

## Language Imperialism and the Fate of Minority Languages: Indoctrination through the So-Called Wolofisation of the Senegalese Society

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### Abstract

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The term *imperialism* coined to denote the cultural, economic, and military domination of some political entities over others or a collective or individual will for expansion and domination<sup>2</sup> is also frequently used in sociolinguistics when it comes to qualify the expansion of some languages (the so called important languages) especially if it is detrimental to other coexisting languages supposed to be less important encroaching upon domains previously reserved to the latter. Wolofisation falls into that trend all the more as it is defined as the “invasion” of Wolof, which manifests itself through a “pilfering” of speakers from other local languages and results in its hegemony in the sociolinguistic environment of Senegal. This paper provides a critical approach to this state of fact which is well on its way to becoming a generally accepted theory that rallies more and more researchers. It addresses crucial issues as deconstructing old stereotypes, picturing language interaction in the Senegalese environment and critically analyzing the concept of Wolofisation.

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**Keywords:** language, imperialism, fate, minority language, wolofisation, identity

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<sup>2</sup> Le Petit Larousse illustré en couleur.

## Résumé

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Terme inventé pour désigner la domination culturelle, économique et militaire de certaines entités politiques sur d'autres ou une volonté collective ou individuelle d'expansion et de domination, l'impérialisme est également fréquemment utilisée en sociolinguistique lorsqu'il s'agit de qualifier l'expansion de certaines langues (que l'on appelle langues de haut prestige), surtout si elle est préjudiciable à d'autres langues voisines censées être moins importantes en envahissant des domaines auparavant réservés à ces dernières. La Wolofisation entre dans cette tendance, d'autant plus qu'elle a été définie comme «l'invasion» du wolof, qui se manifeste par un "maraudage" des locuteurs natifs des autres langues locales, résultant à son hégémonie dans l'environnement sociolinguistique du Sénégal. Ce document présente une approche critique de cet état de fait qui est en bonne voie pour devenir une théorie généralement admise et qui rallie de plus en plus de chercheurs. Il aborde des questions aussi cruciales que la déconstruction de vieux stéréotypes, la description des partenariats linguistiques dans le paysage sénégalais et l'analyse critique de la notion de Wolofisation.

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**Mots-clés** : Langue, impérialisme, destin, langue minoritaire, wolofisation, identité

## Introduction

The influence that results from the contact between languages of wider communication and minority languages in Africa has mostly pointed to one direction: from the former to the latter. This has come to be a general truth and to be accepted as an unavoidable fate. Researchers in the field of linguistics, everywhere in the world, have sought for rational explanations to that monodimensional impact. Most of their investigation, however, point at language status and speakers' attitudes as determining factors. They have therefore resorted to notions such as prestige (High or Low), functionality (vehicular vs. vernacular), demography (majority vs. minority languages) to predict power relationships in multilingual contexts. In this trend, the field of Africa, which has experienced linguistic and cultural domination through colonization, provides a rich and complex ground. The establishment of French as the official language, the opening of western schools to support the assimilation policy of the French colonial administration and the formulation of the status of national language have much contributed to sharpen the complexity born from the opposition between languages of wider communication and minority languages. From 1973, following the promotion of local languages, French has been downgraded in favor of local languages.

Following J. A. Coleman, professor of foreign language learning (FLL) at the University of Portsmouth who states that, "*one of the fundamental purposes of academic inquiry is to challenge assumptions*"<sup>3</sup>, our aim is to provide a critical approach to the very foundations of the theory of wolofisation to see how it backs up imperialistic ideas.

## 1. Drawing the Catalog of Received Ideas

So far, in the field of inventions, Africa has not played a leading role. Many observers in various fields have complained about the "passivity" of African researchers and their mimicry when it comes to generate new concepts and to vulgarize them. Of course, many comfort themselves with the unfavorable economic realities and some other political stakes which limit them in what they can do or say. Those are certainly failing to remember that many great researchers<sup>4</sup> rose to fame posthumously. The ideas they were defending got popularized decades or centuries after their death when their successors rallied their once stigmatized approaches. So the truth is that they dare not challenge assumptions. Another fact is that many African researchers have graduated or have been molded in western schools of thoughts and they only come back to apply rigorously what they have learned there, using concepts that often vehicle subjective ideas often promulgated originally to downgrade indigenous languages and societies and maintain the supremacy of some groups over others<sup>5</sup>. As a matter of fact, it creates a catalogue of received ideas inculcated to their students with so much persuasion that it turns to be a dogma that delimits their actions and brings their thoughts to a standstill. They completely forget that, as researchers, their target subject is dynamic and requires a constant updating of both approaches and concepts if they need to capture its vivid image.

