kuko bengine*  
 there are others
- [21] *bakaanza katala kumuomba Mungu*  
 they started to refuse to pray to (him) God  
 (h)asa,  
 even,
- [22] *utazeka*  
 you will become old/impotent
- [23] (h)autaanza kuvala *bien.*  
 you will not start to dress well.
- [24] (0.5) *du [donc] il faut*  
 so it is necessary

- [25] unaji< eh? unavala bien,  
you< TAG? you dress well,
- [26] *tu te présentes bien ku mancho wa*  
you yourself present well LOC eyes of  
bantu,  
people,
- [27] njo unaenda muomba Mungu wako.  
TOP you go ask him God your.
- [28] *c'est ça eh*  
it's that ehr
- [29] *bible bible (h)aidéfendre.*  
bible bible it doesn't forbid.

Among the 31 nouns in the fragment 11 are French (7 types) and 20 are Shaba Swahili (8 types). Although, at first sight, the French nouns seem to be scattered in a rather random fashion through the text, a closer inspection of the individual French nouns shows that they all play a vital role in setting up relations of lexical cohesion, which form the backbone of the argumentative structure of Fidélie's turn.

First, let us have a look at the repetitive use of *bible* in clauses 2, 7, and 29. In these three clauses Fidélie invokes the authority of the bible in order to support the claims she makes : these claims do not express her personal views but are based on what is in the bible. Fidélie's first claim, made in clause 1, which says that all kinds of rites (*marite moya mingi mingi*) and food taboos (*mabizhila*) are to be condemned is authorized by the contents of clause 2 (« all these things aren't prescribed by the bible »). In the following clauses 3-6, Fidélie points out that the statement in clause 2 follows from what is said in the bible : « God created the things that exist on earth for us to eat and drink (them) ». Note that this sequence does not contain a single switch to French which may be linked to its subordinate role in the general argument.

|      |           | a   | b                             | c  |
|------|-----------|-----|-------------------------------|----|
| [1]  | bantu     | -   | no reiteration                |    |
| [1]  | marite    | SH  | no reiteration                |    |
| [1]  | mabizhila | -   | no reiteration                |    |
| [2]  | bible     | BA  | no reiteration                |    |
| [3]  | bintu     | -   | no reiteration                |    |
| [4]  | dunia     | -   | no reiteration                |    |
| [7]  | bible     | BA  | repetition/[2] bible          | 5  |
| [9]  | Mungu     | -   | no reiteration                |    |
| [9]  | Mungu     | -   | repetition/[9] Mungu          | 0  |
| [9]  | richesse  | BA  | no reiteration                |    |
| [10] | Mungu     | -   | repetition/[9] Mungu          | 1  |
| [10] | or        | BA  | hyponym/[9] richesse          | 1  |
| [11] | Mungu     | -   | repetition/[10] Mungu         | 1  |
| [11] | argent    | BA  | hyponym/[9] richesse          | 2  |
| [12] | richesse  | BA  | superordinate/[11] argent     | 1  |
|      |           |     | superordinate/[10] or         | 2  |
|      |           |     | repetition/[9] richesse       | 3  |
| [12] | batoto    | -   | no reiteration                |    |
| [13] | Mungu     | -   | repetition/[11] Mungu         | 2  |
| [13] | Mungu     | -   | repetition/[13] Mungu         | 0  |
| [13] | buchafu   | -   | no reiteration                |    |
| [14] | dieu      | FCO | synonym of ShS word/[13]Mungu | 1  |
| [14] | propreté  | FCO | no reiteration                |    |
| [17] | macho     | -   | no reiteration                |    |
| [17] | bantu     | -   | repetition/[1] bantu          | 16 |
| [18] | bantu     | -   | repetition/[17] bantu         | 1  |
| [19] | Mungu     | -   | synonym of Fr. word/[14] Dieu | 5  |
| [21] | Mungu     | -   | repetition/[19] Mungu         | 2  |
| [26] | mancho    | -   | repetition/[17] macho         | 9  |
| [26] | bantu     | -   | repetition/[18] bantu         | 8  |
| [27] | Mungu     | -   | repetition/[21] Mungu         | 6  |
| [29] | bible     | BA  | repetition/[7] bible          | 22 |
| [29] | bible     | BA  | repetition                    | 0  |

a : type of codeswitch (BA=bare noun, FCO=(part of) French constituent, SH=morphologically shielded switch)

b : type of reiteration+item reiterated

c : cohesive distance measured in number of intervening clauses

The second claim made by Fidélie says that as a Christian you should be well-dressed when praying to God. This claim is authorized again by invoking the bible in clause 7 ('and then, right in the bible it is said'). It is interesting to observe that Fidélie first invokes the bible, and only then realizes that in order to put forward her claim more cogently she has to explain why one should be well-dressed when praying to God. She does so by saying that God is a God of riches and cleanliness (clauses 9-14). The insertion of this argument explains the aborted clause 8 ('it is necessary that<') and the resumption of it in 15-16. The third and fourth instance of *bible* in the final clause again occur in a clause which authorizes the contents of Fidélie's second claim. Its force as a concluding statement here is strengthened by the fact that *bible* is reduplicated and echoes clauses 2 and 7 at the beginning of the fragment.

