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Jerome Baghana<sup>1</sup>  
Lina V. Razumova<sup>2</sup>

**Borrowings and xenisms in Modern Linguistics:  
Congoese French**

<sup>1)</sup> Belgorod State National Research University,  
85 Pobedy St., Belgorod, 308015, Russian Federation,  
e-mail: [baghana@bsu.edu.ru](mailto:baghana@bsu.edu.ru)  
ORCID:0000-0001-6061-3288

<sup>2)</sup> Moscow State Pedagogical University,  
Russia, 119991 Moscow, bld. 1 Malaya Pirogovskaya St.,  
e-mail: [lina.razumova@mail.ru](mailto:lina.razumova@mail.ru)  
ORCID:0000-0001-5225-0413

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**Abstract.** The article discusses the problem of language contacts and their outcomes. Deviations from recognized standards which take place in the local variants of the French language are consequent upon the transfer of the structural peculiarities of local African languages into the French language. This process affects the phonetic, grammar and lexical levels. A low competence in the French language observed in the most part of African population challenges the identification of characteristic trends and regularly recurrent errors caused by various reasons. The paper focuses the two specific phenomena which result from the language contact process – borrowings and xenisms. Source languages possess numerous differences at all levels of their systems (including the presence or absence of written language, phonetics, grammar, etc.) as compared to the French language. The research considers several types of foreign word incorporation into the borrower language system. They are phonological (graphic), morphosyntactic and semantic types. The conclusion is made about the core differences between interference and borrowings; the former is a psychological process while borrowing is a process of use of elements of another language due to the reasons of social character.

**Key words:** borrowing; xenism; language contact; cross-disciplinary; bilingualism; interference; pidgin; creole language; contact-induced changes

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**Introduction.** Franco-Congoese contact has diverse and broad linguistic outcomes. For modern linguistics, the problem of linguistic contact is both

traditional and relevant, and the study of this phenomenon in the sociolinguistic context of the Congo represents an important contribution to research into the common

problems of the variability of language and language interference. The results obtained fit into the framework of the Theory of language contact or Contact linguistics.

**Methods.** The paper represents a part of a deeper research based on traditional methods of sociolinguistic research: observation, a comprehensive functional analysis of linguistic units in speech, a comparative method, and a widely used method of thematic classification. The research also benefited from the potential of the introspection method applied.

**Results and discussions.** Vocabulary of the language is the most adaptable language component, which is in the process of constant change. Vocabulary change enriches itself, upgrades to reflect in its development the conditions of a certain historical period in the evolution of society. These phenomena do not directly relate to the language system; it can include the processes of change in the meaning of words and enriching the dictionary by borrowing words from other languages.

The problem of language borrowing became important in the recent decades due to the active development of various aspects of the language interaction. Against the background of a growing number of researches, there appeared a contradiction between traditional schemes of explaining borrowing, which developed mainly in the 19th century, and the new ideas about language processes and structure, which expanded in the second half of the 20th century. Various views on the key aspects of borrowing which occur in Russian and foreign research literature are highlighted in the work by T. G. Linnik (Linnik 1989). However, the researcher has neither identified nor analysed diametrically opposed linguistic approaches to understanding the main content of the process of borrowing. In the past few decades, the research into the processes and results of lexical borrowings has been conducted in two directions: some researchers focused on the intrasystem aspect of foreign elements coming into the borrowing language

(N.N. Amosova, L. Bloomfield, L. P. Krysin, A. P. Mayorov), while the others describe borrowing in the context of bilingualism, interlanguage contact and intersystem interaction of languages (V.M. Aristova, U. Weinreich, E. Haugen). The widely held traditional understanding of borrowing as a transition, transference, interpenetration of elements of one language into another is opposed by the explanation of borrowing as a process when language creates its own elements by its own language means through creative imitation, as well as approximate copying or structural modelling by analogy with samples from a foreign language.

