

SAFARA

REVUE INTERNATIONALE DE
LANGUES, LITTÉRATURES ET CULTURES



N° 4 Février 2005

Section d'Anglais, UFR de Lettres & Sciences Humaines,
Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, B P 234, Sénégal

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Language planning in Senegal: should the local languages be revaluated only through literacy policy?

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Résumé

Cet article traite de la politique linguistique au Sénégal. Depuis plus de trois décennies, nous assistons dans ce pays à une politique de valorisation et de promotion des langues nationales par les autorités. Toutes les langues locales ne sont pas concernées évidemment. Seules celles qui sont les plus parlées sont sélectionnées. L'auteur déplore cependant le fait que les autorités sénégalaises semblent être intéressées uniquement par la promotion linguistique de ces langues ("corpus planning") et non par leur promotion sociale ("status planning"). Pour lui, une bonne et harmonieuse politique linguistique des langues nationales devrait avoir lieu au niveau du secteur-clé que constitue l'école.

I- Introduction

Language planning is not a mere "corpus planning" task, i.e. codification and elaboration. In fact, the purely linguistic aspects of planning are very much less important than the social ones, i.e. "status planning" (selection and implementation).

Planning is a delicate exercise and is very much concerned with applications. In some areas, selection is an important task requiring a great deal of skill to choose among different varieties. As for implementation, it has to deal with institutional support through pronouncements, the media, education etc.

In Senegal, for more than forty years, the policy-makers have broken off their *laissez-faire* attitude towards the indigenous languages. In fact, if animals and the physical environment are being protected here and elsewhere, if buildings are being saved

* Maître-assistant associé à l'Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, UFR Lettres & Sciences Humaines.

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and renewed, why should the authorities not be equally zealous then, in aiming to sustain the local languages?

From that perspective, seven major languages have been selected (Wolof, Pulaar, Seereer, Soninke, Mandinka, Joola and Hasanya) among the 39 or 40 varieties and have been promoted to the status of national languages. They are now being taught through the literacy campaigns but not considerable progress is observed as far as “corpus planning” is concerned.

In the case of “status planning” however, no major perceptive actions or formal decisions have been taken so far. Presently, these seven vehicular languages have not received any imprimatur in officialdom and education. What about their social status then? Are the authorities only concerned with a linguistic objective? Is the literacy campaign really a successful endeavour in the revaluation of the national languages?

II- Status and function of French and the national languages in Senegal.

The status of a language means the power, prestige and influence the language possesses through the social categorisation of its speakers. So, it includes linguistic as well as social and economic attributes.

II- 1 The spread of French during the colonial time.

On the 7th March, 1817 the first French school in Senegal was built by the colonial power. It was called “L’Ecole Mutuelle des garçons de Saint-Louis” and was run by a schoolteacher whose name was Jean Dard.

At the very beginning Jean Dard advocated the teaching in one of the vernaculars, particularly in Wolof, a language understood almost by everybody. There were two main reasons for that: first, for him the exclusive use of French at school was a failure. He noted that his pupils, although successful in reading and writing the French language, they had unfortunately many difficulties understanding it. Jean Dard therefore wrote a letter to the Governor General in which he stated:

Je pense qu’on pourrait mieux cultiver l’intelligence des élèves et atteindre plus sûrement le but de leur instruction si on la commençait par l’étude de leur langue maternelle.

¹ Pierre Dumond, *Le Français et les langues africaines au Sénégal*, p 196

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(Translation: I think we could better develop the intelligence of the pupils and reach more certainly the purpose of their instruction if we began it with the study of their mother tongue.)

The second reason was a religious one. Jean Dard believed that the propagation of the Christian religion would largely depend on the ability of the young pupils to read the Scriptures in their own languages and then explain them to their parents.

On the 25th March, 1929, Governor Jubelin commissioned a team to the region of Saint-Louis in order to investigate Jean Dard's way of teaching. He was unfortunately disapproved and was then asked to use only French, whatever the obstacles he might encounter: it was the beginning of the policy of assimilation in Senegal. In fact all imperial powers had directly or indirectly made their languages attractive and sometimes necessary and indispensable to the conquered or colonized peoples.

That policy of assimilation which consisted of using exclusively French at all levels (in initial instruction as well as in the high grades) was applied in Senegal from 1830 to 1960: one hundred and thirty years during which the Senegalese languages were marginalized.

More serious was the fact that learning French was considered a privilege during the colonial period. In fact it was said that only 2 per cent of the Senegalese people could read and write it during that period. French was consequently the medium of the elite minority.

The Senegalese people's motives in using French were extra-linguistic ones. Their loyalty or attitude towards the foreign language was considerably favourable because of the opportunities available to those who learnt it. French was the only medium allowing the people to get an envious social status. The vernaculars did not allow direct access to power.

