

Linguistic complexity and diversity amongst Congolese diaspora in Australia: implications for languages services

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Abstract

Like many African countries, the Democratic Republic of Congo is characterised by linguistic diversity, with approximately 220 languages spoken within the country. Congolese Swahili is one of the five national languages, together with Kongo, Lingala, Tshilaba and French. The majority of Congolese diaspora in Australia have entered as refugees through the International Humanitarian Settlement Scheme or family reunion and their linguistic repertoire has been further affected by their refugee journey. The multilingualism of Congolese individuals and communities has created challenges for language services in Australia. The demand for translation and interpreting services for Swahili has rapidly increased due to it being one of the fastest growing languages in Australia, spoken mainly by migrants and refugees from East and Central Africa. Yet Swahili has a number of variants, with Standard Swahili (of the United Republic of Tanzania) often the variant used by Australian interpreters, but not necessarily understood by speakers of Congolese Swahili.

This presentation provides a socio-linguistic profile of Congolese in Australia by reviewing relevant literature and by statistical analysis of data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011 census and the Settlement Reporting Facility of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection. It is expected that this community linguistic profile will increase understanding of the tensions faced by the Congolese diaspora and the language services seeking to meet their needs. The case of the Congolese diaspora in Australia shows how the ethnic, educational background and linguistic diversity of migrating communities have implications for language services.

Introduction

Government departments and community agencies regularly develop community profiles to assist in understanding community needs and in planning and delivering services. These profiles generally focus on ethnicity or countries of birth as the central characteristic of communities. Instead, this paper presents using a socio-linguistic approach to understand an emerging multilingual community in Australia, namely Congolese Australians, as an innovative way to understanding minority communities. It demonstrates and examines the creation of a socio-linguistic profile of Congolese Australians from statistical analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics (2013) Census data using Tablebuilder and the Settlement Reporting Facility (SRF) of the Department of Social Services. The case of the Congolese

diaspora in Australia shows how the ethnic, educational background and linguistic diversity of migrating communities have implications for language services.

Congolese languages

Like many African countries, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is characterised by linguistic diversity, with about 221 ethnic languages spoken within the country as well as five national languages: French, Lingala, Swahili, Kongo and Chiluba/Tshilaba (Asangama in Kishe, 2003). French is the official language used by the DRC's government, and secondary and tertiary education systems (Kishe, 2003). The majority of Congolese diaspora in Australia have entered as refugees through the International Humanitarian Settlement Scheme or family reunion. Refugees often experience a number of stages in their journey, and hence may increase their language repertoire in each stage (Musgrave & Hajek, 2013), as is the case with some Congolese who have spent time encamped in Uganda, Kenya or Tanzania. Language issues are part of the questions about identity faced by migrants, both forced and voluntary (Martin cited in Musgrave & Hajek, 2013). Language is often an identity marker and cultural aspect around which communities organise themselves, participate and access services.

Congolese Australians are a heterogeneous community, particularly in terms of tribal backgrounds and languages. A survey of agencies in Victoria found that their databases recorded English, French, Lingala, Nyanga and Swahili as the languages spoken by people from the Democratic Republic of Congo (Borland & Mphande, 2006). Congolese not only speak a diversity of languages, but also often use non-standard variants or dialects, such as variations in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and writing of Swahili, which can cause confusion and misunderstanding in interpreting and translation (Burke, in press). For example, Congolese Swahili tends to use more Bantuized words while Standard Swahili uses more Arabic-based words. Understanding this linguistic complexity is crucial in providing adequate language services that allow equitable access and effective communication. Approaches and strategies for adaptation of translation services are outlined elsewhere (Burke, in press).

Developing a profile of Congolese Australians

Analysis of national data was required in order to develop a meaningful profile of Congolese in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2013) conducts the national population census every 5 years in Australia, which is important in planning and effective delivery of services. It is a common data source for studies on the distribution of ethnic minority groups (Harte, Childs & Hastings, 2011, p. 86). The Settlement Reporting Facility (SRF) reports on data sourced from the Settlement Database (SDB), which documents the records of (permanent) settler arrivals on entry to Australia since January 1991. It is regularly updated from sources including the visa processing systems of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection, from Medicare and client details of Adult Migrant Education Scheme (AMES) (SRF training manual), probably making it a more accurate

dataset than the census (Harte, Childs & Hastings, 2011). The census gives data at a particular time point every 5 years, while the SRF records data continuously as people arrive and settle.