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<sup>3</sup> J. A. Coleman. "Language Teaching, Language Learning, Language Testing". Inaugural Lecture, University of Portsmouth, 17 February 1994. p.1.

<sup>4</sup> Galileo and Ferdinand de Saussure is a case in point

<sup>5</sup> The term dialect was coined to designate non codified languages whose structure was too simple to be able to express complex concepts. It was but recently that linguists recognized it as any geographical variation and that it is likely to manifest itself in any language. But despite that semantic shift, the subjective pejorative connotation still survives.

Several concepts and considerations have been taken up by African linguists. Some of these have become outdated but still enjoy a wide usage among researchers.

Among them is the opposition between such notions as vehicular and vernacular language,<sup>6</sup> mother tongue, first language, second language, foreign language etc. In Senegal, these subjective approaches which have long applied to the cohabitation between French and local languages now invite itself in the interactions and power relations between local languages, especially between Wolof and the rest of Senegalese languages. This sometimes creates friction and bitterness among researchers of various sociolinguistic groups, especially when it comes to the discussing about the local language(s) to be introduced in the educational system in the perspective of their development.

In Senegal, many researchers support the conception of Wolof as a unifying language, a symbol of national identity. In this way, Mawéja Mbaya observes that

Tout d'abord, comme phénomène récent, une seule langue parmi les langues nationales se dégage comme langue dominante [Wolof]. Elle est parlée et comprise par la quasi-totalité de la population qui la considère comme le symbole de la modernité et de l'identité nationale<sup>7</sup>.

Yet, in Henry Gravrand's work<sup>8</sup>, Proto-Seereer, is said to be the core language from which most Senegalese languages, including Wolof, sprung and took different names while present day Seereer, because of its closeness to the proto form, maintained its name. Thus, if the theory of Wolof being the symbol of national identity holds, it means a shift from the common roots with its sister languages. This would be favored by a set of factors that might be the early contact of the Wolof with Western settlers and the role they played as go-betweens. This early rise was an opportunity for the Wolof to play leading roles in public communication, in economy, education, and politics. Besides, although the status of national language was recognized in 1968, Wolof was the first local language to be codified in 1971 while that of other languages span from then to 1975.

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<sup>6</sup> The function of languages in Senegal is dependent on the geographical space. As such, although Wolof is called a national vehicular language, in areas like Fatick, Fouta and Casamance, its functionality is much reduced dû to the fact that those areas are predominantly dwelled by other ethnic groups known to be more or less close to their members.

<sup>7</sup> Mawéja Mbaya. *Op.Cit.* p.12-13.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. La civilization Sereer: cosaan

## 2. Wolofisation as a Natural Process: Focus on History, Scholars and Attitudes

It is not without significance that the feeling of nationalism led to the formulation of the function of "national language" in many African countries. In Cameroon for instance, Edmon Biloa, states that "the term 'national language' was adopted merely for the sake of compromise, for purely nationalistic reasons."<sup>9</sup> This, of course, often creates a gap between the status conferred on the language and the social role it plays in the language practices of users. Thus, in Senegal the status of national language sprung in the late 60's and early 70's, with Wolof being the first Senegalese language to benefit that recognition.

Since then, a sustained expansion of Wolof throughout the country has been noticed. This is what researchers termed Wolofisation. The latter is often perceived as a threat to the development of coexisting linguistic minorities. One of the most apparent outcomes of this phenomenon is the imbalance it created in the opposition between the demography of ethnic groups and that of the associated linguistic groups often due to language shift. For instance, as far as Seereer is concerned, Brigitte Rasoloniaina notes the following: « *Par ailleurs, il apparait qu'il y a une perte (environ 13%) dans la transmission de la langue* »<sup>10</sup>. As a matter of fact, the contrastive analysis of the ethnic and linguistic data contained in the report of the census of population and housing, reveals that for Seereer, the percentage of the ethnic group is always slightly higher than that of the language group in almost all regions (e.g. Dakar: Seereer language group is 7.9%, while ethnic group constitutes 11.6%; Fatick: the ratio is 53.3% against 55.1%; Thiès: 26.7% for the language group against 30.2% for the ethnic group).

