

Decolonization and questions of language: The case of Senegal

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ABSTRACT

Language remains the domain in which Senegal is slow to decolonize. French, the tongue of the colonizer, continues to be the official language. This option was favored by the first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor (1960–1980), a Francophile. His successor, President Abdou Diouf, attempted to distance himself from this policy. He began by introducing local languages and creating a language institute, but reforms were limited by lack of finances. The accession to power of President Abdoulaye Wade in 2000—who has a real fondness for the French language—has introduced a dilemma, as French remains the language of administration and education but is strongly challenged by Wolof, a local language spoken by the majority of the Senegalese population. The broad usage of Wolof has a negative impact in schools and universities, as students and teachers are forced to use a language that is not their own. This explains the urgency for the Senegalese government to work toward the “decolonization” of language despite the technical and financial difficulties this poses.

Introduction

In the wake of independence from French colonial rule, Senegal decided to preserve French as the official national language of the postcolonial nation-state, a move mirrored throughout the former empire. President Léopold Sédar Senghor, a well-known Francophile who deeply identified with the culture and history of the French-speaking world, is credited with playing a key role in the decision to maintain the language of the former colonizers after independence. This move opened the way for ongoing difficulties and dilemmas in Senegal, as French is not the spoken language of most Senegalese and is only used as an official language in schools and government institutions. Moreover, while there are approximately fifteen local languages spoken in Senegal, only six are recognized as national languages, among

them Wolof. It is, in fact, Wolof and not French that is most widely used in the daily lives of Senegalese citizens today (see Mc Laughlin, 2009).

This essay examines some of the questions and dilemmas surrounding the issue of a national language in Senegal. While French is the language of instruction and administration, daily life is largely conducted in local languages, generating ongoing difficulties and conflicts for individuals and communities over time. After reviewing the roots to this situation in the colonial era, this essay reflects upon some of the conflicts surrounding issues of language in postcolonial Senegal.

The question of language in the colonial era

French colonialism was constructed on the ideologies of direct rule and the cultural assimilation of colonial subjects to French civilization. In Senegal and throughout the French empire, these policies led to the marginalization of local languages. In 1659, Senegal became the first French colony established in West Africa, but it was only in 1817 that an educational system was founded, marked by the establishment of the first school for Africans in Saint Louis.¹ Under the influence of Africanists such as Delafosse and Westermann, the colonial authority institutionalized French, the perceived “language of culture,” as the language of administration and considered all African languages as an aggregate of forms lacking structure (Fal, 1997). A decree issued in 1928 determined that French would be the sole language of instruction in colonial schools. This had little impact on the larger population, as colonial schools were not open to the masses, but instead reserved for the sons of Europeans and Africans of mixed descent in the four Communes of Gorée, Dakar, Rufisque and Saint Louis. While Governors Faidherbe and Lamothe made various efforts beginning in 1843 to extend the opportunities of education to “indigenous” Muslims, it was only in 1903 that the administration made real strides toward “democratization” of education as part of a process of general administrative reform (Bouche, 1964:112). In the newly founded system, it was officially forbidden for teachers to use local idioms with African students in both the classroom and recreational settings. To enforce this rule, the “symbol” or “signal” was used as a disciplinary tool. This was an object that the student was forced to carry for a certain amount of time, usually one or two days, to show that he had broken the rules (Cissé, 2005:115).

In actuality, formal education remained focused on reading, writing and grammar (Bouche, 1964:112). The main objective of colonial education was reflected in the words of William Ponty, when he proclaimed that it was necessary “to teach indigenes to speak, read and write our language” (Bouche, 1964:115).

The French language in postcolonial Senegal: 1960 to the present

Senghor, the Francophile

Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of the Republic of Senegal and an elected poet to the French Academy, mandated the use of French in the post-independence educational system and government institutions, thus establishing his reputation as the founding father of francophonism in Senegal. Senghor adopted this policy immediately following independence, even though less than 15% of the Senegalese had a mastery of French at the time. In contrast, 65%–80% of the overall population spoke Wolof, as did 97% of the students in primary school (Cissé, 2005:110; Dambre, 1997). By mandating French as the sole language of instruction in Senegalese schools, Senghor thus followed in the footsteps of the French colonial government. Despite promoting himself as a defender of local languages, his bias for French was clearly revealed in 1957, when he wrote: “On the question of language, the choice is not between indigenous languages and foreign languages. Rather, the choice is between the virtues of each language, the educational virtues” (Senghor, 1964, cited in Fal, 1997:796).

From the start of independence, Senghor envisioned himself as an educator of the nation and saw the Senegalese people as his pupils. His preference for the use of French in Senegal was linked to a larger goal of nation-building, as French could be used as a basis for a national unity. He therefore established French as the national language in the first article of the Senegalese constitution. He also believed that the use of French would facilitate the transition from colonialism to independence. Finally, Senghor was also motivated by promises of the French officials to offer financial support to Senegalese schools in which the language of instruction was French.

Consequently, it was not until 1971 that the Senegalese government turned its attention to the task of preserving other national languages. School instruction in local languages was made possible through Decree No. 71-566, which stipulated that: “The Senegalese government aims to introduce the use of national languages in the education system from primary schools to the university” (Cissé, 2005:110–111). But in practice, little changed, as Senghor asserted: “The replacement of French as the official national language and the language of instruction was neither desirable nor possible.” Senghor even went so far as to condemn those who favored the replacement of French as “irresponsible romantics” (Senghor, 1983, cited in Cissé, 2005:111–112). Senghor was referring to his Senegalese detractors, such as the linguist Pathé Diagne, Cheik Anta Diop and the writer Ousmane Sembene, all of whom had fought for the rehabilitation and preservation of the national languages.