Apart from *bible*, there are 6 more French nouns in the fragment. One of these occurs twice (*richesse* in 9 and 12), while the others occur only once. They are all concentrated in clauses 9-14. Looking at the sequence consisting of clauses 9-11, we see an interesting pattern of parallelism involving the repetition of the structure 'ni Mungu wa' ('it is a God of') followed by a French noun: after the introduction of 'ni Mungu wa *richesse*' ('is a God of riches') in 9, the structure is repeated as 'ni Mungu wa *or*' ('is a God of gold') in 10 and as 'ni Mungu wa *argent*' ('is a God of silver') in 11. Apart from the parallelism, the cohesion of clauses 9-11 is further strengthened by the codeswitched nouns *richesse*, *or*, and *argent* which are linked to each other by ties of lexical cohesion: *or* and *argent* are hyponyms of *richesse*. On top of this, we observe another short distance cohesive tie in clause 12 where *richesse* is repeated. In this clause, the first step in the argument made in 9-14 is completed with the conclusion that we as God's children share in God's riches.

The second step leading to the general conclusion in 15-16 is made in clauses 13-14 where Fidélie again uses two parallel structures:

- (2) [13] (Mungu) ashina Mungu wa buchafu  
           (God) he is not God of filth

- [14] (mais) *c'est un Dieu de la propreté.*  
 (but) it's a God of cleanliness.

The contrast in contents of both clauses is highlighted by the switch to French in 14 and the use in 13 of two forms (*ashina* and noun class prefix *bu-* in *buchafu*) that are regarded as stereotypical of the variety of Shaba Swahili which is maximally divergent from Swahili Bora, the prestige variety of Swahili in Shaba. Also note that nowhere else in the fragment *Dieu*, the French synonym of Shaba Swahili *Mungu*, is used while *Mungu* occurs 8 times. Furthermore, Fidélie's pronunciation of French is hardly influenced by her native Shaba Swahili. The effect achieved is that 13 sounds almost coarse while 14 has a refined ring to it.

Another place where Fidélie exploits negative symbolic connotations of the basilectal style of Shaba Swahili is in clause 1. As a way of expressing her negative feelings toward certain rites and food taboos adhered to by some Christians, she piles up a number of typical Shaba Swahili features: the reduplicated form *mingimingi* 'very many', *ma(h)ibi na (h)ibi* 'things like these' instead of *ma(h)ivi na (h)ivi*, and the plural class 6 pre-prefix *ma-* and palatalized fricative in *mabizhila* 'food taboos'.

In this fragment we have seen that reiteration involving the use of French nouns plays an important role in creating discourse structure. It is clear that the repeated use of *bible* structures and strengthens Fidélie's argumentation. Furthermore, the patterns of parallelism involving the use of French superordinate and French hyponyms in 9-11 and the use of French nouns with their Swahili synonyms in 13-14 are prime examples of the rhetorical force of reiteration combined with codeswitching.

In the remainder of this paper I would like to go into the problems of interpreting written Shaba Swahili texts. I will do this with the help of a short text that was written by one of my key informants in November 1992 shortly before I left Zaire. The way the text is rendered here reflects as faithful as possible the features of the original, i.e. I did not make changes in spelling, or segmentation of words while the

lines breaks are also as in the original. I did, however, add a = sign where there was a space in the original between morphemes that clearly form one word.

A striking feature of this text is that, like most written Shaba Swahili texts, it contains hardly any French words. In this respect, written Shaba Swahili dramatically differs from spoken varieties, which are characterized by moderate to high degrees of codeswitching. The near-absence of codeswitching makes the French material that does occur particularly salient. I will deal with the French items in this text below.