In another study on the Pulaar, Fiona Mc Laughlin confirms the same tendency and notes that « Pulaar is losing speakers to Wolof »<sup>11</sup> which is strikingly demonstrated by Makhtar Diouf who uses numbers to details highlight the raiding that Wolof performs on minority languages:

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<sup>9</sup> Edmon Biloa. « le partenariat anglais/français ou le problème anglophone au Cameroun » In *Actes des journées scientifiques de Nouakchott*, 5-7 novembre 2007, p.87.

<sup>10</sup> Brigitte Rasoloniaina. Op.cit., p.102.

<sup>11</sup> Fiona Mc Laughlin. « Haal pulaar Identity as a response to Wolofization" In *Journal of African Languages and Cultures*. Vol 8, n°2, 1995, p.162.

Les groupes ethniques non wolof affichent à l'égard de la langue wolof un degré de réceptivité très variable. La proportion de leurs membres qui adopte le wolof comme première langue est de 39,47% pour les sereer, 35,21% pour les Haal pularen, 31,18% pour les bambara, 29,26% pour les maure, 23,19% pour les saraxulle, 22,73% pour les susu (ethnie de Guinée-Conakry, faiblement représentée au Sénégal) et 22,73% pour les Joola<sup>12</sup>.

Diouf does not fail to emphasize the salient fact that "the number of Wolof speakers is more than twice that of the members of the Wolof ethnic group."<sup>13</sup> Thus, on the basis of this work, we come to the conclusion that the overall linguistic situation is as follows:

- ◆ Wolof: number of speakers much higher than the actual ethnic group;
- ◆ Other languages: number of speakers relatively lower than the actual ethnic group.

This raises many questions about the future of these minority languages and further motivates actions for their protection.

### **3. Wolofisation as an Induced Policy: Focus on Covert Linguistic Policies**

Politicians and decision makers have always denied the existence of any covert intention aiming at giving Wolof a full official recognition as a second official language or at least at favoring its usage to the detriment of the other local languages. However, if they sustain that there is no linguistic discrimination between Wolof and its coexisting languages, there are facts that disprove this position. Senegalese national languages have more or less always benefited from equal treatment as far as their use in public sphere is concerned<sup>14</sup>. However, recently, Wolof seems to have benefitted from a preferential treatment. From December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013, Wolof has become the only local language to have a daily 30mn news bulletin (7pm) in addition to the regular 15mn news bulletin per day and per national language traditionally distributed as a way of promote them.

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<sup>12</sup> Makhtar Diouf. Sénégal. Op.cit., p.82.

<sup>13</sup> Makhtar Diouf. Op.cit. p.79.

<sup>14</sup> Fair usage in news broadcasting, at the parliament and in education.

Language issues in Senegal have become hotter from 2000, especially since the February 7<sup>th</sup> 2001 amendment of the constitution. President Wade took the lead for a covert policy of Wolofisation by systematically translating many of his public addresses to the nation into Wolof. This, of course was the first steps to the move towards a bilingual nation where Wolof would be a second official language next to French.

In conclusion, we can say that the unjust and unfair Wolofisation that many scholars and researchers reject or decry results from a combination of historical events, the myth of numbers, weak or absence of native speakers' resistance and subjective and partial interpretation of research results by both researchers and decision makers.

#### **4. The Double Indoctrination**

The choice of words in the definition of newly created concepts is very determining in the way that it creates a "subjective virtual reality" and prepares people's mind to receive it favorably, i.e. exactly as its theoreticians wish it to be understood and vulgarized. Wolofisation is often described as the hegemony of Wolof in the sociolinguistic context of Senegal with a sharp focus on the coexisting local languages. In clear terms, it is defined as the invasion of Wolof through the other local languages which manifests itself through a "pilfering" of speakers. Following the same view, it empowers Wolof as a national super-vehicular language while lessening the importance and demography of the coexisting local languages. It is a well known fact that projects are underlined by ideologies which reflect choices and sociopolitical positioning<sup>15</sup>. A step back to new trends in the theory of languages in contact situation will be useful to better approach our subject. In contact situations, the relationship between languages was initially said to be conflicting. That conflict found its roots in the diglossia which placed some languages over the others in terms of prestige because they were supposed to play higher roles in the community. That theory of language conflict prevailed over a long period until the moment linguists realized that in multilingual contexts, the coexistence of languages was not governed by tension, rather, they were complementary in so far as in their role as communication tools, and their functional distribution, some operated in domains where the others were absent.

