

The Issue of Identity in the Developmental Efforts of Senegalese Local Languages from 2001 Onwards

Dr Ibrahima Sarr¹

Abstract

Language as an identity marker has now become a clear fact and a generally shared assumption. Linguistic policies should then seek the development of all communities by empowering their respective languages to get them play a pivotal role in development strategies. In Senegal, from independence to present day, a number of twenty one languages have been promoted to the status of national language. This was achieved in two phases: the first concerned the former six national languages promoted between 1972 and 1975 and the latter concerned a larger set of smaller languages promoted from 2000 onwards. So for about 30 years, the number of national languages remained unchanged but in 15 years, it shot up drastically. This paper questions the reasons for such a fact and tries to demonstrate that identity was a deep concern in this process. The paper provides an overview of linguistic rights, and then revisits Senegal's linguistic policies. It also assesses the role played by ethnic associations in codification processes to explain the strength and flows of such an approach.

Key words: language, identity, policy, ethnic, strength, flaws.

1. About Linguistic Rights

The language issue is much like that of human beings. From one source language, thousands others sprang. Some developed faster than others because history favored their speakers. The latter early understood that they were dreadful weapons that could help in the quest for power and directed them against others to impose a utopian homogenous view of the world. Then, several theories developed to legitimize this hierarchical approach – diglossia. Languages were soon made to carry the identity of their speakers in many different ways: as people are differentiated by the data on their ID cards, languages are differentiated on the duality criteria as local vs international, national vs foreign, first vs second vs mother tongue. Sometimes they behave like us ; they make war in times of conflict when they are driven by imperialistic aims. Some will come out of the war unharmed while others will be endangered and some others will simply die. After the war they become partners in time of peace. Thus they can mutually borrow items, unite in blended codes and so on and so forth.

This humanistic approach to the life of languages is a pretext to introduce the issue of the linguistic right of speakers which somehow guarantees a peaceful environment. As it is stated in the preamble of the *Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights*, the purpose is to make sure every language is given importance. This will assure a fair linguistic peace in the world which is the bedrock of peaceful social coexistence.²

¹ Gaston Berger University of Saint-Louis, Faculty of Civilisations, Religions, Arts and Communication.

Ibrahima.sarr@ugb.edu.sn, Phone +221 77 651 66 94

² Déclaration Universelle des Droits Linguistiques.

Clearly, when the regulation of the use of languages through language policies is detrimental to the blossom of some communities, this opens the way to frustration, especially when we know that recognition of a community's linguistic rights gives them the possibility of intellectual, economic and cultural development.³ Moreover, according to Noel Kouassi Ayewa, The recognition of the linguistic rights of the individual goes in hand with consideration and development of their native language which then, will enable them to enjoy their citizenship.⁴ Indeed, the respect of people's linguistic rights facilitates their integration within the mainstream community because psychologically, they feel they are now full citizens and this recognition necessarily earns them social, cultural, economic, intellectual as well as political advantages.

In Senegal, ethnic associations' fight for the codification of their languages and their promotion as national langues is no more than a fight for the recognition of their inalienable linguistic rights. These seemed to be confiscated as the State, through its language policies, favored but the demographically « important » languages, leaving aside « minority » languages confined in family cercles and only used in intra group communication. Beyond their linguistic rights, they were fighting for their identity as citizens and as human beings. But then, didn't the signs of impatience create a blur of movement as everybody got involved in the job that was supposed to be done by high skilled specialists for « scientific » purposes?

2. Linguistic policies

Linguistic policies are any type of organization of how languages should be used in a multilingual context. This should take into account issues like identity, the function of individual languages in a way to preserve peace and cohesion.⁵ The linguistic policies of Senegal, as that of most ancien French colonies, is multifold. During colonization times, the linguistic policy implemented favored the sole use of French as the language of « civilization ». No room was left to local language except for vernacular usage. This was the expression of the French assimilation policy.

Then, the postcolonial period State authorities of newly independent Senegal got caught in a hot debate of wether French should continue to be used as the country's official language or not. Nationalistic movements opposed to such a view while for economic, political, ans security reasons, the ruling power deemed it better to keep the colonial official language and promote a few local languages – the most spoken ones – as national languages. Then, the linguistic landscape remained unchanged until 2001, when President Abdoulaye Wade got to power and amended the Constitution to enlarge the status of national language to all codified languages. So, from one official language in 1960 – French – six national languages have added between 1972 and 1975 – Wolof, Pular, Sereer, Diola, Mandinka, and Soninke -, then fifteen more national languages from 2001 onwards.

