

The use of French in Revival Churches in a West-Northern Congolese Setting: Case of Gbadolite Town

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Abstract:- Having noticed that pastors in revival churches have established French as language of preaching in Gbadolite, a small town with Lingala as vernacular language, the researcher has attempted to discover the reasons hidden behind this practice. After analysis he seems not satisfied with the five main reasons given by the latters and tries to give alternatives. In reality, this practice helps only to distinguish those revival churches from the traditional ones.

Keywords:- Multilingualism, Preaching, Pastors, Revival Churches, Gbadolite

I. INTRODUCTION

In Gbadolite town unlike in other parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, people have tendency to think that having mastery of French is a common sign of the social elite and of social success and that social background changes when one can speak French fluently. So, even though they haven't been to school, anybody who intend to be a community leader aspire to speak French. The French language used in this way is a language that has not been learned in school, or very little. That's what pastors do in revival churches.

Professor Alexis Matangila calls it 'Spiritual French'. He explains this phenomenon by saying that these pastors, these prophets, these preachers do not know schooled French; and that among them some have studied and learned French at school, but many do not have a great educational background. So, they manage as best they can to speak French anyway, and even try to teach it to Lingala speakers. During the worships, they preach in French and their speeches are interpreted into Lingala while they themselves speak better Lingala than French.

➤ Socio-Linguistic Situation of Gbadolite Town

In Gbadolite, French is used much more in education, commerce and administration. Very few inhabitants use it as their language of everyday communication. The majority do not have the mastery of the French language, because the number of illiterates still prevails. Although some have studied, it is clear that many do not have a perfect command of the French language. French remains as the language of the elite.

The meeting of different tribes raising the problem of inter-tribal communication, Lingala - one of the four national languages - recognized as covering the former province of Equateur and a large part of the Oriental province as well as the city of Kinshasa, has taken precedence over the other languages. It is Lingala that brings together the entire population.

In addition to Lingala, Swahili is also spoken, the use of which is justified by the presence of soldiers from the east of the country. This is also the case for Sango, used by refugees from the Central African Republic.

Tribal languages such as: Ngbandi, Mbanza, Ngbaka, Fulu, Mono, Ngombe, etc. are spoken by a large part of the population, but they are more and more used as languages of secrecy in ethnic events. It should also be noted that some tribal languages or dialects are dying, such as Ngbugbu.

In short, in terms of tribal languages, Gbadolite is dominated by the Ngbandi tribe whose majority of speakers occupy more the center of the town. But the influence of other tribes gives primacy to Lingala and Ngbandi comes at the second position, followed by other languages such as Ngombe, Mono, Ngbaka, Mbuza, Fulu, etc. In reality the town is multilingual.

It should also be noted that English is taught as a school subject in secondary and higher education and at university level. It is used in some departments of international NGOs. It is very rare to hear people use it for communication.

➤ Structural Organisation of Churches in Gbadolite

The municipality of Gbadolite includes three categories of churches. The first is that of the independent churches, namely Catholic, Islam (Comuco), Kimbanguist and New Apostolic. These churches aim to make disciples of all nations and also to make them understand the trinity (the union of three persons into one God, therefore God Father, Son and Holy Spirit).

The second category is the grouping of the Churches of Christ in Congo. Initially it was only one church (Protestant church), but today there has been subdivision into several communities. These are churches of American origin.

The Third Category, that constitutes our topic, includes revival churches in Congo. These churches seem to see that the independent churches and the Churches of Christ in Congo are tired, and it is now up to them to increase the spiritual dose. They are based on the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ. Through this name there are miracle healings, deliverances. They organize permanencies to house the sick. Most of these churches prefer to pass their preaching in French. For them French seems to be a spiritual language.

The Catholic and Protestant churches organize services in French just for the intellectual faithful and others in Lingala for the masses. But pastors of the revival churches impose the French language on their literate and illiterate faithful, and sometimes get help from interpreters to translate what they say to the masses. This practice would be normal for pastors from other backgrounds who do not have the mastery of Lingala. But here even pastors from the area do it, and sometimes the interpreter does not fully transmit what is said in French hence there is loss of information.

➤ *Research Questions*

The research questions raised in this study are:

- Why do pastors of revival churches prefer to preach in French, the language of the intellectual elite, rather than in Lingala, the middle vernacular?
- What impact does this use of French as the language of preaching have on the faithful?