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<sup>15</sup> Gille Forlot. « Critique de l'éducation plurilingue et interculturelle, ou comment ne pas se tromper de cible » In *Langue et société* n°140. Juin 2012 page 106pdf pp104-114

Moreover, even within the advocated of language conflict, there was consciousness that actually the conflict they much talked about was not inherent to the interaction between languages themselves. Rather, it was created and fed by their speakers on behalf of subjective consideration rooted in their attitudes. From then, the relationship was reconsidered and labeled “partnership” in the 1990’s.

The concept of partnership in linguistic interactions is just wonderful in theory. However one may wonder if it is not another trick meant to serve the interests of some languages. Very recently, during a meeting of Francophone countries held in Québec<sup>16</sup> (Canada), the renowned French linguist Claude Hagège<sup>17</sup> talking of the state of French in the world openly declared that “*nous [the francophone] sommes en guerre*”<sup>18</sup> before adding that English is not only supplanting French in the domains where it was traditionally used but it progresses faster than it. Moreover Abdou Diouf’s phrase “*indignés linguistiques*” says much about how detrimental to French the progress of English is felt by the Francophone and how urgent it is to remedy that situation. The question we are tempted to ask is how can there be a so flagrant contradiction?

In November 2006, the research network *Dynamique des langues et francophonie* (DLF) held a symposium in Nouakchott (Mauritania) to popularize the concept of “linguistic partnership” in multilingual contexts. As a participant, I subsequently asked the then DLF honorary president to know whether that concept was not one more trick to maintain French in the linguistic geography of Francophone countries because it was undeniable that compared to its status in the sixties, it is progressively losing ground in favor of local languages. The response was negative of course. Now, this forum brings the debate back on the agenda. Indeed the situation is much like a negotiation with two possible strategies depending on the power relationships: when you notice that you are losing ground, you call for a partnership hoping to peacefully settle the matter, and when the decline persists, you declare war. Clearly, any ideology is meant to serve the interest of a given entity and the great speeches that popularize it, no matter their form and their content are but a mere “marketing strategy”.

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<sup>16</sup> Forum mondial de la langue française, 5 juillet 2012 au Québec (Canada)

<sup>17</sup> Linguiste du Collège de France.

<sup>18</sup> Claude Hagège. Report of The International Forum on the French Language on TVS Monde’s 7 o’clock News bulletin on Thursday July 5<sup>th</sup> 2012.

## 5. Do as you would be done by

This proverb perfectly applies to the situation that prevails in the linguistic environment in Senegal. Indeed, for a long time, advocates of the promotion of local languages have much disparaged the hegemony of French as a colonial heritage. They have fought for a fairer linguistic policy that would place languages on equal footing. Here and elsewhere, all attempts to homogenize the linguistic map through an overt or covert will to impose a language for the interest of a community were doomed to fail. Now that multilingualism and multiculturalism have become the norm, those very people behave as if they had unlearned the lessons of the past. Local communities are deliberately inflicting to the minority local languages the same wrong they rejected from colonial rules by proclaiming the hegemony of Wolof and setting it up as the *de facto* national language in Senegal; the one that embodies national linguistic identity. Some foolish and unrealistic thoughts have then been advocating that Wolof be imposed and compulsorily used by all Senegalese citizens<sup>19</sup>. Such isolated political conceptions are what misled some researchers and the majority of non initiated citizens to promulgate the implicit recognition of Wolof as The national language. The following passage is illustrative enough:

Tout d'abord, comme phénomène récent, une seule langue parmi les langues nationales se dégage comme langue dominante. Elle est parlée et comprise par la quasi-totalité de la population qui la considère comme le symbole de la modernité et de l'identité nationale<sup>20</sup>.