In a nutshell, the achievements of this language policy are the result of struggles of ethnic associations and organizations for the defense of national languages, which drew their motivation in cultural, ethnic, linguistic claims; in one word, identity.

3. The role of ethnic associations and the issue of identity

Ethnic associations are gatherings of people claiming the same ehtnic origine and willing to uphold the development of their language and culture. In Senegal, there are several ethnic associations, either formal or informal, which show great concern about the promotion of their language. They partly account for the increase from the six languages initially recognized as national langues – wolof, fula, sereer, mandingo, diola and soninke – to the 21 codifies ones now. As Fary Silate Ka states « The development of the other languages was mostly favoured by the dynamism of cultural associations, their speakers and also civil society organizations »⁶. This statement is further supported by Albinou Ndecky when he states that

³ Noel Kouassi Ayewa. « Le droit linguistique et le développement en Afrique ».

⁴ Noel Kouassi Ayewa. « Le droit linguistique et le développement en Afrique » p2. Accessible at <http://itml.ci/files/articles3/Noel%20AYEWA.pdf>.

⁵ Mamadou Cissé. « Langues, Etat et Société » In *Sudlangues* n°5, p126.

⁶ Fary Silate Ka. « Politique linguistique du Sénégal des années 1960 à nos jours : réalités et perspectives ». Communication présentée au symposium *Politiques linguistiques en Afrique francophone de l'indépendance à nos jours : bilan et perspectives*. Kinshasa : 14-16 juin 2010. Accessible à <http://faryka.e-monsite.com/pages/communications/politique-linguistique-du-senegal-1960-a-nos-jours.html>

The breach made through the emendment of the Constitution in February 2001 was an occasion for speech communities to codify their languages. The Mancagne who consider themselves victim of lack of recognition as they are often subsumed in the Manjaque speech community sized that occasion to single themselves out.⁷

The starting point of the forward jump being the year 2001, when newly elected president Abdoulaye Wade amended the constitution, stipulating that every codified language becomes *de facto* a national language. Recognition as a national language goes with some privileges as a wider use in society, the media, and in politics not to mention cultural implications. So, giving such an opportunity to only six local language in a sociolinguistic environment involving no less than 24 languages seemed somehow unfair to the eye of the speakers of the « forgotten languages » all the more as « The linguistic right raises the problem of the right for human beings to existence; for when a people is denied the right to use his own language, he is doomed to intellectual, technological and social underdevelopment .He is excluded from modern society »⁸

Moreover, codification is the first step to fighting against language loss and decay, which is a major concern in multilingual contexts where majority languages threaten minority languages. As it is said in the Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, all predictions indicate that 80% of world languages might die along the XXI century. Yet, multilingualism and linguistic diversity play a paramount role in peace building and integration.⁹

Let us remind, as Edmond Biloa puts it, that the status of national language was the result of nationalistic claims following the independence of African countries. So, the growing awareness of the identity function of language and speakers' readiness to balance the situation led Abdoulaye Wade to reconsider article 1 of the *Constitution* which stipulated that French was the official language of Senegal and that there were six national languages. Now, every local language can pretend official recognition provided that they are codified. From then, codification became the only prerequisite for recognition as a national language.

The process that resulted in the recognition of the first six national languages in Senegal was sparked by political authorities and monitored by great linguistic experts in the framework of a national programme for the promotion of local languages. The works conducted by the *Centre de Linguistique Appliquée*¹⁰ are significant enough to propel promotional efforts. However, from 2001 onwards, codification processes have benefited from less governmental support as some believed that it was not relevant to officialise all local languages for economic and practical reasons. A similar approach has been denounced by Noel Kouassi Ayewa about the linguistic policy of Cote d'Ivoire which promoted French as the country's official language : « the official role is given to French because they say the people of this country constitute a real human puzzle because of their diversity ».¹¹ Such approaches are often driven by covert political intention aiming to favor one or few languages over the other. This is why Bole-Richard and Houis state the following:

*Ce trait de la multiplicité des langues a pris et continue de prendre un sens politique à travers l'insistance avec laquelle on le souligne. Il sert en effet de justification, en particulier dans la zone d'influence coloniale française, au principe d'exclusivité du français comme langue d'enseignement. Face à la multiplicité des langues africaines, seul le français pouvait assurer unité et homogénéité.*¹²

⁷ Albinou Ndecky. « Du pluralisme linguistique sénégalais au fantasme du UN : l'Etat, le citoyen, le langagier » in *Revue du Groupe d'Etudes Linguistiques et Littéraires (GELL), Langues et Littérature n°18*. Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, UFR Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Janvier 2014, p331.