As noted before, Shaba Swahili does not have a standard orthography. Of course, this does not stop people from writing in Shaba Swahili, but to do so they have to devise their own rules of spelling and orthography. One and the same writer may often use different spellings for the same word, or segment words in various different ways. In general, these variable ways of writing the word present no serious problems to the reader. What is more problematic is that sentence boundaries are often not marked by a full stop. The biggest problem, however, is the use of idiosyncratic hypercorrect forms under the influence of the high-prestige Swahili Bora. Several such forms can be found in the text below. In lines 8 and 11 we find *kubalaka* and *kumuba* respectively, where the hypercorrect *b* reflects the uncertainty of the speaker regarding the use of voiced versus unvoiced velar plosives. In Shaba Swahili plosives which are unvoiced in Swahili Bora are often unvoiced. The author must have thought that *kupalaka* and *kumupa* were instances of this voiced to unvoiced change but, in fact, they are not: both Swahili Bora and Shaba Swahili have an unvoiced plosive in these words. It is forms like these that often force the reader of Shaba Swahili texts to pause and think what the author could have meant by a certain word. However, with a little effort even these problems can be solved relatively easily, especially if you are in a position to consult the author which I did. Dédé, the author, explained many features of the text that were puzzling to me. I did not, however, explicitly asked him to explain the meaning of the text since at that time I was primarily interested in the

linguistic features of written Shaba Swahili. So, back in Amsterdam, where I became interested in the meaning of the text, and in the intention of the author in particular, I was confronted with a serious problem because Dédé was no longer there to answer my questions. Therefore, I had to look for contextualization cues provided by the text in order to contextualize and interpret the meaning of the text, i.e. not only the socio-cultural meaning of the text but also the intention of the author.

(2)

- [1] nirikuyaka na rafiki yangu moya  
I was with friend my one/a
- [2] K\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\* harikuya na zohezo  
K\*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\* he was with habit
- [3] ya kutafuta ba=bibi bakubwa na  
of looking for women older and
- [4] bale beko na makuta. harikuya  
those/who they are with money. he was
- [5] na dawa ile kambo  
with medicine that/which grandfather/mother  
yake harimu=  
his s/he
- [6] mba. na bale banamuke bengine  
gave him. and those women other
- [7] bari=kuya ba'femme mariée'.  
they were married women
- [8] na dawa yake irikuwa ya kubakala  
and medicine his it was for apply
- [9] mu mukono jo ana=kulamukiya na  
on hand so he greets you and



- [10] paka pale unamupenda sana  
right there you love him very much
- [11] wa=na=muke sasa bananza kumuba  
women now they begin to give him
- [12] makuta, bananza kumusiya manguyo.  
money, they begin to buy him clothes.
- [13] zaiti haripendaka ba=mama ba miaka  
especially he liked women of years
- [14] 40 à 50 ans ba musoko ya kenya  
40 to 50 years of at the market of Kenya
- [15] na ya mu ville jopale beko na  
and of in town precisely where they are with
- [16] makuta saa yote  
money time all
- [17] tena rafiki harikuya na=lala nabo  
also friend he was sleeping with them
- [18] ku ma=hotel ya kufishama sana,  
in hotels of be hidden very much,
- [19] ile muntu asta=waziya ata.  
that person he will not give it a thought at all.
- [20] kisha yote rafiki anamini sana  
after everything friend he puts his trust very much
- [21] anatupa ma=dawa wote. sasa mungu  
he throws away medicine all. now God
- [22] harimupa bati ya kushikiya neno  
he gives him good luck of hear/understand word
- [23] lake muzuri.  
his good.
- [24] na wewe na omba mungu akubari-  
and you ? ask God he may bless you
- [25] ki sana, vincent  
very much, Vincent

K. Dédé [signature]11- nov 92

The contents of the text itself is rather straightforward and deals with things that I had become acquainted with quite well. The text tells the story of a friend of Dédé's, K., who with the help of *dawa* ('traditional medicine') given to him by one of his grandparents, causes older rich women to fall in love with him. He sleeps with these women who supply him with material wealth. After a while K. gives up this way of living and becomes a devout Christian. At first sight, there is nothing particularly special about this story : it is just one of many related stories I heard about people becoming successful in life by means of magic or witchcraft.

There are several details of the story that make the events related by it highly interesting for a native reader. As I said before, the use of magic in itself is a common theme but one has to realize that what is not made explicit here – because it is known to a native reader – is that the magical use of *dawa* is anti-social<sup>4</sup>, in the sense that applying magic normally entails some kind of sacrifice : the benefits you reap from *dawa* are at the cost of the well-being or health of one of your relatives. Also, relying on *dawa* often affects your normal capacities of reasoning. In other words, the *dawa* gets hold of you : you give up an aspect of your personality in return for something else. It is against this background that we should understand *astawaziya* in line 19 : Dédé's friend is simply not able to see that he is doing things that are socially unacceptable. The introduction of *dawa* in line 5 also 'explains' the behavior referred to in lines 2-3 : where Dédé writes about his friend having « the habit of looking for older women », which is not done for a man : a man should preferably date women who are younger than himself. On top of this it is mentioned that these women are married (line 7). Note that this is one of the very few places where French is used in this text (*ba'femme mariée*<sup>5</sup>), which serves to further emphasize the outrageous character of this behavior. The age of the women is given in French as well (line 14), but this

<sup>4</sup> It should be stressed here that the use of *dawa* is not always anti-social: *dawa* mostly refers to magical usage of ointments, potions, and other medicine but it may also refer to medicine which is not magically manipulated.