The dichotomy between French, a medium of work synonymous with *clarity*, *correctness* and *civilization* and the vernaculars which were thought to be only capable of expressing social and traditional values, was based on sociopolitical judgements. From a linguistic point of view, it is very useful to note that the basis for language evaluation rests upon social conventions. There is no linguistic and aesthetic argument for language superiority. Evaluative terms such as better / worse, clear / unclear, correct / incorrect, beautiful / harsh, stronger / weaker etc. are scientifically unacceptable. All languages are

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sufficient for the needs of their speakers and to each man his language can completely communicate every doctrine.

II- 2 French and the vernaculars today.

After independence in 1960, the former colonizer's language remained the medium of work and became then the official language in Senegal. As for the local languages, they were not allowed at school.

Today in Senegal we have a set of social, political and linguistic factors which are modifying the situation of the 1960's. The environment has changed, needs and demands have altered, and all these social currents have a great deal of influence upon language.

Now, the exclusive maintenance of French at school goes against the sociolinguistic situation of the country which can be characterised as follows:

- * One official language: French which is the medium of affairs, of the government, of law etc.
- * Seven major national languages (Wolof, Pulaar, Seereer, Soninke, Mandinka, Joola and Hasanya). Many of them were codified since 21st March, 1971 with decree n° 71 566.
- * A multilingual minority using French, Wolof and another language.
- * A Muslim minority using classical Arabic and one vernacular.
- * A larger group of Wolof speakers.
- * A large group of urban citizens using Wolof as a second language.
- * A rural group of non-speakers of Wolof who use their own vernacular.

From the above linguistic hierarchy, it is easy to note that French, though it constitutes the official language of the country, is not at all a medium of communication with a large scope in Senegal now. In fact, its use is reserved for specific situations which are very easy to list. The language of a wider communication is largely fulfilled by Wolof which is the lingua franca of the country. The great majority of the Senegalese

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people can neither read nor write in French: about 60 per cent of the population is illiterate.

From then on, a new definition of the status and function of the national languages is required because of their emergence. It is proper now to have a perceptive language policy which allows Senegalese people to maintain and promote the use of their mother tongues for a better cultural, intellectual and even technical development while reserving a specific status for French, which is that of a language of international communication.

III- The reassessment of the national languages through the literacy policy.

In the past, the study of African languages aroused a great deal of admiration. During the colonial period the works of the missionaries in the description of these languages had to be acclaimed, though they were superficial. It was rather at the end of the first half of the 20th century that linguists began to publish scientific studies on the main languages in Senegal.

The literacy campaign in Senegal started during the colonial period and was pursued in an unorganised way until 1970. It was only in 1971 that the State began to launch a perceptive literacy campaign, defining the objectives and strategies for the realisation of such a campaign.

III- 1 Movements of the literacy policy

The evolution of literacy in our country is dealt with by the literacy operators as follows :

— From the colonial period to 1971

The first step towards adult literacy in Senegal went back before 1960. But just after the attainment of independence, considerable efforts were made in order to help the great majority of Senegalese people to overcome the ignorance of the “written matter”. However, it is useful to note that those activities at that time were greatly unorganized and inefficient to have any meaningful impact upon the development of the literacy policy since no clear definition concerning the objectives and the methods was put forward.

— From 1971 to 1985

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1971 was a significant date in the efforts of the government for the revaluation of the national languages and for the struggle against ignorance. During that period a great number of official texts came out in order to regularize the grammar, orthography and lexicon of the selected languages. From 1971 the following legislations appeared successively:

- * The decree n° 71-556 of 21st March, 1971 about the transcription of the national languages with the Latin alphabet enriched by special letters.
- * The decree n° 3 of 26th February 1971 which specified the literacy conditions.
- * The decree n° 75-1025 and n°75-1026 about the spelling and separation of Seereer and Wolof words.
- * The decree n° 80-1049 of 14th October about the spelling and separation of Pulaar words.

— From 1985 to date

In 1984 was created a department designated “Direction de L’Alphabétisation”, which was linked afterwards to the Ministry of National Education in 1985. Its mission was to boost the activities of the literacy campaign. It expanded in 1986 and became “Direction de l’Alphabétisation et de l’Education de Base” (D.A.E.B.).

The campaign got a new impetus when a new ministry was created in 1991 with the decree n° 91- 430 of 8th April : “Ministère Délégué Chargé de L’Alphabétisation et de la Promotion des Langues Nationales ” (M.D.C.A.P.L.N.)

In 1995, The M.D.C.A.P.L.N. became by decree (the decree n° 95- 325 of 16th March, 1995) “Ministère Délégué Chargé de l’Education de Base et des Langues Nationales” (M.D.C.E.B.L.N.) linked to the Ministry of National Education.

