FRENCH OR CREOLE LANGUAGE IN AFRICA

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Summary: *Our research lies in the necessity to delve into theoretical inquiries and depict how the French language operates beyond its central domain, particularly within a defined socio-historical setting in Tropical African nations, utilizing contemporary lexical resources. Examining extralinguistic phenomena and their manifestation in language holds particular significance for contact linguistics and intercultural interaction, spurred by a gap in understanding this area.*

Key words: *Francophone, French, African cultural affirmation, self-identity, cognitive framework*

Black African French poses a peculiar challenge for linguists. Its existence, widely acknowledged by scholars and seldom questioned, appears evident at a glance. However, attempting to define and analyze it reveals its elusive nature. Varieties spoken in regions such as Mauritania, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Togo, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, as well as former Belgian territories, and likely all French-speaking nations in sub-Saharan Africa, exhibit noticeable similarities. V.Y. Mudimbe provides a stark portrayal: "inexact pronunciation, suppressed syntax, inflated or convoluted vocabulary, intonation, rhythm, and accent reflecting the influence of the native African language; encompassing phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and lexical 'Africanisms'."[1]

The formula is stark, yet it highlights both the significance of the changes that French has undergone, particularly in Africa over a span of less than a century (with Senegal being an exception), primarily through education, and the consistent impact ("Africanisms") of this differentiation across a vast territory stretching from the Atlantic coast to the Great Lakes. This latter characteristic precludes any attempt to explain it solely through a diverse vernacular substrate. The cohesive influence of colonial French, disseminated by subordinate agents—military, administrative, and commercial—during colonization, has often been cited. This "common French" was frequently used by Europeans among themselves and in their interactions with the indigenous populations before independence, and it persists on construction sites and plantations. Its main contribution appears to be lexical ("déconner, foutre, démerder"), while its grammatical structure remains that of spoken French, lacking the specificities of the African variety. Another explanatory principle underpins the work of Linguistics Institutes.

Applied practically, the observed differences stem partly from interference, whether with native languages, particularly distinct ones, or with predominant local

languages. Others arise from the intricacies of French grammar rules, which pose challenges for all learners, African or otherwise. [2] Additionally, the teaching methods themselves, largely uniform across regions, tend to generate common errors. The language taught is often referred to, in a widely circulated expression in Africa, as "the language of Voltaire," signifying a literary variety that has long fallen out of common usage. Instruction focuses more on discourse about this language rather than on acquiring practical communication skills. By overly emphasizing derivation processes, students may misconstrue derivation as unrestricted and believe that the grammatical compatibility between roots and affixes knows no bounds beyond their respective meanings.

It is likely that, in each particular case, one or other of these interpretations, or several at the same time, are admissible. Thus “cadeauter” and “grever” are probably analogical formations, tracings or school “artifacts”, but the first also belongs to the popular language of the 19th century and the second is considered by J. Blonde as the effect of an interference indirect: reinsertion into Senegalese French of an equivalent of wolof gerew, itself derived from French “grève”, but invested, according to the general rule in Wolof, with a double verbal and nominal valence. We will readily admit with C. Hagège[36] that “different motivations can lead to an identical result” and that the linguist must remain aware “of the complexity of the facts of language and the non-uniqueness of the reasons which account for them”. It nonetheless remains remarkable that such diverse “motivations” lead to practically identical results at all points in the Negro-African domain, and even beyond, according to our author.

Such uniformity cannot be attributed to chance convergences, nor to any "tendency" of the French language, although the analogies sometimes pointed out with other French Creoles (in the literal sense of the term) and even with Creoles French continues to be disturbing. The principle of this relative unity was sought in an adaptation to African socio-cultural realities: “It is... quite understandable that French used in a socio-cultural context very different from its original context has undergone a certain number of transformations tending to adapt it to the communication needs of African societies”. [3]

The proposal seems reasonable, but not very explicit: it is not specified what these communication needs consist of, how they differ from those of the metropolitan linguistic community, nor how the transformations observed are likely to satisfy them. The phenomenon is only immediately intelligible in the lexical domain, where the reference to different realities obviously implies a profound reorganization of lexico-semantic fields; [4] it is much less so when it comes to

1. [36] Kavilova Laura-Aquilina, Kavilova Tamara. Suffixal Derivation in French and Uzbek Languages. SPAST REPORTS, Vol. 1 No. 5 (MAY 2024): Second PAMIR Preprints (MAY 2024)

grammar, unless we risk establishing a hazardous parallel between “mentalities” and linguistic structures. Our aim is precisely to look for the factors common to the different situations of use of French in Black Africa and to try to show how their action determines both what makes this speech unique compared to other dialects of central French and the affinities that he presents with regard to the Creoles who come from there. [5]

The geographical extension of the phenomenon hardly confirms the interpretation given by this author: “An illiterate African tries to speak French even though he has only a limited lexical background in this language, and that "he ignores the rules of combination which govern the French sentence: he models the sentence which he wants to be French on the specific structure of his language". The specific structures are too different to generate such uniformity. It remains that this “little Frenchman” is “neither French nor African”, that he is something else; the question is whether this other thing can legitimately be considered as the index or the effect of a process of creolization. [6]

Due to its utilitarian character, the “little Frenchman” undoubtedly belonged to the first of the two aforementioned orientations. It is assigned mainly to interethnic communication, this term designating both relations between Europeans and Africans and between Africans of different languages when they have no other means of understanding each other, in circumstances where, generally, the referential content of the message matters much more than its form. This is also the function of vehicular African languages and the parallelism is striking, with regard to the structural characteristics, between these and the former. We see the same variability, depending on places, individuals and, within the same individual, depending on times, in the areas of pronunciation and lexicon; the same morphological regularizations, assigning to the constituents of the statement a unique and stable form; the same predominance of analytical constructions where each signified corresponds to a distinct and explicit signifier; the same frequency of generic terms, with high polysemy; the emergence finally of the same fundamental categories: those of animate and inanimate, of defined and indefinite and, in the verbal domain, those of time and aspect. A good description of the French of Togolese “non-literates” was given by S. Lafage.

This phenomenon of reinterpretation of a second language as an indicator of belonging to a community larger than the ethnic group, but less extensive than the State, is probably not unique to French. It was observed, among Chadian students at the University of Nice, that those of them who had Arabic, French and Fulani as vehicular languages used in their private conversations the third, the language of their country (Mayo-Kebbi, in the southwest of the Republic of Chad), in preference to the other two, devoid of socio-cultural connotations (S. Goracci, pers. comm.). If there is a chance, or a risk of creolization, that is to say of the formation of a language

with a French lexical base, but which would be in the same relationship to "central" French as, for example, [7] “big Creole” of Reunion Island, it is in this mode of appropriation that he resides. Paradoxically, the recent favor granted by African governments to the introduction of local, national or regional languages in primary education constitutes the best guarantee against such creolization of French, to the extent that this reform would definitively confine it in its status of the “superimposed” variety.

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