In both the census and the SRF, the language questions only allow for one self-reported answer, although people may speak a number of languages. SRF refers to the main language of a person and the census to the language spoken at home. The census variable, Language Spoken at Home (LANP) is coded from the Australian Standard Classification of Languages (ASCL) second edition, Revision 1. There are approximately 300 different languages recorded in the Settlement Database (SDB). This is not many when we consider the number of tribal or minority languages, spoken in Africa. A caveat clearly stated in the SRF is that main language is an item that is not mandatory and hence may result in an undercount in reports generated from SRF. Lucas, Jamali and Edgar (2011) comment how language use in African communities, such as Sudanese, is complex. The question in the census asks about language spoken at home, yet many Africans are multilingual and use different languages in various domains. Moreover, many who speak African languages not listed by the census are collapsed into “not elsewhere classified” (nec) or “not further defined” (nfd) (p. 17).

Language profile

Swahili is the most commonly reported main language for those born in the DRC (53%, 2065/3896) and the Republic of Congo (36%, 434/1214) respectively (DSS, 2015). Other main languages declared are national languages like French, English and Lingala as well as other African and tribal languages. See Table 1 below. Both people from the DRC and the Republic of Congo call themselves Congolese. The small numbers of refugees from the Republic of Congo who have settled in Australia are most likely to be children of refugees from DRC, and hence data from both DRC and Congo have been used in the SDB and ABS census.

Main language	DRC	Congo Republic	Total
Swahili	2065	434	2499
French	667	348	1015
Lingala	176	31	207
Kinyarwanda/Rwanda	118	57	175
Kirundi/ Rundi	48	16	64
English	24	34	58
Bemba	23	26	49
Shona	14	1	15
African languages, nfd	302	78	380
African languages, nec	145	70	215
Other languages	67	34	101
Not stated	247	85	332
Total arrivals for report period	3896	1214	5110

Table 1: Congolese-born and main language spoken (SRF, 1/1/91 – 1/1/2015)

While some of these languages, such as French and Lingala are Congolese national languages, others such as Kinyarwanda and Kirundi are languages of Rwanda and Burundi and their tribal groups. These results demonstrate how country of birth may not reflect tribal background or ethnicity. The SRF focuses on country of birth rather than ancestry, yet service providers are more often concerned with country of origin and ethnicity than country of birth (Robinson, 2011). Harte (2013) points out that birthplace may not reflect ethnicity, especially of refugees who have been displaced and born in refugee camps outside the country of their parent’s birth. Many refugees who have fled from Congo and Burundi have lived in camps in Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda and some of their children are born in these camps.

Swahili was also the most commonly reported language spoken at home amongst Congolese-born settlers from DRC and RC (50%, 1277/2575) and (47%, 460/982) respectively (ABS, 2011). See Table 2. The discrepancy between the SRF and ABS data is in part due to the self-reporting of somewhat different variables, and the time when these were measured, that is, on each person’s arrival, or on a specified date in 2011.

Language spoken at home	DRC	Congo Republic	Total
Swahili	1277	460	1737
French	693	210	903
English	260	129	389
Kirundi	45	36	81
Kinyarwanda	38	31	69
African languages, nec	144	57	201
Other	68	27	95
Not stated	38	28	66
Inadequately described	12	4	16
Total	2575	982	3557

Table 2: Congolese-born and language spoken at home (ABS, 2011)

Likewise, of settlers who arrived in Australia between 1 January 1991 and 1 January 2015 who declared their main language to be Swahili (totalling 4477) the majority had been born in the DRC (47%, 2084) with less from the Congo Republic (12%, 434). Hence Congolese arrivals are significantly responsible for Swahili being one of the fastest growing languages in Australia with a 117% increase from 2001 until 2006, and 125% increase from 2006 until 2011 (ABS 2001, 2006, 2011).

Migration profile

Congolese have predominantly arrived through the Humanitarian migration stream, meaning most have arrived under the International Humanitarian Settlement Scheme after receiving refugee, women at risk and Global Special Humanitarian visas. See Table 3.

Migration Stream	DRC	Congo Republic	Total
Humanitarian	3486	1066	4552
Family	388	97	485
Skilled	18	45	63
Unknown	4	6	10
Total	3896	1214	5110

Table 3: Migration Stream of Congolese (SRF, 1/1/1991 – 1/1/2015)

Migration of Congolese peaked in 2007 to 2010. A growing but small number have been arriving under the family reunion migration stream, as Congolese refugees settle and then sponsor mainly partners and orphan relatives to join them. This is evident in Table 4, which shows growing numbers (and proportions) of settlers from DRC arriving in the family reunion migration stream, particularly from 2009.