Between the year 2000 and 2003, two ministries in charge of the national languages were set up : “Ministère Délégué Chargé de l’Alphabétisation et des Langues Nationales” in 2000 which became in 2003 “Ministère de L’Enseignement Technique Professionnel et de l’Alphabétisation”. It should be noted that since there was a change in the political party in power in Senegal in 2000, the authorities have not yet launched a real and efficient policy towards the national languages.

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III- 2 The objectives of the literacy policy

According to the literacy operators there are, on the one hand, general objectives, and on the other, specific ones. As for the general objectives, the policy aims at:

- Increasing the literacy rate for adult people
- Raising the level of education of people
- Improving learning and teaching conditions

As far as the specific objectives are concerned, the policy aims at :

- Reducing in a very appreciable manner (5 per cent a year) the illiteracy rate and eliminating the disparities between age, sex and district. However, priority will be granted to women.
- Encouraging researches on the development of the national languages.
- Helping to attain educational policies such as education on family planning, population, environment, health, peace, human rights etc.
- Increasing the political participation level of the population: self-development, democracy etc.
- Involving people in the cultural, social and economic processes of development.
- Increasing productivity, etc.

Considering the extent of the crusade against illiteracy the planners have contemplated many forms of strategies which implied a precise and functional distribution of the task of each operator :

- The ministry : planning, coordinating, evaluating, directing etc.
- The partners (governments, NGOs, companies, etc.) who support the activities of the government on the basis of mutual consensus.
- The operators (the organized civil society) : implementing.
- The beneficiaries who have to be involved in the activities.

As far as the strategies are concerned, many consulting committees are set up for a real involvement of all the actors. We can cite for instance :

* CNEA (“Comité National d’ Elimination de l’Analphabétisme”) which is divided in subcommittees such as :

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- CREA (“Comités Régionaux d’Elimination de l’Analphabétisme”)
- CDEA (“Comités Départementaux d’Elimination de l’Analphabétisme”)
- CLEA (“Comités Locaux d’Elimination de l’Analphabétisme”)
- * CNOAS (“Commission Nationale des Opérateurs en Alphabétisation du Sénégal”) with its subcommittees :
 - CRAO (“Commissions Régionales des Opérateurs en Alphabétisation”)
 - CDAO (“Commissions Départementales des Opérateurs en Alphabétisation”)

For the success of the policy, various programmes are designed, taking into account the specificities and priorities of each district. These programmes are :

- * PAF (“Projet Alpha Femme”)
- * PAIS (“Programme d’Alphabétisation Intensive au Sénégal”)
- * PAPF (“Projet d’Alphabétisation Priorité Femme”) financed by the World Bank.
- * PAPA (“Projet d’Appui au Plan d’Action”) financed by the ACDI.

The list is not exhaustive; there are other specific programmes of NGOs, groups, and ministries, etc.

The literacy policy in Senegal has made some achievements, especially in designing, publishing, evaluating, translating, editing, etc. The following achievements have also been mentioned by the literacy operators:

- * Production of didactic materials (reading books, calculating books, etc.)
- * Elaboration of methodological documents
- * Production of posters, leaflets, etc.
- * Production of newspapers in the national languages
- * Production of documents on health education, hygiene, family planning, human rights, agriculture, peace, civic instruction, management, home economics, etc.
- * Annual organization of the “Semaine Nationale de l’Alphabétisation” to make the Senegalese people aware of the dangers of illiteracy and adhere to the policy. During

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these annual meetings different general topics are debated each year, in different districts. They constitute also the evaluating sessions of the activities of the operators throughout the year.

Despite the considerable efforts made by the policy-makers, a striking decrease of the number of learners in the classrooms is noticeable. These learners are mainly women, who represent 70 per cent of the total number. It is also a common observation that the performances of the learners are very low. They do not match the investment. This low output has other more profound causes:

- A lack of proper training of the instructors. In fact the training must not be a mere initiation to transcription as it is unfortunately the case. It must deal with a deep morphological and syntactic analysis of the structure of the languages.
- The degree of standardization is not well out.
- The written material on the taught national languages is limited.
- A real lack of prospects for trainees.
- The literacy centres for peasants, workers, tradesmen throughout the country are not widespread.
- The publication of written material must encouraged (novels, plays, magazines, newspapers, dictionaries, etc.). For public mobilization, prizes should be awarded very often to deserving authors.
- We witness presently a real lack of mobilization and adherence of the Senegalese people who are aware that French is still the only medium of social and economic advancement. In fact any literacy policy must have a revolutionary goal, that is, allowing people to achieve their own intellectual freedom.

IV- Necessity of introducing the national languages into the school system

The elaboration of a language policy aiming to promote national languages must take into account several interdependent sectors. The literacy sector is undoubtedly a very important one.