➤ *Hypotheses*

Given the questions of our problem, we propose the following hypotheses:

- Pastors of revival churches in Gbadolite use the French language as a distinctive feature between their churches and other religious organisations.
- The faithful of these churches have no difficulty in understanding the message, since these sermons are interpreted in the vernacular.

II. THE RESULTS

Data were collected on a number of pastors in twenty out of the twenty six revival churches in Gbadolite. As the questionnaire contains two types of questions (closed and open-ended), two types of approach were used for data analysis, namely the quantitative and the qualitative approach. Responses to the closed-ended questions were analysed using descriptive statistics of percentages and bar charts. Those to open-ended questions were using the descriptive method consisting of the presentation and discussion on the given responses.

Sample distribution data on pastors' names – dropped for the sake of anonymity - and denominations of their respective churches will be presented first. Then data results on the variables of interest will be given. The latter are related to the raised question and consist of five items that aim at knowing:

- The linguistic capacity of pastors;
- The language they use when preaching;
- The reasons that push them to preach in French (for those who do so);
- If their followers do not have difficulty in understanding the message;
- Why they preach in Lingala and not in French (for those who avoid preaching in French).

A. *Sample Identification Data*

➤ *Pastors' Names* (rejected for the sake of anonymity).

➤ *Denomination of the Churches*

Since our sample is equal to the population, pastors of all the twenty six revival churches should respond to the questionnaire, but there were six cases of mortality, so pastors of the following twenty churches have been reached.

- Assemblée la grâce de Dieu pour l'humanité (God's Grace for Humanity Assembly)
- La terre promise (The Promised Land)
- FEPACO Nzambe Malamu (God is good)
- Assemblée de Berrée (Assembly of Berrée)
- Bima Mouchoir (Bima Handkerchief)
- Rachat tabernacle (Tabernacle Redemption)
- Les disciples de la vérité du Christ (Followers of Christ's Truth)
- Eglise de réveil pour la mission (Revival Church for Mission)
- Ministère yahshua (Yahshua Ministry)
- Bima Mosapi (Bima Finger)
- Le combattant de l'éternel (The Fighter of the Eternal)
- Eglise de Dieu vivant (Church of the Living God)
- Chapelle des vainqueurs (The Victorious' Chapel)
- Assemblée des élus (Assembly of the Elected)
- La révélation (Revelation)
- Centre Evangelique peniel (Peniel Evangelical Center)
- La louange (Praise)
- Elim
- Ministère d'évangélisation et d'éveil spirituel (Ministry of Evangelization and Spiritual Awakening)
- Communauté des frères Baptistes visionnaire au Congo (Visionary Baptist Brothers' Community in Congo)

B. *Interest Variables Data*

These data on our variables of interest will consist of five items related to the raised questions and the relative hypotheses stated above.

➤ *Linguistic Knowledge of Pastors*

Forty-five percent (45%) of pastors are fluent in Lingala, French and Ngbandi. Thirty-five percent (35%) of them know Lingala and French. Five percent (5%) master only Lingala. Five percent (5%) speak Lingala, French and Sango. Five percent (5%) know Lingala, French, Ngbandi and Mongo. And five percent (5%) speak Lingala, French, English, Ngbandi and Sango.

