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Kavilova Laura-Aquilina

JSPU, Jizzakh, Uzbekistan

Summary: *The status and future of the French language in sub-Saharan African countries are the subjects covered in this article. French was introduced to Africa by the French and Belgians during the scramble for Africa. After the independence of the French-speaking colonies in the 1950s and 1960s, governments kept their language policy and French as the official language. Today, the situation remains unchanged and French is still used in government and education in the former French and Belgian colonies. The strong position of French in the public sector is not reflected in the use of the language by citizens. In the first chapter the status of the French language in the world and in Africa, specifically sub-Saharan, will be treated. In the second chapter, the future of the French language in sub-Saharan Africa with particular attention to education will be examined. The development of the French language as well as other alternatives to replace it as the official language in this region will also be discussed.*

Key words: *francophonie, language-based nationalism, deculturation, colonialism*

The French language holds international significance, serving as a medium for international diplomacy, commerce, and communication. It is the primary language utilized by global institutions such as the United Nations and holds official or co-official status in 29 countries spanning five continents. Within Africa, 21 nations, including Benin, Burkina Faso, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo, designate French as their sole official language. Additionally, French holds co-official status in Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Comoros, Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, Rwanda, Seychelles, and Chad. According to the International Organization of La Francophonie (OIF), as of 2010, approximately 220 million people worldwide spoke French. Projections from the same organization suggest this number will surge to 700 million by 2050. [1]

According to the OIF, this rise is primarily attributed to population growth in French-speaking African nations. The OIF's projections are based on demographic forecasts from the United Nations. Consequently, it anticipates that current French-speaking countries will maintain their linguistic status, continuing to endorse and teach the French language. Currently, 36% of the global French-speaking population resides in Africa, but with projected demographic shifts, this proportion is expected to surge to 85% by 2050. The OIF defines French speakers as individuals who use the language either as their native tongue or as a secondary language. On a global scale, French ranks second only to English in terms

of the number of countries where it holds official status (Ball, 1997, 5). Despite having fewer speakers compared to other international languages, French boasts extensive dissemination worldwide.

The bulk of French-speaking nations in Africa were colonized by the French and Belgians during the 18th century, with Senegal serving as a unique exception due to French presence dating back to the 17th century [2]. The colonial powers established nation-states that were previously nonexistent (Simpson, 2008, 4). Pre-colonization, political organization in sub-Saharan Africa predominantly revolved around clans and villages, with Mali standing as an anomaly. There existed no historical precedent for a national language or a sense of national identity. Consequently, there was no necessity for a unifying national symbol among Africans. The concept of a centralized government was alien, and the imposition of this new system clashed with traditional African institutions. In their partitioning of territories, European colonizers disregarded ethnic and linguistic boundaries, resulting in the division of ethnic groups by arbitrary new borders. Consequently, identical ethnic groups found themselves under the rule of different nations, each with its own language. Presently, nationalism associated with languages has yet to fully develop in the majority of French-speaking African countries, primarily due to these imposed borders. There exists a disconnect between the national identity of citizens and the country's identity on the global stage (McLaughlin, 2008, 80). While citizens align themselves with their local languages, the country's identity remains rooted in French.

Initially, the colonizers provided education to a segment of the local populace, enabling their employment (Simpson, 2008, 3). In Belgian colonies, indigenous languages were utilized for initial schooling, whereas in French colonies, instruction was solely in French [3]. The French discouraged the use of local languages, believing that only French could fulfill their civilizing mission in these regions. This policy's legacy is evident in Africans' perceptions of their various languages. In former Belgian colonies, the status of African languages is somewhat better, given their use in education to a certain extent. Prah (1995a, 61) highlights the differing approaches of the English and French in the education of colonized populations.

The aim of education within the French colonies aimed at fostering French citizenship and integrating individuals into French societal norms and culture. To accomplish this objective, all instruction occurred exclusively in French. Consequently, this approach led Africans to distance themselves from their native languages and cultural heritage.

In contrast, the English initially permitted the use of indigenous languages, prioritizing the enhancement of African identity. They believed in educating Africans in their native tongues before introducing European languages. However, indigenous languages struggled to evolve beyond basic levels. Notably, technical and scientific vocabulary remained underdeveloped, prompting the continued dominance of European languages in these domains.

Diglossia, as defined by Ball (1997, p. 45), occurs when two languages coexist within a linguistic community but are employed in distinct contexts. This phenomenon is observable in numerous French-speaking nations across Africa due to the extensive linguistic diversity present. In the majority of these countries, a plethora of languages are spoken, numbering in the dozens or even hundreds, as indicated by Ethnologue statistics (n.d. b), which report 889 languages spoken in West Africa among nearly 275 million individuals across 16 countries. [4]

Local residents demonstrate remarkable proficiency in multiple languages, adeptly transitioning between them and discerning appropriate usage in different contexts [5]. While French may not be extensively utilized in everyday conversations, its presence is felt in various facets of society, including television news broadcasts and educational settings. Typically, individuals employ their native languages, or vernaculars, when conversing with family or engaging in local market transactions.