They are unfortunately aided and galvanized by Westernized Senegalese linguists, who by all means have to capture funds to support research activities in their laboratories, even at the expense of their inner convictions. Research in developing countries seems to be corrupted but this is not surprising, because as the sayings go, "beggars can't be choosers" and "he who pays the piper calls the tune". More and more, the concept of wolofisation is moving from a simple theory to a dogma "*Le wolof est la langue usuelle que l'on doit connaître si l'on veut vivre à Dakar et dans la plupart des grands centre urbains régionaux*"<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> The 2009 speech of Samba Diouldé Thiam, member of parliament of the then ruling Liberal Party is striking.

<sup>20</sup> Mawéja Mbaya. Op.Cit. p.12-13.

<sup>21</sup> Mamadou Cissé p.108

This sentence would perfectly fit in a catalogue presenting Dakar as a tourist destination. However, its prescriptive tendency makes it inappropriate in linguistics which ought to be descriptive.

In the past, Senegalese intellectuals had kept on stigmatizing and deconstructing the erroneous conception that intrinsically related economic success to given languages because of their supposed superior status. The following extract provides a good summary of that rejected old stereotype: "*international languages are the only means for upward economic mobility*".<sup>22</sup> Today, another generation of intellectuals is failing to learn from the lessons of the past by yearning for the establishment of Wolof as a second official language on the assumption that this would help foil the hegemony of French<sup>23</sup>.

## 6. The Voices of the Voiceless

A common error made by planners is applying the principles of democracy to linguistic policies. They favor then the aspirations of the majority and neglect that of minority groups. Yet, a quick view of the world political situation will reveal that almost all tensions are rooted in the minimization of minority groups and their aspiration in favor of majority ones.

It is wrong to say that all Senegalese people speak Wolof or that all of them are favorable to its recognition as a co-official language, or they identify with it. It is just that the voices of the voiceless are not heard. Master theses defended at Gaston Berger University have revealed that in non Wolof speaking families, children are often forbidden to speak Wolof in the family circle<sup>24</sup>. This ban may not be a rejection of Wolof as a means of communication but a protection of one's ethnic identity. The non Wolof and the Wolof accuse each other of ethnocentrism and without willing to side by the non Wolof, this applies more to the Wolof who always give Wolof connotation to national identity. This is what deceives Donald Cruise O'Brien into assuming that the Wolof have the highest sense of belonging to the Senegalese nation.

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<sup>22</sup> Adama Ouane and Christine Glanz (ed). "Why and How Africa Should Invest in African Languages and Multilingual Education: an Evidence – and practice – based policy advocacy brief". UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2010, pp.4-5.

<sup>23</sup> Such is the position of many scholars.

<sup>24</sup> Aissatou Diouf. Mémoire de master 2. Section Langues Art et Culture, UFR de Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis. 2012

Some phrases such as *weeru wolof*, (the moon of the Wolof)<sup>25</sup> and *yere wolof* (Wolof attire)<sup>26</sup> are illustrative enough this ethnocentrism.

## Conclusion

The coexistence of majority and minority languages is often to the former's advantage. Researchers and policy makers, in their will to regulate language use in multilingual contexts have focused too much on numbers and have often come out in favor of majority languages. In Senegal, the majority/minority relation opposes Wolof to other local languages. Far from being solely a natural process, we have demonstrated that Wolofisation is intensified by a covert political will aiming at establishing it as a co-official language. This is all illegitimate as it flouts the basic principles of the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Right (UDLR) which advocates that all languages are equal in terms of right no matter their status<sup>27</sup>. The UDLR further stipulates that adjusting the imbalance will assure a peaceful linguistic situation in the world which is the cornerstone of social co-existence.

Afin de corriger les déséquilibres linguistiques pour assurer le respect et le plein déploiement de toutes les langues et établir les principes d'une paix linguistique planétaire juste et équitable, comme un élément fondamental de la coexistence sociale<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, advocating Wolofisation and supporting any attempt to homogenize the linguistic situation of Senegal by establishing Wolof as a co-official language can reveal to be dangerous and detrimental to social cohesion.

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<sup>25</sup> This is especially when they refer to the Muslim calendar.

<sup>26</sup> This is to make the difference with western attire. It thus considers Senegalese attire as originating from Wolof culture.

<sup>27</sup> Point 3 of the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

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