⁸ Noel Kouassi Ayewa. Ibid. p.1.

⁹ *Déclaration Universelle des Droits Linguistiques*. P13.

¹⁰ Applied Linguistic Center. It is attached to the University Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar and was responsible to experiment the introduction of Senegalese local languages in the educational system.

¹¹ Noel Kouassi Ayewa. Opcit. p.3.

¹² Bole-Richard et Houis. *Intégration des langues africaines dans une politique d'enseignement*. Paris : AGE COP/UNESCO, 1977, p2.

So, the idea that for a multilingual country to develop faster there ought to be one and only official language to federate people has long been demythologized as specialists kept warning that diversity is not an obstacle to development¹³. Besides, if we focus on Senegal, how could French be able to unite the people when it is a minority language? As Aram Fall puts it:

French is the official language, even though ¾ of the people do not speak it. It is the language used in administration, at all school levels, in justice, in the media, in formal business etc. State documents as well as laws are written in French.¹⁴

This age-old homogenizing tendency is meant to reduce diversity by encouraging negative attitudes towards linguistic and cultural multiplicity.¹⁵ So, from the moment the Constitution has been amended to enlarge official recognition as a national language to all other codified languages and those that would be codified in the future, ethnic associations which have long been fighting for the promotion of their languages grabbed that opportunity to spark the process. If every linguistic community should enjoy the right to use their language in the media and to be addressed to in their language¹⁶, the need becomes necessary to codify it and give it official recognition.

Rescuing minority languages is very important as they carry the identity of their speakers. As Michael Byram puts it, « languages are identity markers; Speakers use them to mark their identity. People also use them to categorize other depending on the language they speak »¹⁷. Through linguistic choices, speakers differentiate from others by displaying unique features in their speech. So, if languages and language varieties are means for expressing and recognizing the many identities of people as Michael Byram holds it, then every citizen has the absolute right to insist that their identity be taken into account in State policies. In turn, State authorities should equally consider every identity. As Louis-Jean Calvet states,

When a person does not speak the official language of the State, when they do not understand the language they are judged in, when they do not speak the language which is their children's medium of instruction, the language of politics, public life, then democracy is scoffed at.¹⁸

So, the constitution was amended in February 2001. From then onward, at least fifteen local languages have been codified and given the status of a national language adding to the former six national languages – Wolof, Pular, Serer, Mandinka, Jola, and Soninke. Among the newly promoted languages we can mention a few like Manjakú¹⁹, Mankaani²⁰, Noon²¹, Onyan²², Hassaniya²³, Saafi²⁴, Balant²⁵, etc.

Let us mention that the expressed objective of the Department for the Promotion of National Languages (DPLN)²⁶ was to promote every local language as a national language. This was meant to promote cultural diversity, to favor citizen's full participation in State affairs and to develop languages through codification. But it was then pretty clear that they would not have the human resources and the financial means necessary to monitor the whole process. So, the preliminary work was devolved to ethnic associations for which it was a deep concern as they were longing for this official recognition.

¹³ Monica Heller. *Éléments de sociolinguistique critique*. Paris : Didier, 2002.

¹⁴ Aram Fall. « L'expérience de l'OSAD dans la publication de livres en langues nationales » In Neville Alexander et Brigitta Busch (éd). *Alphabétisation et diversité linguistique dans une perspective globale : échanges interculturels avec des pays africains*. Centre Européen pour les langues vivantes, 2007, p33. [the original quotation is in French, so this is my own translation]

¹⁵ *Déclaration Universelle des Droits Linguistiques*.

¹⁶ Ibid. Article 3, alinéa 2.

¹⁷ Michael Byram. « Langues et identités ». Conférence intergouvernementale *Langue de scolarisation : vers un cadre pour l'Europe*. Strasbourg : 16-18 octobre 2006.

¹⁸ Louis-Jean Calvet. « Identité et multiculturalisme » Trois espaces linguistiques face aux défis de la mondialisation. Paris : 20 - 21 mars 2001.