French assumes greater significance in formal settings, occupying a superior position to vernacular languages within a hierarchical relationship. This hierarchical arrangement, a legacy of colonialism, persists to this day, with French retaining considerable prestige. The elevated status of Western languages has marginalized local languages, and proficiency in a Western language is often equated with economic, educational, and social success.

The varieties of French spoken in Africa can be categorized into two distinct groups, as noted by Knutsen [6]. The first group comprises standard French, unaffected by African linguistic influences and utilized across various contexts. It's crucial to acknowledge that a language perceived as standard isn't inherently superior or more comprehensive than its non-standard counterpart; rather, this perception of linguistic standardization is socially constructed. Mastery of the standard language enhances one's social standing, often favoring the upper echelons of society who possess it, thereby augmenting its prestige. Consequently, it is in the interest of the privileged classes to perpetuate notions of the standard language to safeguard their status and preserve their monopoly on this powerful tool.

Organizations like the Académie Française are formed with the purpose of preserving and maintaining the purity of the standard language, a practice not exclusive to French. Knutsen distinguishes the second group as consisting of varieties where French blends with one or more African languages.

The varieties of French spoken in Africa can be categorized into two groups, as outlined by Knutsen [7]. In the first group, standard French remains unaffected by African languages and is employed across various contexts. The perception of a language as standard does not imply linguistic superiority or completeness over non-standard varieties; rather, it is a socially constructed notion. Mastery of the standard language enhances social status, often favoring the upper classes, thereby imbuing it with greater prestige. Consequently, maintaining these perceptions of the standard language proves advantageous for the elite, allowing them to uphold their status and control over this

influential tool. Institutions like the Académie Française are established to preserve and safeguard the standard language, although this phenomenon is not unique to French. Knutsen identifies the second group as comprising varieties where French blends with one or more African languages.

In specific countries like Cameroon, French has undergone a process of development and amalgamation with local languages, resulting in the emergence of new linguistic varieties (Simpson, 2010, p. 11). This process of pidginization primarily occurred in urban areas. In Cameroon, Camfranglais, a blend of English, French, and local Cameroonian languages, evolved. Similarly, variations of French have emerged in Senegal. In Ivory Coast, the colloquial French spoken in Abidjan has gained widespread usage, extending beyond urban centers to rural villages. This form of language is accessible to the uneducated populace, providing an alternative linguistic platform beyond the elite circles.

The popularity of Abidjan's French has extended its influence throughout Ivory Coast to the extent that it transcends geographical boundaries, being utilized not only in Abidjan but across the entire country (Knutsen, 2008, p. 168). It serves as a medium for inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic, and familial communication. Ivorians tend to identify more closely with the vernacular French of Abidjan than with standard French, employing each variant in distinct social contexts.

The prominence of Wolof in Senegal does not completely overshadow French, as French has significantly influenced Wolof, resulting in the incorporation of numerous French loanwords. Additionally, there exists a Senegalese variant of French. This phenomenon can be attributed to the post-independence era, during which teachers no longer primarily hailed from mainland France; instead, many had acquired French proficiency from fellow Senegalese. This geographical and cultural distance from the French metropolis facilitated the divergence from standard French.

In contrast, Mali has not witnessed the development of a distinct Malian variant of French, with the local French closely resembling the standard variety [7]. This is largely due to its infrequent oral usage. Instead, it is the urban Bambara dialect that has undergone influences from French borrowings. Many individuals in Mali exhibit discomfort with French usage (Simpson, 2008, p. 12), often due to factors such as limited access to quality education and brief periods of schooling. Consequently, local variants of French are preferred by a majority of the population as they are less evocative of the colonial legacy. Another method of employing colonial languages is through mixing, known as "code-switching" or "codemixing".

This is used a lot in Congo DR for example. Code-switching occurs when two languages are used interchangeably in the same conversation or written text [5]. People choose to use two languages alternately when they consider it more appropriate and in order to express themselves better. Code-switching is more common in multilingual societies and indicates identity and social status. "Code-switching" must be understood

from the social reality of the individuals by whom it is used because each variety is localized.

French holds a rather restricted place in the daily lives of Africans residing in French-speaking sub-Saharan countries. Its usage is primarily confined to official domains such as government, administrative procedures, and the legal system. Historically, French has also been the medium of instruction and is predominant in most media outlets, although this dynamic is swiftly evolving. Despite its prevalence, French is not the native language of Africans and lacks widespread adoption as a lingua franca, particularly in its standard form. The limited exposure to standard French may stem partly from a negative perception of the colonizer's language, thereby fostering the emergence of diverse variants like popular Abidjan French and Camfranglais.

According to the OIF survey (2010, p. 11), the prevalence of French speakers varies significantly across sub-Saharan countries. Nonetheless, a considerable portion of the population remains unable to communicate or comprehend French effectively, hindering their full participation in civic affairs and access to essential information. This presents a significant barrier and prompts considerations regarding the sustainability of current language policies and the necessity for reforms.

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