

Speaking French was always more difficult for me than writing it. Alveopalatal fricatives and unvoiced vowels disconcerted me. I could not understand how the joining of the “o” and the “e” in *coeur*, for example, could lead to such a thin, reedy sound. Compared to Greek, which is a rather resonant language, French seemed almost silent to me. I had the impression that French people spoke without opening their mouths.

Sango has no alveopalatal fricatives. The “e” resonates almost as clearly as it does in the word *bec*, like “deck” in English. “U” is pronounced “oo.” The letter “g,” “ga,” is always hard, starting in the back of the throat, like in “gangrene.” Bangui should thus be written Bangi and not Bangui, as it is in French. In Sango, Bangui is pronounced Bangwi. I really want to adopt the rules of written Sango for proper names from now on. I shall write Bangi when I want to talk about the capital, and Ubangi when I need to talk about its river. The city of Bangassou that I located in the east of the country, with the help of my magnifying glass, should be spelled Bangasu, considering that in Sango the “s” is unvoiced even if it falls between two vowels.

I sometimes read Sango words aloud, at the risk of disturbing the peace of my neighbors. Perhaps they think illegal immigrants have besieged my apartment? Sango is a sonorous language, probably closer to Greek than to French; it encourages the voice to use its entire range. It seems as if it were conceived in a tumultuous environment, in the heart of a huge marketplace or during a night of celebration. No doubt the people who lived along the river needed such a language to speak to each other across it. Central Africans radically transformed the French words they adopted: *jusque* has become *zusuka*, *encore*, *angoro*, *docteur*, *dokotoro*, *chef*, *sefu*. France is called *Faranzi* and Greece, *kodoro ti mbi*, let’s not forget, *Geresi*. As for the Central African Republic, its name in Sango is much more appealing: it is called *Beafrika*, that is, “Heart-of-Africa.”

Sango has a few disquieting consonants that have no equivalent either in French or in Greek. They are transcribed with two or three

letters but have to be pronounced in a single utterance. What then is the single sound that corresponds to *mv, kp, gb, ngb*? I need so much time to try to blend these letters together and to avoid stressing each one of them individually that I forget to breathe. I don't know if the coughing fits I occasionally experience are caused by tobacco or by words like *kpengba*, which means, appropriately, "hard," "difficult."

The first syllable of *kpengba* is high-pitched, the second low-pitched. According to Marcel Alingbindo's textbook, which uses the acute accent to indicate the high pitch and the grave accent for the low one, I should really write *kpéngbà*. Non-accented syllables belong to the middle register. For now I have to make do with writing the way the Catholic and Protestant missionaries who translated the New Testament did, without any accents at all. They deliberately disregarded the different tones: "We don't need tones to make ourselves understood," they affirm. It is possible. Apparently they are pronounced much less distinctly today than in the time of the Ubangi pirogue boatmen. In gaining a broader audience, Sango lost much of its flavor. The Gbayas, who are one of the largest ethnic groups in the country, speak a Sango using only two tones, for the simple reason that their own language has only two. Linguists deplore this change, not only because there are many words, like *kua*, whose meaning can only be made clear by the modulations of the voice, but also, and especially, because they believe that the suppression of its distinctive characteristics will harm the language's memory. I cannot but agree with them. If the Greek language managed to hold on to its identity, it's because it remembers having been, once upon a time, the language of a blind poet.

Sometimes I try to sing some of the sentences cited in the textbook or in the dictionary. Alas, I have even less talent for singing than I do for languages. When I attempt to learn the tones I'll probably need a teacher. Shall I go back and see Mathilde? Her husband still hasn't sent me Marcel Alingbindo's address. Clumsy as my efforts are, they nonetheless make the language hop and skip. With every word, or

almost, Sango begins a little dance, as if it were trying to recall a tune it had heard long ago.

I try to play my two roles—professor and student—to the best of my abilities. As soon as I learn a word, I hasten to teach it to myself:

“Do you know how to say ‘tomorrow’ in Sango?”

“How?”

When I was in school I never asked my teachers questions. I was bored in class. Just the sight of the blackboard was enough to depress me.

“How?” I ask again.

I make myself wait for my answer in order to pique my curiosity.

“*Kekereke!*” I declare at long last.

“Why, it’s an onomatopoeia!”

“Precisely. You will notice that one says *cocorico* in French and *koukourikou* in Greek. Is this because the rooster’s cry varies slightly from one country to the next? Well, it doesn’t matter. In Sango, this onomatopoeia was used to form a noun that means ‘tomorrow.’”