¹⁹ DÉCRET n° 2005-983 du 21 octobre 2005 relatif à l'orthographe et la séparation des mots en manjakú

²⁰ DÉCRET n° 2005-984 du 21 octobre 2005 relatif à l'orthographe et la séparation des mots en mankaani

²¹ Décret n° 2005-986 du 21 octobre 2005 relatif à l'orthographe et la séparation des mots en noon.

²² DÉCRET n° 2005-987 du 21 octobre 2005 relatif à l'orthographe et la séparation des mots en onyan

²³ DÉCRET n° 2005-980 du 21 octobre 2005 relatif à l'orthographe et la séparation des mots en hassaniya.

²⁴ DÉCRET n° 2005-989 du 21 octobre 2005 relatif à l'orthographe et la séparation des mots en saafi-saafi

²⁵ DÉCRET n° 2005-979 du 21 octobre 2005 relatif à l'orthographe et la séparation des mots en balant.

²⁶ Direction pour le Promotion des Langues Nationales

So, concerning Manjaku which is the eleventh Senegalese language to become a national language, it has been promoted in 2002. However, prior to that promotion, a paramount underground works that started in 2000 had been conducted. This was first a sensitization campaign targeting the whole Manjaku speech community. They created a national association called « Association Kajiër Manjaku » and headed by Mamadou Nafoulé Gomis. As its president explains, in 2001 the branche of the Manjaku living in Kolda got in touch with that in Dakar to merge together into a national association. The « Association Kajiër Manjaku » was then created. Its purpose was monitor the codification process of the Manjaku language. Then, From April 12 to April 13 2002, under the aegis of the Kajiër Manjaku association was made the eleventh national language.²⁷

So, although public authorities expressed their will to promote all local languages, actually for Manjaku, it was the community's ethnic associations that sparked the process and committed itself all along the process until the project was achieved. The codification process of the Mankaan language is much like that of Manjaku. Here too, the preliminary job was done by the Mankaan association called Pkumel. Actually, Mankaan is the eighth codified language right behind Balant. The Pkumel's preliminary work was actually very advanced when the decision to enlarge the list of national languages to all codified one was enacted. That is why the success of the codification project was very fast. As Albinou Ndecky explains, « this is why just a month after the enactment of the fundamental law, the studies conducted in the framework of the Pkumel association since 1993 resulted in the codification of their language in March 2001 as the eighth national language behind balant [...]»²⁸.

Saafi is among the newly promoted languages. Its codification process is not much different from that of Mankaan or that of Manjaku. The process was jointly conducted between the Office for National Languages, the Association for the Development of the Saafi Language (ADLAS) and the International Linguistics Society (SIL) which shows much concern about intragroup languages. These efforts resulted in the government decree specifying the rules for the orthographic transcription of Saafi, which then officially became the fourteenth national language in Senegal. In a press article published on Tuesday December 7th 2014 in the daily Observer in Senegal, Mbaye Thiandou reports the words of the President of the Association for the Development of the Saafi Language who declared that for about fifteen years, they did all they could to preserve and promote their language which was endangered. Then in accordance with the experts of ADLAS, they participated to several workshops for the designing of basis materials. Then, with the codification committee of Saafi, they undertook the sensitization of the whole Saafi community in Senegal and in the diaspora to meet the requirement for the organisation of the workshop that validated the transcription standards of Saafi²⁹. Here too, we can easily see the driving force of identity which speeded up the codification process by bringing together local communities and the diaspora.

As for Baynunk, efforts to promote their culture and their language started about thirty years ago when Agustin Coly founded the *Bureau d'Organisation, de Recherche, et d'Etude du Patrimoine Baynunk*³⁰ in 1981 to unite the Baynunk community and promote Baynunk identities and languages. Since then, the Bureau has been fighting for the recognition of Baynunk as an official language in Senegal which was achieved in 2005 with the completion of the codification process providing the language a writing system.

4. The formalization process

Even if it is clearly stated the Senegalese linguistic policy that « the goal of promoting Senegalese national languages as cultural tools and at the same time, providing more resources and efficiency in education, modernity and development efforts, requires that these languages are written, introduced in the education system and used in the official and public life »³¹, one can easily notice from the above processes that the job done upstream the codification project was unofficial and somehow unprofessional.

²⁷ <http://www.3d-citizen-center.com/salon-corporation-3d/BAKHONNE/bakhonne-manjak-manjaque-citoyennet%C3%A9.html> [my translation]

²⁸ Albinou Ndecky. Opcit. [my translation]

²⁹ Mbaye Thiandoum. « La Saafi, quatorzième langue nationale codifiée », article paru dans l'Observateur du mardi 7 décembre 2014.