The first approach was developed in the 19th century and continues to dominate at the present time. In particular, L.P. Krysin (1968) carried out this approach in his famous monograph which became the foundation for many subsequent works of Russian linguists. This approach absolutely prevails in scientific and educational literature, in modern linguistic encyclopaedic publications.

O.S. Akhmanova describes borrowing as referring to the lexical fund of other languages in order to express new concepts, to further differentiate the existing ones and to name previously unknown objects (Akhmanova 1969: 150-151).

The term “xenism” taken by D. Gautier from L. Gilbert, means, according to the latter, “a foreign word” or an unknown or rare phenomenon, the use of which is accompanied by a metalinguistic sign, such as a descriptive paraphrase or footnote at the bottom of the page, when it comes to written text. Moreover, D. Gilbert argues that xenism has nothing in common with borrowing (Guilbert 1975: 96-98).

We should note that this phenomenon has become common in the French language of the Congo. It can be observed in the following example:

*Samba s'entraînait au yéké yéké (danse congolaise).* – Samba learned to dance yéké yéké (a traditional Congoese dance).

Due to its frequent use, xenism has become a phenomenon to be reckoned with

when describing the French language of the Congo. It is a manifestation of the constant contact of two or more languages among people of the Congo, who speak and write in French. Furthermore, the influence from politicians, journalists, and writers often turns a xenism into a proper borrowing. Thus, the words *dombage* – “jumping, dancing”, *mudjulisme* – “a Satanist sect” in recent years are often used by journalists of printed mass media (Baghana 2001: 25), and it is possible to say that these words have become a part of the system of the Congoese variant of the French language.

In the thesis devoted to linguistic borrowings, Louis Deroy clarified the following differences between borrowing and xenisms. In his paper, he asserted that “in terms of the use of language at a certain point in history, i.e. synchrony, general borrowing is presented ... with numerous nuances. It is possible to distinguish two categories: peregrinisms, or xenisms – words of a foreign language, sometimes quoted, and proper borrowings, or words that have been finally assimilated. ... It is impossible to draw a clear line between these two categories. Their use changes not only in time, but also includes some vagueness, lack of distinctness that does not tolerate the tyranny of normative grammar” (Deroy, 1956: 224).

L. Deroy recognizes that there are various degrees of interpretation, the so-called *continuum* between non-assimilatable peregrinisms which preserve the form of other people’s words, and words which have been completely adapted, that is, true borrowings” (ibid: 224).

For the analysis of borrowings, traditional Lexicography can determine the boundaries within which the lexicographer works when he aims to compiling of a dictionary of a native French language. Thus, the word *immigré* – “an immigrant”, exogenous in origin for monolingual speakers, can, according to the author, quite legitimately function in various texts designed to enhance the level of its integration. The situation is obviously fundamentally different

from the one in Africa, where French is one of the languages of a bilingual and even multilingual society. During the acclimatization to the African conditions, the French language underwent complex evolutionary processes.

A.B. Edema proposed to consider the following scheme for the development of the French language in the Congo (which corresponds to the situation in most parts of the French-speaking countries in Africa), and highlights three phases:

- *Superposition* (fr. *superposition*): they are the situations when monolinguals come into an extra-local society (the case of the French language in Africa, represented as the language of Europeans who lived on the continent during the colonial period – they were researchers who served in colonial administrations, missionaries, and travellers). Among the researchers of the lexical aspect of this phase were G. van der Horst and J. Pohl for Zaire (1961), A. Lanley (1962) for the countries of the Maghreb, R. Moni (1952, 1953) for the French language of West Africa.

- *Co-existence* (fr. *cohabitation*): the emergence of monolinguals. In this phase, the French language of Africa becomes an intermediary language; the Europeans use it, as well as a number of Africans: as a general rule they are people who acquired the basics of French at school and use it in everyday life (for oral speech or written communication). The European version of French remains the standard for their speech.

- *Mastering* (fr. *imprégnation*): systematization of the standards of the speech of monolinguals. The African variant of the French language “is so tamed, so domesticated by the colonized population, that not only its definition as a foreign language, but even the very idea that it is an imported language disappeared” (Edema 1998: 151).

