

# Studying a Totally Unknown Language

[This is a letter I sent on Oct. 6, 2008, to my circle of friends interested in science, together with an article from the *San Francisco Chronicle*. –S.H.]

Hi science fans,

The article below is about a graduate linguistics class at UC Berkeley which is studying an African language called “Nzadi”. There has been virtually no previous scholarly study of this language, so this class hopes to create and publish the first scientific description of Nzadi and its grammar.

While this is very interesting, and certainly a good thing to do, in a way this class is cheating! They are “cheating” in that they are lucky to have a native speaker of the language working with them who *also* knows English. Thus they are able to ask *in English* how you would say a word or sentence in Nzadi. This is a tremendous advantage!

But the question arises, could some outsider go the area of the Congo where Nzadi is spoken and—not having any common language with the people there—*still* learn Nzadi? The answer is yes, this sort of thing can be done, and has been done. If it couldn’t be done, then no one could have ever learned a language other than their own (because there would also have been no one who could have taught it to them by using their own native language as the medium of instruction).

A famous American bourgeois philosopher, W.V.O. Quine, absurdly claimed that on “logical grounds” such a thing should be impossible, but the fact is that it has been done, not only by trained linguists, but on many occasions even by travelers with no training in linguistics. (I make fun of Quine on this point on my “Philosophical Doggerel” website at: <http://www.massline.org/PhilosDog/Q/Quine.htm> )

Actually, I myself once took an undergraduate course in linguistics at the University of Wisconsin where we learned the basics of how to go about doing this sort of linguistic field work. The instructor spoke Quechua, the language of the Incas and their modern descendants in the Peruvian Andes. Naturally, none of us students in the class knew any Quechua or had probably even heard of the language before. But our teacher presented us with verbal and written examples of the language—*without providing us any translations!* We then had to analyze the data she provided us and determine first the set of sounds (phonemes) used in Quechua, and then start the process of identifying the basic units of meaning (morphemes) in the language. It was amazing to me at the time that all of us in the class were able to do this, while still not understanding a single word of the language! Then gradually we were able to deduce the meaning of some Quechua words and phrases because of the linguistic and “real world” context where they were used. Thus if she said “kunka” while pointing to her neck, most of us soon got the idea that “kunka” meant “neck”.

Of course our phonemic and morphemic analysis of Quechua was only very crude and initial. What the

grad students in Berkeley are doing with Nzadi is hopefully quite thorough and much more reliable.

Scott

## UC linguistics students get lesson of lifetime

Patricia Yollin, Chronicle Staff Writer

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Nzadi is one of the most obscure tongues in the world. That's exactly why a UC Berkeley class has embraced it.

"There's nothing like the joy of discovering a language from scratch," said Cal linguistics Professor Larry Hyman.

The 10 students in his course, Introduction to Field Methods, are focusing on Nzadi this semester - the first such effort in any college or university to examine this remote member of the Bantu linguistic family.

"It's a chance to study a language that nobody has studied before," said graduate student researcher Thera Crane. "That opportunity does not come around very often."

Nzadi is spoken by thousands of people in fishing villages along the Kasai River in Congo, a country with about 220 languages.

The students in Hyman's class have two goals. They want to figure out how to analyze an unfamiliar language and they plan to document Nzadi - a tongue so unknown that it cannot be found in the Ethnologue, a compendium of almost 7,000 languages across the globe.

The first objective is crucial for researchers doing field work. As Crane put it: "How would you learn a language if you knew nothing about it?"

Hyman also would like to produce a grammar by the end of the semester that could be published. Each student would be responsible for a chapter.

The methodology course is offered from time to time, but has never before featured such an esoteric tongue - the result of sheer serendipity. Hyman decided on Nzadi when he heard that a native speaker was living in Berkeley.

That speaker, Simon Nsielanga Tukumu, grew up in the Congolese village of Bundu in a family of fishermen. He was ordained there in July as a Jesuit priest, and is now working toward a master's degree

in ethics at the Graduate Theological Union, a few blocks from the university.

He is also a linguistic consultant in Hyman's class.

"I'm a little bit surprised to speak Nzadi in Berkeley," said Nsielanga, who is 38. "For me, it's a way of bringing awareness to Americans that there is this language spoken in the Congo but not known by many people."

Christina Agoff, 21, who is taking the course, said, "Most people don't understand how unusual it is to have a speaker of such an obscure language. And most of my classes have been theoretical. I wanted to get some practical work. It's so much different than our other classes. It makes it like the real world."

In the class, which meets three mornings a week, Nsielanga and Hyman teach students how to grasp the essence of a language that exists in written form only in an unpublished 768-item word list that a Belgian scholar submitted to UC Berkeley's Comparative Bantu Online Dictionary, co-founded by Hyman in 1994.

"We're trying to discover how the grammar works, how to figure out what the sounds are, how you put words together to form sentences," Hyman said.

One Wednesday morning, the students - all linguistics majors - asked Nsielanga for the Nzadi equivalent of various words, such as house, eyebrow, place, firewood, jaw and skin.

For Nsielanga, who hopes to someday get a master's in political history and perhaps teach, the class is instructive.

"This is a starting point for writing a history of the Nzadi people," he said. "And this class gives me strength to know how to teach."

For Hyman, 61, it's a way to explore his endless fascination with languages, especially the 500 or so Bantu tongues, and unravel the mysteries of one still untouched by any sort of scrutiny.

"I love puzzles, although I don't do puzzles," he said. "But I have a puzzle mentality."

Hyman, who spent two years in Cameroon, specializes in tones, which are crucial in a language such as Nzadi.

"Tones are what keep me up at night," he said. "I'm a failed tenor, I think."

Although there have been cuts in many of Cal's language programs, Hyman said colleagues and students do not resent the arrival of Nzadi on campus. For one thing, it's definitely not Conversational Nzadi. For another, the approach being studied is applicable to grasping any language anywhere.

"It's a great opportunity to put our linguistic training to good use," said John Keesling, 21. "We're

documenting Nzadi for future linguistic analysis."

When he taught the methodology course before, Hyman used such languages as Chibemba from Zambia, Ikalanga from Botswana and Adhola from Uganda.

"We have something much more special this time," Hyman said. "We'll be putting Nzadi on the map and it will be valuable."

He added that Nsielanga has asked people in his village to gather proverbs, which could tie the class further to this distant part of the world.

"It's a part of Africa not very well known at all - like it's out of the 'African Queen' or something," Hyman said.

He said interest in African languages in general is exploding on the Cal campus.

"Given that we are working on a shoestring budget, we've done incredibly well in offering any African languages," said Martha Saavedra, associate director of the Center for African Studies at Cal.

She said UC Berkeley is currently teaching Kiswahili, Zulu, Wolof and Chichewa. Last year, Afrikaans, Malagasy, Setswana and Xhosa were taught as well.

As for the Nzadi course, Hyman said he'd love to simply staple students' term papers together at the end of the semester and have a publishable product.

"We have high hopes," he said. "I say that with some apprehension because we've had high hopes before and it hasn't worked out."

A sampling of Nzadi words:

Iba = man

Okar = woman

Wa = village

Ikie = egg

Dzi = eye

Ote = tree

Iman = stone

Ntsur = animal

Mbva = dog

Out = night

Mpful = bird

Etwa = bag

Nda = hunger

Ebam = kidney

Man = ground

Mbvwa = path

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/10/06/BA7I133KE1.DTL>

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