<sup>5</sup> *ba* in *ba'femme mariée* is a noun prefix which marks plural.

usage is less conspicuous because speakers of Shaba Swahili almost never use Swahili numerals. Dédé further details how his friend accepted money and clothes as gifts from these women (lines 11-12), which serves as further illustration of his immoral behavior: a man cannot accept gifts like that from a woman. The most immoral thing, however, is that Dédé's friend has sex with these older married women (line 17) in hotels that are, for obvious reasons, « very well hidden » (line 18), meaning they are not recognizable as such from the outside. Another interesting detail is given in lines 14-15: the women whom K. accepts gifts from are women who earn their money at the markets in the city center ('*mu ville*') or at the market of Kenya ('*musoko ya Kenya*'), a town district that is known for its illegal and immoral activities. Furthermore, market people are assumed to rely on magical means in securing success in business. By having contacts with these women, K. is drawn deeper in the world of magic.

So we may conclude that the this text relates events that are extra-ordinary for native readers. But there is more to this text than just being an account of socially unacceptable behavior. So far, I have discussed the use of lexical items and their role as contextualization cues: a word like *dawa* conjures up a whole universe of culture specific meanings and contextual knowledge. In the same way *ba'femme mariée* acts as a cue signaling to us the social inappropriateness of Dédé's friend's behavior.

But more cues can be detected which signal that Dédé wrote this text not just with the intention of providing an account of an outrageous social act. I was intrigued by the dramatic element of conversion, which I only knew from religious periodicals which often feature life histories of people who after having lived a life of sin suddenly convert to Christianity. Furthermore, in lines 22-23 we find the phrase *neni lake* which means *his (i.e. God's) word*. This form is stereotypical of Swahili Bora and highly untypical of Shaba Swahili which would have *neni yake* here. Moreover, *neni lake* is a collocation which is typical of church language. As such it adds a solemn ring to the conclusion of the story. Another element of the text that I found interesting was its closing statement in lines 24-25:

*And you, ask God to bless you highly, Vincent.* This closing statement was the cue I needed to come to an appreciation of what Dédé really had intended with his text. He did not merely want to write an interesting anecdote; what he wanted was to give me a good advice. In Shaba, when you want to tell someone what to do the standard thing to do is to tell a story which acts as an illustration of what is good and bad. At the end of the story you then make explicit the morale of the story and/or give some explicit advice. This is exactly what Dédé is doing. But why should he give me this advice ?

So far, everything I said about this text could have been 'uncovered' by anyone who has a sound knowledge of Shaba Swahili ways of speaking and of the local culture in general. The reason why Dédé is addressing me with these words at the end of the text, however, is, of course, not recoverable with the help of the aforementioned knowledge alone. To answer this question, I had to go back, as it were, to my long conversations with Dédé on witchcraft, religion, and the existence of God. In these conversations I openly questioned the existence of the efficacy of witchcraft on the one hand and the existence of God on the other, although I showed respect for his opinions and beliefs. Dédé always tried to convince me of the opposite but never really succeeded. By contextualizing his text with the knowledge I had gained during these conversations I was able to reconstruct his intention : he wanted to warn me against the dangers of a life without God. And perhaps not only that : I now read his story also as a warning against using magical means to achieve material well being. As I now suspect, Dédé may have written this story about his friend because he believed that I might have been involved in magic as well. This may sound strange but he indicated to me many times that *you Europeans* have your own magic which you use for producing all kinds of modern machinery. Was it Dédé's intention then that I would read the story in such a way that I would see the parallel between his friend's bad behavior and mine ? I cannot be certain of this until I have gone back to Shaba and asked Dédé about his intention. What I do know here and now is that his intention was to give me a

well-meant advice, 'put your faith in God and you will find happiness', and, perhaps, also a warning, 'if you practice magic, give it up or it will destroy you, and turn to God instead for achieving your goals in life'.

### 3. CONCLUSION

In the discussion of these two texts, one oral and the other written, I hope to have shown that even in cases where one is not able to ask the participants/writers about the meanings of the text, one can still engage in a dialogue with them. The way I analyzed and interpreted the texts is just one of several possible ways of analyzing : dialogue, as Tedlock says, should not be thought of as a method but as a mode. That is to say, we can be dialogical in our work and writing in many different ways using many different formats of presenting our findings and relying on many different types of analysis. What is at issue in being truly dialogical is listening and talking back to the texts we deal with, and via these texts to the people who produced them, when we have left the field and are writing our scholarly texts.

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