Sometimes the affected manner I take on in my role as teacher makes me want to laugh.

“And how do you say ‘today?’” I ask slyly.

“We’ll look at that later.”

“*Kekereke?*” I suggest.

“*Kekereke.*”

How many words have I retained in six weeks of work? Not many. I learned more quickly when I was younger. My mind is slow to cross the distance that separates words. It lingers on the blank spaces as if they too were part of the language. Will I have the strength to make it to the end of the task I have set for myself? I realized just how huge it was as I was leafing through W. J. Reed’s textbook. Had I underestimated Sango, as one does so easily when one doesn’t know a language? But it would be even more painful to go backwards and forget the little I’ve learned. This is because one becomes attached to words, like one does to people and things. I was sensitive to the quaint

charm of the metaphor *ngu ti Nzapa*, “the water of God.” In ancient Greek there was an equivalent: Zeus is raining, they said. I imagine that my father, who was very devout, would have appreciated this metaphor, and that he would have been happy to depart on a rainy day. I hadn’t expected to find a term as biting as *de*, “cold,” in the vocabulary of a tropical country. It renders perfectly the sensation I had when I touched my father’s forehead. He passed away on the seventh of March: browsing through the short chapter that W. J. Reed devotes to numbers, it was fated that I should stop on that number. It has a seriousness, a weight in Sango that neither Greek nor French gives it: *mbasambara*, that’s how you say “seven” in Sango. On the other hand, the two high notes that go with *kuu*, “death” (I should really write *kuúú*), make me feel uncomfortable. They ring false in my ears, they mock the word, they lack respect for its meaning. *Kekereke* delighted me, and so did *kutukutu*, “automobile.” The noun that I prefer, however, is the one given to fickle women and prostitutes. They are called “butterflies,” which in itself is rather common, but the word for them is delicious: *pupulenge*. Marcel Alingbindo says it is an insult. I never tire of savoring it.

Not only do the words I have already studied encourage me to keep going, so do those I don’t know yet. The objects surrounding me are a constant reminder that I still don’t know their names in Sango. How do you say “pencil,” “paper”? How do you say “eraser” or “ashtray”? I find myself in the middle of unknown words that are constantly calling out to me. Sango has brought me back to the time when I first arrived in France. I was very attentive to smells then, I would sniff the air like a dog. What was the first French word that really seduced me? *Promiscuité*, “promiscuity,” I believe. I’m sure, in any case, that I loved that word. How do you say “to get up”? I ask myself this question each time I prepare to interrupt my work. My ignorance makes me clumsy. Am I supposed to lean an elbow on the table before I push my chair back from it? I’ll need to learn some verbs as quickly as possible.

I notice that everything has two names for me, one Greek, the other French. Why is it that it took me so long to realize this? I also realize that I don't see objects in exactly the same light when I name them in one language or in the other. In French the word for hammer, *marteau*, reminds me of the bed I built myself to save money when I first arrived in Paris. In Greek, the same term—*sphyri*—makes me think of my father, who loved to tinker. He took great care of his tools, he would clean them with a cloth soaked in paraffin oil. One day I came upon him as he was nailing shut a coffin in a municipal warehouse.

“Is there somebody in there?” I had asked.

There was. My father was vigorously hitting the nails, driving them in deep, as if he thought the dead man capable of escaping.

The word “onion” in French (*oignon*) also appears in a different light in both languages. Its Greek version (*croμμυδι*) takes me back to my mother, whom I would often see browning onions in a frying pan, whereas its French label conjures up the kindly features of the woman who runs the fruit and vegetable stand on the rue de Lourmel where I shop.

The memories I associate with Greek are much older than those the French language calls up. My mother tongue knows how old I am. French makes me twenty-four years younger. That's quite a bit. I always feel that my French texts are lighter than my Greek writings.

I'm starting to think that learning a language is like taking a dip in the fountain of youth. Sango doesn't remind me of anything, my memories are alien to it, and it gives me the agreeable illusion that I can start anew. It invites me to play, like French used to. It is less painful for me to talk about my father's death in Sango than in Greek. I now know how to say “my father is dead.” This, in fact, is the example used in the dictionary to illustrate the verb *kui*, “to die”: *Baba ti mbi a kui*. The lone *a* doesn't indicate the past tense, as it does in

French. It doubles the subject whenever it is not a personal pronoun.

*Baba ti mbi a kui:* I write this calmly. I forget to be moved. . . .