

Dakar Wolof: The Language of an African City

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I have long been interested in the urban variety of Wolof spoken in Senegal's capital city, Dakar, which is distinguishable from its rural counterparts by its liberal incorporation of French borrowings – even in the speech of those who do not otherwise speak French. I spent the 2008–2009 academic year on research leave, thanks to a sabbatical from the University of Florida and a fellowship from the American Council of Learned Societies, and I am currently finishing up a book, tentatively entitled *Dakar Wolof: The Language of an African City*. My research for this book is based on extensive fieldwork that I have carried out over the course of several years in Dakar, and most centrally on a database of natural speech that I recorded in the summer of 2005.

My research revolves around three interrelated questions, the first of which is how the grammars of two unrelated and typologically different languages, Wolof and French, come together in the minds of speakers of Dakar Wolof. Here I have focused primarily on the ways that Wolof has borrowed verbs from various lexical and syntactic categories such as adjectives, nouns, and prepositional phrases in French and how this is having a very subtle effect on the use



of verbal extensions in Wolof. Wolof is a language that does not have an infinitival marker, yet French verbs are borrowed in their infinitival form. I argue that the French infinitival marker, /-er/, has been reanalyzed by Wolof speakers as a verbal extension that encodes the applicative, locative, and detransitive, as well as a host of other functions.

The second question addresses the history of urban Wolof and why it is the way it is as opposed to, say, a creole, given the possible outcomes of language contact. Based primarily on historical linguistic data from the mid 19th century I have been able to trace a social history of urban Wolof from its origins in the island city of Saint-Louis du Sénégal. I argue that the nature of early contact between African and European populations in the 18th century and the later role played by the métis or mixed-race population of the island as linguistic brokers were not

conducive to the formation of a creole, but led instead to the maintenance of Wolof, albeit a Wolof with French borrowings which subsequently became a prestigious urban way of speaking.

The third question considers the ways in which Dakar Wolof shapes and is shaped by the social environment in which it spoken. Here I trace the way in which Dakar Wolof, as an urban vernacular and national lingua franca, has contributed to the emergence of a post-ethnic urban identity that fundamentally reconfigures the ways in which people identify themselves.

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