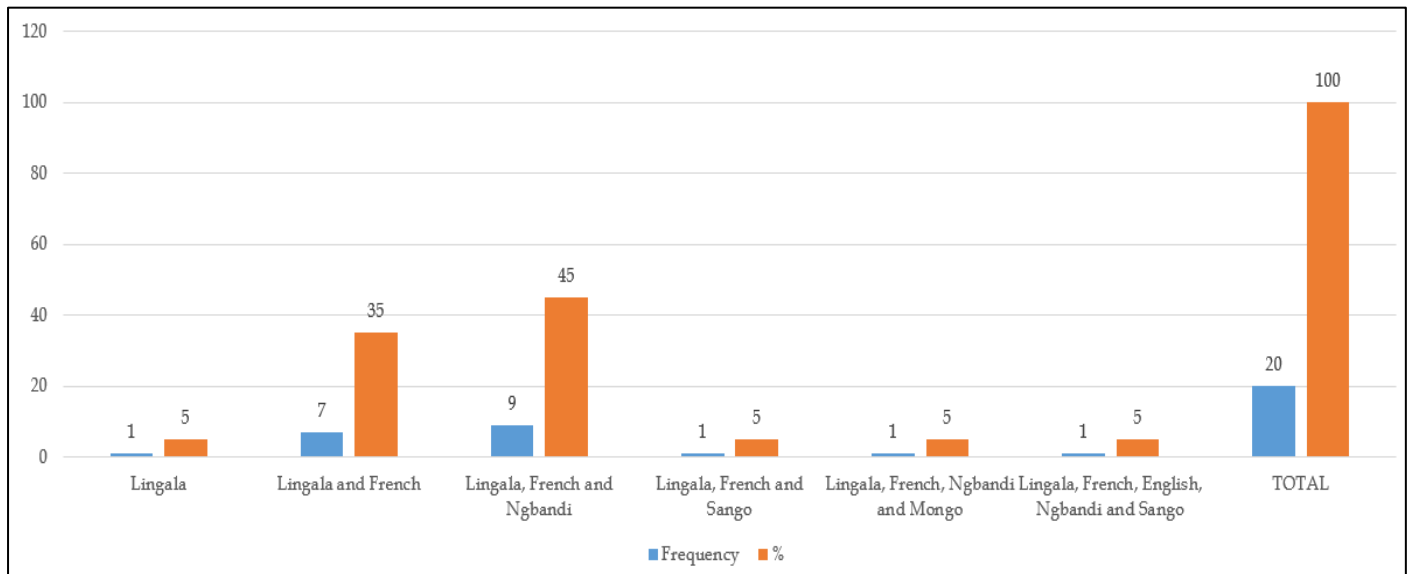


Fig 1 Distribution for Languages Pastors Know

➤ Languages used for Preaching in the Church

Half of the pastors (50%) preach only in Lingala. Forty-five percent (45%) preach in French with interpretation in Lingala. And five percent (5%) preach in Lingala with interpretation in French. None of them is limited to French only.

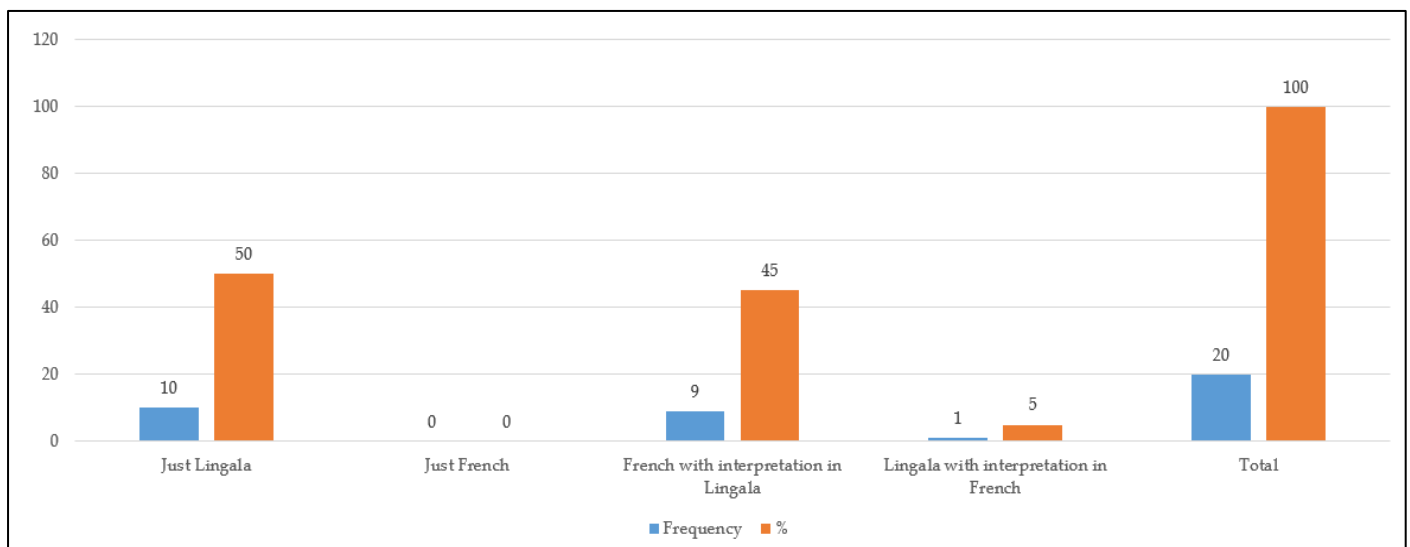


Fig 2 Distribution for Languages used to Preach in Church

➤ Reasons Pushing Pastors to Preach in French

Responding to the question aiming at knowing why they preach in French instead of using Lingala directly, pastors who engage in this practice gave the following arguments:

- Because I read and understand French better than Lingala; French has more audience.
- Our national language (Lingala) is poor.
- I usually preach in Lingala, but I use French when there are visitors who do not understand Lingala.
- First because the Bible is written in French, we read in French and we translate afterwards.
- Because some do not master Lingala well and we must teach in French and translate into Lingala.

