Case report: Contributing to an asylum case of “language analysis” without knowledge of the language in question

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Normally, performing a language analysis in the asylum procedure requires specific knowledge of the language in question, which can be obtained from specialized linguists and/or trained native speakers. Here, we will discuss a case where neither of these was available. Thus a linguist with no knowledge of the languages in question was left with only minimal resources to investigate the case. A useful analysis was still possible because the objective was purely to establish whether the applicant was indeed able to speak the languages that he claimed to speak.

The case at hand

The applicant claimed that he was born and raised in Central African Republic. When applying for asylum, he claimed to speak Sango as his native language, Gbaya as his second language, and some French. There were no interpreters available for Sango or Gbaya, and so the interviews were conducted in French.

The interviews did not go very well. It did not become clear whether communication through the French interpreter was causing problems or not. In order to evaluate whether the claimed origin of the applicant was plausible, it was considered essential to establish whether the applicant indeed spoke Sango and/or Gbaya, as he claimed.

First, we established that the claimed linguistic profile was entirely consistent with the claimed origin, with Sango and French being the principal languages of Central African Republic (Lewis et al., 2015). We then prepared a tailor made script. Among other things, the applicant had to translate words and phrases from French to Sango and from French to Gbaya. These were words that occurred in word lists of these languages (Samarin, 1967; Roulon-Doko, 2008). The applicant also had to produce free speech and translate numbers.

Analysis of the applicant’s language

Various findings could be reported that refute the applicant’s claimed linguistic profile:

- Faced with a microphone, the applicant no longer claimed he could speak Sango fluently.
- The applicant could not speak freely in Sango and did not speak any Gbaya.
- For 28 basic words such as ‘father’, ‘mother’, ‘year’, ‘sky’, ‘smoke’, ‘dance’, ‘ear’, ‘nose’ etc. the applicant could not provide a translation in Sango.
- For 71 other basic words, the applicant provided a translation that did not match Sango.
- The translated numerals (1-10) did not match the Sango (or Gbaya) numerals and did not resemble any Ubangian language of the Central African Republic.

Further research (which will be described in detail) revealed that the numerals and some of the translated words resembled the language Moghamo (Mbah, 2013), spoken in the North West Region of Cameroon. This language is not closely related to the Ubangian languages of the Central African Republic. Moreover, besides heavily accented French the applicant involuntarily spoke some English during the recording as well. Thus, the findings of the analysis would suggest an origin from Cameroon.
References