Diouf and the rethinking of the educational system

Senghor resigned from office in 1980, and his successor, Abdou Diouf, currently the secretary-general of the *La Francophonie*,² soon took steps to establish his own rule. As part of his effort to promote his political agenda, he called for the reorganization of the educational system. At the time, Senegalese schools faced deep contradictions that needed to be addressed. For example, over a quarter of the state budget was allocated to the system, and yet 70%–80% of pupils did not know how to read or write in French (Cissé, 2005:116). Ultimately, it was decided to abandon the policy of teaching French so that students would learn “to speak French,” a policy which had been adopted until then in schools (Cissé, 2005:117). In addition, Diouf attempted to raise awareness among the population of the importance of local languages, and recommendations were made to create a new language institute, the UN institute of languages (Cissé, 2005:119). Despite Diouf’s intentions, the impact and significance of these reforms were ultimately limited by the demands made by Breton Woods institutions, which mandated a downsizing of the state in all areas.

The current dilemma

Since 2000, Abdoulaye Wade has served as the third president of Senegal. Wade has a strong affinity for Wolof, and his presidency has been marked by several efforts to boost its status, although these measures have been unevenly enforced. Thus, the new constitution of 2001 extended the status of the “official national language” to include six local languages: Wolof, Pulaar, Sérère, Diola, Mandingue and Soninké, chosen among the 23 spoken in Senegal. However, the state continues to use French as the official language of government. At the same time, Wolof has grown in influence, and over 80% of the population use it as their vernacular in daily life. Thus, the strong presence of Wolof in all aspects of life in Senegal constitutes a real challenge to the status of French. The media systematically uses the two languages: both French and Wolof are used in radio and in television, while the written press remains the domain of French. The education system also remains largely dominated by French. The dominance of local languages in daily life ultimately has a negative impact on the level of education in primary and secondary schools and at universities. Given this, some teachers have confessed that “the use of national languages, and Wolof in particular, is common practice in most public schools” (Cissé, 2005:129).

Consequently, it would seem that much has changed in Senegal with regard to knowledge of French since the colonial era. In the Mumford Report of 1935, colonial officials who had conducted a study of the educational system in French West Africa praised the mastery of the French language among local students in

Senegal (Bouche, 1964:119–120). Today, this is hardly the case, and it is commonplace for students to make serious errors in speaking and pronunciation of French. At the university level, the problem is equally grave. Many students originate from remote areas of Senegal where French is barely used in daily life and heard only in schools. These students arrive at the university with an extremely basic knowledge of French and are largely incapable of expressing themselves or constructing even the simplest sentences. This situation has led the Senegalese mathematics professor, Sakhir Thiam, to begin using Wolof to teach students at the University of Dakar. His experiences of teaching mathematical theory in Wolof are telling, and he claims that students in fact grasp the concept of “Jëggi dayo” better than the French word “exponential” (Fall, 2009).

Senegalese students are hardly to be faulted, as they face a difficult situation in which they are forced to use a foreign language in school, even though they possess a language of their own. The real problem lies in the current linguistic policy, which is not properly organized or institutionalized and remains at an experimental stage. Within the framework of the program for the rehabilitation of local languages instituted in 2002, students in 155 classes throughout the country are currently studying in the six official local languages. Since then, children are being educated 100% in their own language in kindergarten, 75% in first grade and 50% in second grade. Afterwards, French takes over completely (Daniel, n.d.). Moreover, in the formal sector, education is still being conducted in French.

With regard to the written word, Senegalese authors, researchers and educators continue to write in the language of the colonizer, although French does not necessarily reflect their thoughts. There is no sign of decolonization in the works they publish. There is one exception of historians, who have used Wolof names for places in their writing; thus, they refer to the kingdom of Waalo, rather than Walo, or Kajoor, rather than the colonial name, Cayor. But the rest of the population, and schoolchildren among them, remain incapable of writing in Wolof—even though the language of Wolof has an alphabet and rules of grammar, codified in 1826 by Jean Dard, a French teacher. This affects the tone of every written text in Senegal. Moreover, the select few books that are written in Wolof are not purchased by the majority of the population, as they do not know how to read the language they speak so well. The market for written works remains, therefore, confined to French.

Conclusion

The linguistic question constitutes the domain where Senegal has delayed its decolonization. French continues to dominate the linguistic landscape. However, French faces a strong challenge from Wolof, the most widely spoken local language. Teachers face increasing difficulties in conveying basic ideas to students in French.

Today, the situation in the country is largely universal: students at all levels do not master written or spoken French. This is clearly the result of the duality between Wolof and French, as well as the ambiguity of Senegal's official linguistic policy. As 2010 marks the fiftieth year of Senegal's independence, it is vital that government officials commit themselves to linguistic decolonization, regardless of the technical and financial difficulties this will pose.

NOTES

¹ France controlled the coast area from 1659 and conquered the mainland in the middle of the nineteenth century.

² Established by Onésime Reclus and Léopold Sédar Senghor, *La Francophonie* includes all countries that use French as the national language, the language of international communication or the language of work, or that embrace the French culture.

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