It is obvious that the status and the limits of borrowing depend on the specific language. In the case of the African variant of the French language, the disturbance of its usual connection with local intermediary

languages (which experienced a strong influence of the French language in cities) resulted in the lack of possibility to distinguish the borrowings because the source language and the borrower language interpenetrate each other. The situation in most French-speaking countries is similar to the situation in Wallonia. According to Francard, “when defining a dialect, it is necessary to define its contours, establishing boundaries with the neighbouring languages and the status of words which come from these languages; at the present moment in Wallonia it is impossible to overcome these difficulties” (Francard 1995: 61). Even the notions of borrowing and xenism here lose their meanings, since the two languages, which are in contact, often experience mutual interference: most of the words of one language pass into another; even if they do not become a part of the language system, they at least diffuse into speech.

The researcher S. Lafage presented a vivid illustration of such transfer in his analysis of “the French language of the streets” in Abidjan, and proved that “the term *borrowing* is not sufficient to qualify such a phenomenon” (Lafage 1997: 281).

As for the situation in the Congo, A.B. Edema also underlined the importance of the phenomenon of code mixing, and notes that “borrowing becomes a re-borrowing” (Edema 1998: 144).

L. Deroy realized the weak points of the analysis of borrowing and xenism conducted. So, the part of his work devoted to “the mixed languages” (i.e. Creoles, Sabirs, pidgins which embody “the consequences of borrowing”) begins with the following: “we have a right to speak not about borrowing, but about mixing of languages (Deroy 1956: 326). In our opinion, it makes impractical the use of the notion of “borrowing” in its traditional sense.

To return the meaning to this term, it is necessary to consider a situation where the borrower language and the source language are clearly separated, which excludes the

presence of “hybrid” forms such as Franco-Wolof, Franco-Arabic or Franco-Sango.

The distinction between xenism and borrowing, necessary for lexicographers, makes sense only for the middle or higher language levels of the French language in Africa, i.e. for the mesolect and acrolect.

This sociolinguistic rule (requirement) explains, in particular, the fact that researchers from the group of the Institute of the French Language in Africa (IFA) and their followers paid great attention to these varieties in printed media and literature. However, this restriction does not have any confirmation in the impossibility to detect borrowings in the basilect. This is justified by the fact that the mesolect tends to act as an endogenous standard adopted by most native speakers (de Feral et Gandon 1994).

According to L. Guilbert, there are three types of criteria for the incorporation of words of foreign origin into the language system of the borrower language. They are phonological (graphic), morphosyntactic and semantic parameters. Source languages possess numerous differences at all levels of the system as compared to the French language. This implies the need, in most cases, to adapt the local vocabulary to the requirements of the pronunciation and use of the French vocabulary (Guilbert 1975: 96-98).

#### ***Phonetic and phonological adaptation***

The simplest and most common example of adaptation is the use of the sounds of a native language to imitate the sequences of foreign sounds. This criterion can be regarded as fundamental. L. Deroy notes that “the first adaptation for a borrowed word to undergo is phonetic and, to some extent, phonological adaptation”. He also points out that “... there are four ways of adaptation: not to pay attention to unfamiliar and unpronounced phonemes; to replace them with familiar phonemes; to introduce new phonemes; to change the tone according to the rules of the source language” (Deroy 1956: 237).

The criterion of pronunciation, according to the phonetic system of the

French language, is not always prevalent in determination of the degree of integration of borrowings. Often a double pronunciation takes place: one way of pronunciation is close to French, the other corresponds to the phonetics of the local language, or at least pursues this correspondence.

Many linguists described the process under discussion as a substitution of the sounds of the foreign language by “the closest sounds” from the speaker’s native language (Haugen 1972: 355). However, it is not always clear to both the speaker and the linguist who researches into the linguistic behaviour, which particular sound of the native language is closest to the foreign sound imitated. Only if there is an exhaustive description of the phonetic system and sound sequences of the language, one can foresee which sounds the speakers are most likely to produce in every specific situation in order to substitute the foreign sounds. Speakers are accustomed to react to certain signs in the speech flow and reproduce them in their own speech, but at the same time they are accustomed to reproducing only a limited number of combinations and sequences of sounds. The phonology of borrowing has a purpose to describe these analytical skills of the speaker, which are important for the results of phonological substitution.