³⁰ This is an office which purpose is the research on Baynunk heritage and the promotion of Baynunk identities and languages.

³¹ First paragraph of the presentation report of the various decrees specifying how Senegalese languages should be transcribed.

The reasons for that, as we said, are to be found in the motivation of stakeholders who undertook the process. Clearly, most of the Associations involved in the codification process were cultural associations that were just trying to fill the void left by a language policy that showed favoritism. In doing so, the root motivation has been the preservation and promotion of endangered identities. That is why, participation to the process, was not selective. Instead, artists, teachers, writers, linguists and all components of concerned communities were committed to the promotion work and deeply involved in the codification process.

Yet, since the last word to governmental authorities, they ought to be associated to the process when everything is almost done. Then, they make the audit work for the compliance of what has been done with the requirements. Then they report to the appropriate person for the culmination of the process. So, the process is a two-phase. First is the work of ethnic association mainly motivation by identity claims, then the culmination of the process with brings into play language experts and governmental authorities.

Bibliography

- Aram Fall. « L'expérience de l'OSAD dans la publication de livres en langues nationales » In Neville Alexander et Brigitta Busch (éd). *Alphabétisation et diversité linguistique dans une perspective globale : échanges interculturels avec des pays africains*. Centre Eropéen pour les langues vivantes, 2007, pp33-40.
- Babault, Sophie. « *Plurilinguisme et tensions identitaires chez les lycéens malgaches* » In Gottopol, N° 2 – Juillet 2003.
- Bole-Richard, R et Houis, M. *Intégration des langues africaines dans une politique d'enseignement*. Paris : AGECOP/UNESCO, 1977.
- Byram, Michael. « Langues et Identités ». In *Langues de scolarisation: vers un Cadre pour l'Europe*. Strasbourg. Conférence intergouvernementale 16-18 octobre 2006. www.coe.int/lang/fr
- Calvet, J-L, 1981. *Les Langues Véhiculaires*. Paris : PUF.
- Calvet, Louis-Jean. « Identité et multiculturalisme » Trois espaces linguistiques face aux défis de la mondialisation. Paris, 20 - 21 mars 2001.
- Canut, Cécile. « À la frontière des langues. Figures de la démarcation » In *Cahiers d'études africaines*. 2001/3-4, 163, p. 443-464.
- CISSE, Mamadou. « Langues, Etat et société au Sénégal », in *Revue électronique internationale des Sciences du Langage 'Sudlangue'*, n°5. 2005, pp. 99-133 – Accessed on September 2nd 2015. <http://www.au-senegal.com/IMG/pdf/doc-109pdf-33f96.pdf>
- Heller, Monica. *Éléments de sociolinguistique critique*. Paris : Didier, 2002.
- Ka, Fary Silate. « Politique linguistique du Sénégal des années 1960 à nos jours : réalités et perspectives » Communication présentée au symposium *Politiques linguistiques en Afrique francophone de l'indépendance à nos jours : bilan et perspectives*. Kinshasa : 14-16 juin 2010. Accessible at <http://faryka.e-monsie.com/pages/communications/politique-linguistique-du-senegal-1960-a-nos-jours.html>
- La Déclaration Universelle des Droit Linguistiques*.
- NDAO, Papa Alioune. « Politiques linguistiques et gestion de la diversité linguistique au Sénégal : aspects sociolinguistiques », in *Glottopol n°18*. juillet 2011, pp.7-20. Accessed on September 1st 2015. <http://www.univ-rouen.fr/dyalang/glottopol>.
- Ndecky, Albinou. « Du pluralisme linguistique sénégalais au fantasme du UN : l'Etat, le citoyen, le langagier » in *Revue du Groupe d'Etudes Linguistiques et Littéraires (GELL), Langues et Littérature n°18*. Université Gaston Berger de Saint-Louis, UFR Lettres et Sciences Humaines, Janvier 2014, pp325-337.
- Noel Kouassi Ayewa. « Le droit linguistique et le développement en Afrique » p2. Accessible at <http://ltml.ci/files/articles3/Noel%20AYEWA.pdf>.
- Thiandoum, Mbaye. « La Saafi, quatorzième langue nationale codifiée », press article publishe in the daily « l'Observateur » on Tuesday décembre 7, 2014.