The school and university sectors, in the elaboration of a coherent policy aiming at revaluating the local languages, are

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generally the areas that must be dealt with first. They are obviously the sectors, particularly for the future.

IV- 1 Rationale

One of the most obvious ways of revaluating and spreading a language is to establish a formal institution charged with that task. The school appears then as the most appropriate institution. Traditionally, the school is a strong device of cultural and linguistic identity. So when maintaining and encouraging these identities, the school can play the most central part. It can contribute in the best way to the development and to the expansion of the national languages. But it requires from the planners to be aware that the national languages and the African languages are not only capable of expressing our sociocultural and traditional values. They can, in addition, be used in any situation, at any level and for any purpose like the European languages.

If the planners do not stop reserving the national languages for just literacy purposes, if they do not try to integrate them into the school sector so far reserved unjustly only for the foreign languages, their domination and marginalization will last forever. Outside the school area, the national languages cannot have any meaningful spread at all.

Thus, the necessity of introducing the national languages into the school system is justified both by sociolinguistic and pedagogical reasons. For the latter, we must bear in mind that the taking into account of an L1 is necessary both for the learner and for the teacher when an L2 is being learned or taught. How could one then successfully teach a foreign language while leaving aside the native language of the foreign language learner?

Now we must put an end to the marginalization caused by the linguistic hierarchy between the national languages used just for literacy purposes and the foreign language used for official matters. At school, the access to written material through French exclusively must now be reviewed.

IV- 2 Towards a restructuring of the monolingual education

At the prospect of introducing the national languages into school, which national languages must be selected and taught at school? All the national languages at the same time or just one variety? In both cases profound restructurings in the educational system must be made. The country will move then from a monolingual educational system to either a multilingual or bilingual one.

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In multilingual education, all the national languages and the French language have to be taken into account and each Senegalese child has to get access to writing through these national languages. This option may be however criticized, mainly by “big” language speakers who consider expansion of linguistic repertoire at school as being unnecessary and balkanizing. This is unfortunately the attitude of individuals with a narrow cultural awareness who, very often, restrict official status to just one language. In fact, multilingualism, which implies multiculturalism, must not be viewed as a factor of weakness, of divergence, but rather as a factor of diversity that must be valued within unity. Diversity must force people to be tolerant of differences and raise their cultural awareness, which has so many psychological and social benefits.

In bilingual education, one national language and French have to be dealt with and, in the idea of introducing a unique medium of instruction into school, it is easy to note that the Wolof language will particularly emerge for perhaps the following reasons:

- The percentage of its speakers is very high (more than 80 per cent of the Senegalese people speak Wolof).
- It is the second language of many Senegalese people (it is the lingua franca of the country).
- It belongs to a monolingual speech community which does not need to use a second language.
- Its dialects are less numerous in comparisons with other languages such as Seereer and Joola.

It is useful to note however that Pulaar is much more internationally widespread than Wolof. The Pulaar language stretches over many parts in Africa, but it is almost a minor language everywhere (in Mali, Niger, Cameroon, Mauritania etc.)

Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that the choice of languages to be introduced into school must be based on systematic data which are the concern of linguistics, pedagogy, sociology, sociology of language etc. Again, in either case (in a multilingual educational system or in a bilingual one) the young learners must get access to written material in only the national local languages for reasons we have already mentioned. The national languages, like the European ones, can serve as a vehicle for a qualitative and modern education, at least in initial instruction as far as the country is concerned for the time being.

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There is however a regulatory work of adaptation and elaboration to be carried out.

V- Conclusion

The introduction of French in Senegal resulted from colonization during which the Senegalese population was compelled to use the colonizer's language for a certain number of reasons.

In 1960, our attainment of independence marked politically the end of the colonial period. However, the domination of the French language was maintained through its use as the official language of the country.

Presently, more than four decades after independence, the language of the former colonizer remains the only language present at school in our country and carries with it disproportionate amount of social, economic and political power. For example, knowing French is dependent on the access to the modern world, to its science and to its technology. The French language also ensures the totality of the written communication, at the national level (at school, in officialdom, etc.) and at the international level. That linguistic hierarchy is not without many consequences, particularly at the pedagogical level.

Faced with that situation, the authorities have not observed a *laissez-faire* attitude towards our local languages. Since 1971 a language policy aiming to promote the national languages was launched, but unfortunately through the literacy sector exclusively. Presently, the policy knows no real success because of low performances, lack of motivation etc.

In a coherent policy aiming to promote the local languages, the literacy sector is far less important than the school area which is more vital. It is all the more so that it will, in Africa particularly, put an end to the sufferings of the schoolboys and schoolgirls who have to put in double effort when they learn the new form of communication, that is, the written form which they did not previously know in their sociocultural background, and this, through a foreign language which they have also to learn at the same time.

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