J. Hamers continued this idea and stated: “the adaptation to the borrower language (adapted borrowing) occurs at least on the phonological and phonetic levels” (Hamers 1997: 137), and cites the example of the English word *football*, pronounced in the French manner.

In fact, the trend of phonological integration does not suggest a subsequent evolution of the imported word and “phonological uncertainty” does not necessarily mean a “sign of rejection”.

Along with these fluctuations, there are numerous cases of phonological Frenchification of borrowings. It is important to recognize that the more borrowing fits into the system of the borrower language, the more its phonetic basis corresponds to the

characteristics of the phonological register of the central variant of the French language. In other words, the allied phenomena, which are closer to the borrower language in terms of articulation, tend to gradually replace the phenomena alien to the language system (Benzakour 1995: 71).

There is a more accurate approach which states that “a partial overlay of the phonological characteristics of the two languages – the source language and the borrower language – so that a number of the latter’s rules become activated or blocked. This hypothesis allows to assume that borrowed words are not words, or only some of them are integrated into the receiving language” (Durand-Deska, Durand 1994: 80).

Thus, P. Dumont regarded the use of Senegalisms as an “overlay of phonological systems”; he admitted that “in most cases, borrowing retains two pronunciations, one is African, the other is French”. As an example, he cites the word *varugar* (from the Wolof language), which can be pronounced either as [*warugar*] or as [*varugar*] (Dumont, Maurer 1995: 26). Besides, a significant number of other borrowings in the Arabic language (in the context of Maghreb) assigns Arabic pronunciation to the local variant of the French language: Gaadi notes that some of the borrowed lexical units “have only one way of pronunciation which corresponds to the Arabic phonetic system: these are mainly words containing sound [x], represented in writing by the combination of letters *kh* – *cheikh* [ʃ *ex*], *fekhar* [f*exar*], *khaddar* [x*addar*], *makhzen* [m*axzen*], *mokhazni* [m*oxazni*]» (Gaadi 1995:146).

#### **Graphic adaptation**

Graphic adaptation partially arises from phonetic adaptation and means successful acclimatization of writing a foreign word in the borrower language, especially in the situation when the source language does not have a written variant or uses the written variant different from the one of the borrower language. Moreover, if the written systems of both languages coincide, graphic adaptation is not clearly defined. One can visually perceive

this graphic adaptation; it is more distinct. For the cultures with developed traditions of written language it serves as a source of continuous disputes about the acceptability of a borrowed word, about contamination of the language, about distortion of the idea of the borrower language.

According to P. Dumont and B. Maurer, “the first graphic characteristic of African vocabulary, introduced into the French language of Black Africa, is its instability” (Dumont, Maurer 1995: 28). The most common type is mixed writing, which combines the graphics systems of the source and the borrower languages. Such graphic mixing, common to all the borrowings from African languages, forms the basis for the excess of different variations described by many researchers. So, as a part of the Central African inventory, there are doubts about the graphemes *c*, *k*, *qu* (*coco* and *koko*, *cola* and *kola*, *kinkckiba* and *quinquéliba*, etc); *u* and *ou*, reproduced by [u] (*koundi* and *kundi*, *gbalukuma* and *gbaloukouma*); *s* and *ss*, reproduced by [s] between vowels (*kissolo* and *kisolo*, *sissongo* and *sisongo*).

There are deeper analyses of such variations in relation to the French language of Senegal, which G. Delaporte (1993) conducted within the framework of the ORTHAF Programme, and which A. B. Edema and K. Nduku (1993) performed for the Congolese version of French.

### ***Morphological adaptation***

Since each borrowed word will function in the statements of the borrower language, they must receive one or another morphological adaptation within the framework of their new language.

