

René Bastin:

Academic and Professional Career

On March 14, 2000 the signature event consecrating the sale of the Belgian companies of the CERAN Group took place. My wife, Monique, and myself wanted to find a solution to ensure the continuity of our professional activity before reaching too ripe of an age. The sooner, the better!

We were 59 years old on that day. And that day was the beginning of a new activity!

Some History

1960-1975

In 1964, freshly graduated with a B.A. in Roman Philology, I left Belgium with my family to teach in Burundi. I quickly grew interested in the issue of French teaching as a non-native language.

Indeed, as soon as I started teaching my pupils, I realized that they did not understand a word of what I was saying, and that they could barely express themselves in French. My colleagues encountered exactly the same problem. In fact, French was not a native language for those students. This observation seems trivial today, but it was revolutionary at that time! My remarks irritated many, especially in school and diplomatic circles. I was called a “communist” and a “Trotskyist”.

My point upset many indeed - I was quite unaware of it at first – because it went against the way education officials, Belgian and French cultural attachés, and die-hard teachers viewed the teaching of French: It was taught as a native language! Besides, politicians too considered French as a native language since it was the official language of that country.

Above all schoolbook publishers disagreed with the statement! They could not afford losing the African markets, where they could get rid of the unsold manuals of the metropolis, which were most of the time obsolete and, at any rate, totally non-adapted to the psycho-linguistic and cultural reality of sub-Saharan African students.

French was thus taught as a native language, just as it had been during the colonial era. Young Africans, who did not practice French outside school, were using in the seventies the very same manuals I had used in the fifties in Belgium...

On the basis of this observation, I elaborated various documents to try to adapt my teaching to this specific situation. First of all, I focused on exercises of phonetic correction, since the oral language was the key to understanding the rest of the course.

Complementary Training

Soon I felt the need for extra training in language didactics. In 1969 I acquired an M.A. in phonetics at the University of Mons. Simultaneously, I attended classes in African linguistics at the University of Bujumbura. Those lectures were given by André Coupez, a prominent africanist, who encouraged me to work on a doctoral thesis, which I would defend at the ULB (Free University of Brussels) in 1978.

As early as 1967 and 1968, I invited several professors from the University of Mons to come to Burundi - Raymond Renard was one of them. On several occasions those professors participated in seminars designed to train Burundese and foreign teachers. Hundreds of those teachers developed an interest in the rather new audio-visual methods, among which the phonetic correction (the verbo-tonal system). Some of them even spent a month of their vacations at the School of Interpreters of Mons to perfect their knowledge.

In 1971, as I wished to continue progressing in the field of linguistics, I attended a three-month course in linguistics at the University of Buffalo, N.Y., given by Prof. J. Lyons, Prof. P. Ladefoged, and Prof. N. Chomsky. This theoretical training was extremely interesting and important to me.

From 1968 until 1973, I was in charge of the courses of historical phonetics, historical grammar, and French diction at the Bujumbura university (Université Officielle de Bujumbura, Burundi).

Le français sans frontières

An important aspect of my work in Africa – as supervisor for French and for secondary education later - was that I led the language teaching reform commission in Burundi. From that moment on, French was recognized as a foreign language to African children. The teaching methods were then totally revised. There were however no textbooks corresponding to our needs. Shortly thereafter, in collaboration with the Belgian technical cooperation department, I set up a pedagogical research team, whose objective was to define a language teaching methodology and to elaborate adequate schoolbooks.

Thus, with a team of six educators from the Belgian Cooperation and in total agreement with the local authorities, I designed a new method: *Le français sans frontières*. Several editions were published under my supervision by De Boeck & Didier publishers. Those books were used in several French-speaking African countries, and I was quickly requested to lecture on the new approach to language teaching. Unfortunately a French publishing company stole our work and became quite successful after changing only the front page of the books!

Next to lecturing about the new methodology in several schools and meeting with education officials in Rwanda, Congo, Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Morocco, I ran several training seminars for French teachers in Burundi, Rwanda, and Congo.

I was fascinated at the same time by the linguistic theory and by its application to foreign language teaching.

CERAN 1975-2000

Having acquired such an experience in the field of language teaching in Africa, and wishing to continue in that direction, my wife and I created the CERAN – Centre d'Etude et de Rencontre à Nivezé – near Spa, Belgium, in 1975.

Our project consisted in offering adults coming from all horizons, languages, and cultures a seminar in a residential center where they could meet while learning French. The stays were designed so as to make sure the participants enjoyed a total immersion in the language studied.

On April 1, 1975 my wife and I alone launched the center. Twenty-five years later, we sold our Belgian companies, which had counted up to 150 employees in Spa, while the CERAN method was used in language centers in Spain, France, England and Japan.

The CERAN method

In 1978, I wrote the first CERAN course for French, which was used until 1984. Then I reorganized the levels, wrote parts of and directed the design of the new courses. The course is subdivided into eight levels, and I recorded the whole method with the help of another teacher. The method, whose theory and principles go back to 1970, was to be used until 2000.

After 1985, I directed the writing of the CERAN method in English, German, Dutch, Spanish, Japanese, Italian, and Russian with the obvious collaboration of native teachers.

In spite of my heavy duties as CEO, I was close to the actual teaching taking place in the CERAN center. Whether I visited classes or trained teachers from various languages in different countries, some learning problems caught my attention and forced me to wonder about the nature of learning. The application of the CERAN method to the Japanese language and the training of Japanese teachers was undoubtedly an exceptional experience.

My numerous contacts with participants who attended CERAN courses (in 2000, after 25 years of activity, they were 30.000) and my meetings with officials in the private and public sector all around the world provided me with precious feedback concerning the needs of the customers in the field of language training.

Crystal Sentences

In 1993, I started to think about 'crystal sentences', i.e. sentences whose grammatical structures are universal and can be found in all the languages. Intuition had led me to create those sentences, but no linguistic theory was there to support the idea. The research about the 'crystal sentences' stopped, as I was unable to devote the time necessary to it while I was at the head of the company.

My insight in the 'crystal sentences' however was one of the strongest motivations I had to further my theoretical research. After four years of work in this field, I can now say that those sentences are effective only if they are generated while considering the results of the latest linguistic research.

This is why, while I was still CEO of the company, I wished so much to be able to devote more of my time to the field of linguistics applied to language teaching – my hobby.

2000... and after!

I never considered retiring and selling our companies as a synonym for remaining idle, and as a matter of fact, I was reminded by one of my advisors, three weeks after the selling, that I needed to fill in my retirement paperwork so as to be entitled to a retirement income.

In order to devote my time to linguistic research, I had to create a new company, which was quickly done.

The first phase of my research consisted in reading (and re-reading) the linguistic literature so as to make up for the time lost... I read at least 80 books on the topic, some in French, some in English.

The second phase of the work dealt with bringing together my long experience on the field and the latest linguistic, neurological, and psycholinguistic theories.

The third phase consisted in the writing of the Balingua (Boost your Acquisition of Languages) method, in French, English, Lithuanian and Chinese... to start!

The fourth phase was to launch the Balingua method on line: since January 2007, you can start the learning of a new language or (re)activate your knowledge, with www.balingua.com!

I wish you a lot of success and much pleasure with Balingua!

René Bastin

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