- Because most of our brochures are written in foreign languages (French, English).
- French has many words; our language, Lingala, is poor.
- Many of our Bibles are written in French.
- We sometimes preach in French when there are visitors.
- I preach in French when there are foreigners.

As it can be seen, the respondents have different reasons that push them to preach in French rather than in Lingala.

➤ Difficulties for Church Members to Understand the Message

Thirty-three percent (33%) of pastors acknowledge that their faithful encounter difficulties when using French in church and sixty-seven percent (67%) say the opposite.

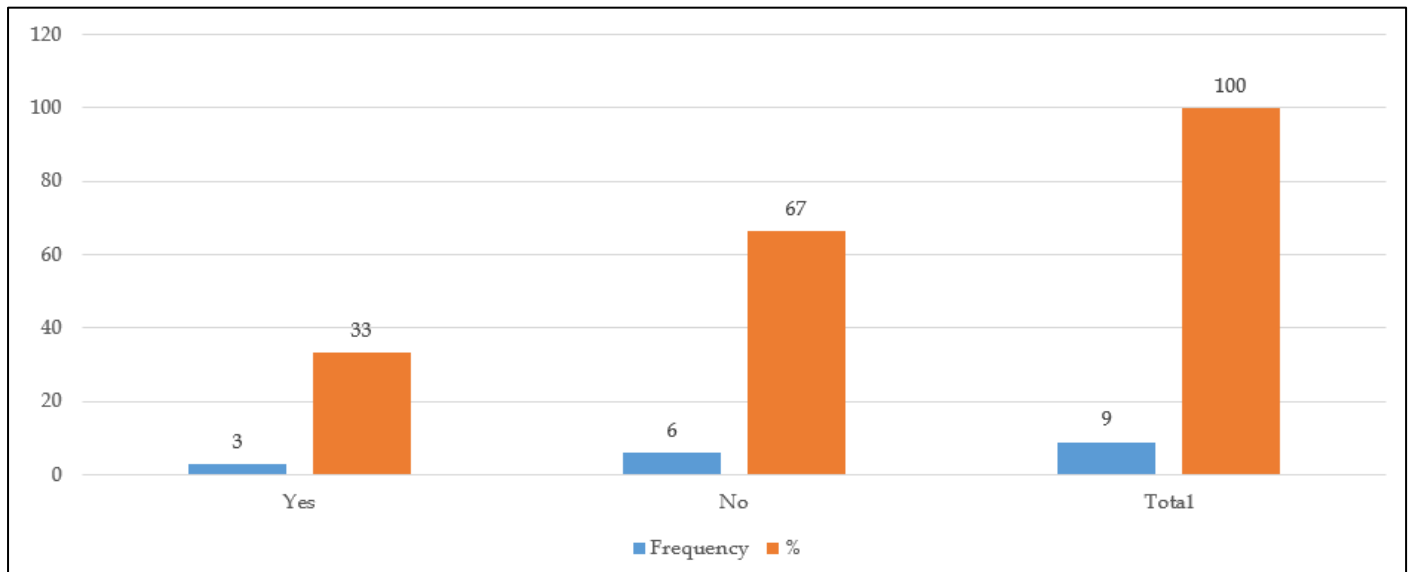


Fig 3 Pastors' Opinions about Difficulties for the Church Members to Understand the Message

➤ *Types of Difficulties*

Hereafter are the types of difficulties pastors acknowledge that the faithful encounter when following preaching in French:

- They have difficulties in understanding French, especially 3rd age people and illiterates.
- Understanding is not direct.
- Many have no education
- Sometimes there is loss of information in the interpretation.

➤ *Reasons for Lack of Difficulties*

Pastors gave the following reasons to support why they think the church members do not have difficulties even if the preaching is done in French:

- Because they are already able to understand the speech.
- Because there is someone else who does interpretation into Lingala, so everybody can understand.
- There is someone whose task is to translate into Lingala.
- All sermons are translated into Lingala.
- Because there is an interpreter who translates into Lingala.
- Because there is someone else who translates into Lingala.