It is noteworthy that morphological adaptation, which many researchers often move to the background, is actually a very serious process, since morphology forms the core of the language and often touches upon the adaptation of the grammatical categories of the source language in the borrower language, including the number and gender of nouns, person of the verb.

Taking all this into account, L. Deroy puts morphological adaptation into the second place after phonetic and states the following: “In addition to phonetic adaptation, borrowed words undergo morphological accommodation, which allows them to function clearly in the language system” (Deroy 1956: 252).

For his part, A. Queffelec notes: “One would assume that in the case of real borrowing, compliance with the rules of the borrower language would be compulsory. In fact, the observance of the rules does not always take place” as shown by the study of the characteristics of the categories of gender and the number of borrowed nouns, which are by no means the most active grammatical category (Queffelec 2000: 291).

As for the gender, integration of this category into the French language of the Congo is not a major challenge. The nouns mostly keep the form of the words of the source language, and determine the gender in accordance with the rules of the French language.

For example,

*foula-foula* – «a bus» = *un foula-foula*:

*La ndoumba était arrivée dans un foula-foula* (Baghana 2001:44). – The girl arrived by bus.

*ndombolo* – «a dance» = *une ndombolo*.

F. Benzakour writes: “In the French language of Africa, the gender of borrowings in most cases coincides with the gender in the source language.” However, according to the same author, there may be some deviations and fluctuations in relation to the gender (Benzakour 1995: 72).

The problem of designating the number is more significant as it concerns all the borrowings. In this case, there are three options for borrowings:

a) the specificity of the source language may be neglected, and the expression of the singular may differ from the plural according to the rules of the borrower language;

b) the morphological system of the borrower language can remain, formally distinguishing the singular and plural

numbers of countable nouns, can be observed. For example, in North Africa there are Arab borrowings *une souika / des souikat* (*petits marchés*) – «small market(s).

Also in the French language of the countries located to the South of the Sahara, affixes from some African source languages remain and denote singular and plural: *Blanc(s)* – «white ( )»:

in Burgundy: *un muzungu / des bazungu* (Frey 1996:25);

in Senegal: *un toubab / des toubabou*;

in Congo: *un mundélé / des mindélé* (Queffelec, Niangouna 1990:219).

The plural form can also be found in the words borrowed from Kikongo, like *sangu / masangu* – «corn» (Toporova 1997:40), *ki-ntu / bi-ntu* – «pineapple» (Makouta-Mboukou 1973:174), *lipasa / mapasa* – «twin», *di-kulu / ma-kulu* – «foot» (M'Foutou 1992:119).

For nouns, which differ in gender, four different forms in the French language of the Maghreb are possible: the singular of masculine, the singular of feminine, the plural of masculine, and the plural of feminine. This paradigm is found, for example, in the words *cherif* – «sherif» and *cheikh* – «sheikh» (masc., sing.) – *cherifa* and *cheikha* (fem., sing.) / *chorfa* and *chioukh* (masc., pl.) / *cherifate* and *cheikhate* (fem., pl.).

Finally, borrowing can take a mixed form, a compromise between the two morphological systems of the contacting languages.

**Conclusion.** The African variant of the French language contacts have a strong impact on the structure of the European language. As it follows from the analysis conducted, both external and internal factors influence the development and change of language. However, it is possible to assert that the distinctive signs between the central French and Congoese versions of the French language mostly formed under the influence of local languages, that is, an external factor.

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**Жером Багана**, доктор филологических наук, профессор, ФГАОУ ВО «Белгородский государственный национальный исследовательский университет»

**Jerome Baghana**, Doctor of Philology, Professor, Federal State Autonomous Educational Institution of Higher Education "Belgorod State National Research University"

**Лина Разумова**, доктор филологических наук, доцент, профессор кафедры романских языков им. В.Г. Гака, Московский педагогический государственный университет.

**Lina Razumova**, Doctor of Philology, Associate Professor, Professor of the V.G. Gak Department of Romance Languages, Moscow State Pedagogical University.