Year of Arrival	Migration Stream				
	Humanitarian	Family	Skilled	Unknown	Total
1999-00	0	1	0	0	1
2001-02	0	1	0	0	1
2004-05	3	0	0	0	3
2005-06	139	4	1	1	145
2006-07	564	9	0	0	573
2007-08	471	6	0	0	477
2008-09	245	22	3	0	270
2009-10	550	38	7	0	595
2010-11	385	40	0	0	425
2011-12	374	71	5	0	450
2012-13	192	63	1	2	258
2013-14	429	95	0	1	525
2014-15	134	38	1	0	173
Total	3486	388	18	4	3896

Table 4: Migration Stream (DRC) by year of arrival (1/1/1991 – 1/1/2015)

English Proficiency

English proficiency is an important category when considering language services. A person whose main language is Swahili and has very good English will rarely, if at all, require any translation or interpreting services; the exception possibly being the need for certified translations of birth, marriage and similar certificates. Amongst Congolese Australian arrivals, English proficiency is predominantly poor or non-existent, with some not recording their proficiency. 411 from the DRC and 189 from RC have good or very good English, including, unsurprisingly most of those who arrived by the skilled migration stream. This indicates that, on arrival the majority of Congolese, being 75% (2924/3896) of those from

the DRC and 64% (774/1214) of those from the Republic of Congo were not proficient in English and would have required language services on arrival. See Table 5 below. The census also includes the variable Proficiency in Spoken English (ENGP) as a self-assessed subjective classification, recognised as useful for planning and provision of multilingual services (ABS 2011).

English Proficiency	DRC	Congo Republic	Total
Nil	1559	388	1947
Poor	1365	386	1751
Good	299	118	417
Very Good	112	80	192
Unknown	561	242	803
Total arrivals for report period	3896	1214	5110

Table 5: English Proficiency of Congolese-born arrivals (SRF, 1/1/1991 – 1/1/2015)

Another useful category for language service planning is the geographical distribution of a language group in Australia. Congolese who speak Swahili as their main language reside in every state and territory, with the highest numbers in Queensland and South Australia. See Table 6.

State	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA	Invalid	Total
DRC	9	281	102	622	456	52	319	223	1	2065
Rep C	5	85	6	90	77	7	45	119	0	434
Total	14	366	108	712	533	59	364	342	1	2499

Table 6: Geographical distribution of Congolese-born by states (SRF, 1/1/1991 – 1/1/2015)

Linguistic Diversity and complexity

Official data tends to underreport linguistic diversity. Wendy Harte (2013) studied the settlement geography of the eight largest African refugee communities in South east Queensland, including Congolese (DRC) using a community-based census undertaken by the communities themselves. She compared their results to the ABS census and settlement database, which are the secondary data sources most commonly used for planning purposes, and suggests these latter sources under-enumerate these communities. Khoo and Lucas (2006) also suggest that the language question in the census would underestimate the size of an ethnic group, if not everyone speaks the ethnic language at home.

There can be a tendency to see language groups and ethnic groups as homogenous without recognising the variety within the group. The census does not allow for recording information about complex language use typical in African communities. Official data lacks recognition of the multilingualism of individuals and the societies from which they have come. Instead, data collection presupposes assumptions being made about being monolingual or bilingual. Lucas, Jamali and Edgar (2011) note the data can be improved, particularly highlighting how the language question for the Settlement Database could be

made mandatory (p. 22). Borland and Mphande (2009) have concluded there was lack of preparedness by the Australian government and other agencies about the linguistic diversity and complexity of new settling Africans. This may be partly due to the limitations in gaining accurate data.

Minority languages can remain hidden in official or public data (Musgrave & Hajek 2013), in part due to the limited range of choices, with many languages unnamed and speaker numbers combined in Unspecified or Other categories. Furthermore, speakers of minority languages, such as Lingala, may choose to nominate a more widely spoken language, such as Swahili, because it is listed, or so as to access services, such as interpreters (Musgrave & Hajek 2013). Hence, records kept by service providers may also not indicate the presence of minority languages. Yet we need as accurate and complete information as is possible to plan for demand, such as for offering training within the New Interpreter's Project especially in the case of rare languages.

The challenge for emerging languages in Australia is for interpreting agencies and language services to learn which communities to prioritise to develop their service. For this they need accurate information on the languages spoken by emerging communities, multilingual patterns, geographical distribution of the linguistic communities, their educational levels and English proficiency. For Congolese Australians, who speak a number of languages and have little English proficiency, and may speak non-standardised lingua franca, such as Swahili, language services need to be flexible and learn from community members how best to meet any changing needs. A socio-linguistic profile such as the one created for this paper can guide services to better adapt to the realities and challenges of the specified community in order to provide them with equitable access to services and information, and ability and empowerment to communicate adequately with authorities.

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