In short, all of these pastors who do preaching in French rely on the interpreters and think that their task is sufficient to avoid difficulties for the church members in understanding the message.

➤ *Reasons that Push some Pastors to Preach in Lingala Instead of French*

Pastors who preach only in Lingala gave the following reasons:

- For the better understanding of God's word.
- Christians in North Ubangi are users of Lingala.

- Because Lingala is a national language and especially spoken in the former province of Equateur, and it allows a good understanding especially for our rural environment.
- It is our language.
- Because there are no foreigners.
- We preach in Lingala to help everybody understand the message.
- We are in a Lingalophone environment.
- Because Lingala is our language and the majority of people listen and speak it.
- For a better understanding of the message, as Lingala is a national language.
- Because here in the province of North-Ubangi everyone has mastery of Lingala.

➤ *Even pastors who use French also gave their views on this issue as follows:*

- Because the faithful are from (the former) Equateur province.
- Jesus Christ himself taught his brothers in his mother tongue, the purpose of the sermon is so that the faithful understand. It is therefore necessary to preach them in their vernacular language for a better understanding.
- Sometimes I preach directly in Lingala when the interpreter is not there.
- If we only use Lingala, it is just because it is the language everybody know and easy to everyone who lives in the environment. In short, Lingala is spoken throughout the Congo and neighbouring countries also master it.
- One can also preach directly in Lingala for direct understanding.
- It is also good to preach in Lingala for quick understanding.
- I can also preach in Lingala because Lingala is understood by all the audience.

III. DATA INTERPRETATION

➤ *Population*

The researcher refrained from revealing the respondents' names for anonymity. However a word can be said about the population and the sample. Indeed, 26 revival churches in total were identified whose pastors constituted the population of the study. They were all taken as a sample given their small number.

Pastors from 20 out of the 26 churches were reached and responded to the questionnaire, representing 76.9% of the study population. The results obtained come from a large majority of the population. So they can be thought of as reliable.

➤ *Variables of Interest*

• *Linguistic Knowledge of Pastors*

The results obtained on the linguistic knowledge of the pastors of the revival churches in Gbadolite indicate that all have a perfect mastery of Lingala which is the vernacular language in the area; and that 95% use French for preaching. In addition to these two languages, some are familiar with other languages such as Ngbandi, Sango, Mongo and English.

These results confirm and even reinforce the research problem: How do Lingala speaking pastors in a Lingalophone environment prefer to preach in French? Isn't there a hidden reason behind this practice? The question still remains.

• *Languages used for Preaching in Churches*

The results obtained on this variable indicate that 45% of pastors prefer to preach in French and be interpreted in Lingala. This represents a fairly large proportion for a Lingalophone environment.

The question always remains: Why this preference of French when one has the perfect knowledge of Lingala and the audience is made up of Lingalophones? What is hidden behind this practice?

• *Reasons Pushing Pastors to Preach in French*

Going through the answers given by pastors who engage in the practice of preaching in French to be interpreted in Lingala, the following reasons emerge: brochures produced in foreign languages, presence of non-Lingalophone visitors, easier reading and comprehension in French than in Lingala, poverty of Lingala compared to French, and existence of several French versions of the Bible.

➤ *It's Time to Stop and make some Comments on these Reasons.*

• *Brochures Produced in Foreign Languages*

Certainly, some of our revival churches are under the direction of foreign spiritual leaders, and therefore not Lingala speakers, who provide them with pamphlets on their

doctrine in foreign languages. But in our opinion this should not be used as a pretext to preach in French since there are other churches in the same situation that make an effort to translate their publications into Lingala. The solution in this situation would be to follow the example of these other churches.

• *Presence of Non-Lingalophone Visitors*

It is quite normal that, when the assembly is heterogeneous, one can use a language that brings everyone together, especially visitors in a church.

However, with regard to the case under study, we think that two alternatives should be used: if it is the non Lingala-speaking visitor who preaches, he does so in French and is interpreted in Lingala; but if it is the local pastor who preaches, he does it in Lingala with a summary in French for visitors.

• *Easier Reading and Comprehension in French than in Lingala*

This situation must probably stem from the language policy applied in the schools where these pastors have been trained.

Indeed, there is a certain dichotomy in the language policy applied in our schools, especially at the primary level. Official and/or contracted schools use French which is the official language and language of teaching while emphasizing the learning of local languages, in this case Lingala; while private schools favour French and neglect Lingala. This can only result in the present situation.

• *Poverty of Lingala Compared to French*

It is quite normal that French which is an international language has a wider audience and is considered to be richer than Lingala.

But, when having a closer look, one can see that some people use this argument to hide their lack of mastery of Lingala; because it is recognized that all languages borrow from each other. Thus nothing prevents that when preaching in Lingala, borrowings from French, Ngbandi, Sango, Mongo, etc. fill the gaps of Lingala, which is the vernacular of the environment.

• *Existence of Several French Versions of the Bible*

Certainly, there are several French versions of the Bible (the Jerusalem Bible, Louis Second version, ecumenical translation of the Bible, translation of the New World ...).

But, in our opinion, there is no shortage of translations of the Bible into Lingala. There is the translation of the Bible into Lingala made by Catholics, another by Protestants, yet another by Jehovah's Witnesses, and even a version of the New Testament in current Lingala produced as part of ecumenism.

However, these different versions are not used by the pastors of revival churches or are rarely used.

Since these versions are produced in the prosody of each of the churches concerned, using one or the other version would be a sign of identification with the church that produced it. However, the Revival churches, not identifying with either of the aforementioned churches, can only reject the versions of the Bible in Lingala produced by them and resort to the different French versions of the Bible.

This is what lies behind this practice of preaching in French, but which our pastors do not dare to say clearly.

- *Difficulties for the Church Members to Understand the Message*

Some pastors who preach in French recognize the harm that this practice causes to the faithful, including linguistic difficulties. They recognize that people of 3rd age are disadvantaged as well as illiterates. They also recognize that some interpreters are not up to the task.

However, they persist in the practice of preaching in French. That is why we say that French is used as a distinctive sign by the pastors of revival churches.

Those who think that their faithful have no difficulty in understanding the message give as reasons the habit and presence of interpreters. But when we think of what has just been said above, in particular the linguistic difficulties of the faithful and the poor quality of some interpreters, we dare to believe that these reasons must be taken with great reserve.

- *Reasons to Preach in Lingala*

The pastors who act in the way we want have justified their choice by the sociolinguistic situation of the DRC which makes Lingala the vernacular spoken in the former great Ecuador. We believe that they are right and encourage them to continue in this regard.

However, it is surprising to note that pastors who support the practice of preaching in French recognize the merits of preaching in Lingala. They say that Lingala is the middle vernacular, known to all and that it should be used to preach following the example of Jesus Christ himself who taught these brothers in their mother tongue. But they persist in preaching in French: what a paradox!

IV. CONCLUSION

Here we are at the end of this work entitled "Opinion of the pastors of the revival churches on the use of French as the language of preaching. Case of the municipality of Gbadolite".

We started from the constant that many pastors of the revival churches of the municipality of Gbadolite, aware of the sociolinguistic situation of the environment, prefer to address their faithful in French during their preaching and to be interpreted in Lingala, even though they have the perfect mastery of this vernacular language.

We wanted to know the hidden reasons behind this practice and the impact it has on understanding the message.

To do this, we hypothesized that pastors would use the French language as a sign of demarcation between their churches and other religious denominations, and that the faithful would not have difficulties in understanding since these teachings are interpreted in Lingala, the middle vernacular language.

In order to verify the hypotheses we designed a questionnaire to which we submitted 20 of 26 pastors of the revival churches of the municipality of Gbadolite.

➤ *After analyzing the Data, it was found that Pastors Prefer to Preach in French for the following Reasons:*

- Brochures produced in foreign languages;
- Presence of non-Lingalophone visitors;
- Easier reading and comprehension in French than in Lingala;
- Poverty of Lingala compared to French;
- Existence of several French versions of the Bible.

These reasons seemed insufficient to the researcher, especially the last one, because it is known that there are versions of the Bible in Lingala produced by Catholics and Protestants. There is also an ecumenical translation of the New Testament into current Lingala. So if some pastors do not use them, it is just for a reason of demarcation, because these versions are produced in the different prosodies of the aforementioned churches. The first hypothesis was thus confirmed.

With regard to understanding the message, some pastors who do preaching in French have acknowledged that this practice has a negative impact given the illiteracy rate in the environment and the poor quality of some interpreters. The second hypothesis was rejected.

➤ *The following Recommendations can be made:*

- That the leaders of revival churches seek to produce a Lingala version of the Bible in their prosody;
- Organize training sessions for their interpreters to improve the quality of their work.

We suggest that further research be carried out in order to gather the opinion of the faithful of the revival churches on the same issue, because we have limited ourselves here to that of the pastors.

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