Language and Multilingualism in Senegal: From Colonial Legacies to Contemporary Educational Issues

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Abstract:

Senegal's linguistic landscape is marked by a rich and complex multilingualism, shaped by a long history of contact between French and over thirty national languages. Among these, Wolof serves as the dominant lingua franca. Despite their vitality and widespread use in daily life, national languages have long been marginalized within formal education systems. Since the colonial period, language-in-education policies have consistently favored French as both the medium of instruction and a symbol of institutional legitimacy and social mobility. This historical imbalance has reinforced the symbolic hegemony of French and delayed the systematic integration of local languages into educational frameworks.

This article adopts a dual approach. Diachronically, it traces the evolution of language policy in Senegal from the colonial era to contemporary reforms. Synchronically, it analyses ongoing debates around language choice in education, particularly in multilingual regions where such choices remain socially and politically charged. The analysis is based on qualitative data collected during fieldwork in school settings between 2020 and 2024.

Findings reveal that while recent reforms—most notably the introduction of the Modèle harmonisé d'enseignement bilingue au Sénégal (MOHEBS)—reflect a growing institutional recognition of local languages, their implementation remains uneven. The gap between official policies and sociolinguistic realities continues to shape the educational experience of learners.

These observations suggest that Senegal has yet to resolve, in a definitive and coherent manner, the status and role of national languages in education. Despite progress, local languages often remain confined to a peripheral position within the formal schooling system.

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Résumé

Le Sénégal est un pays plurilingue d'une grande richesse. Il est façonné par l'histoire coloniale et une coexistence durable entre le français et une vingtaine de langues nationales. Parmi elles, le wolof occupe une place centrale en tant que principale langue véhiculaire. Pourtant, ces langues nationales restent sous-représentées dans l'espace scolaire formel, où le français continue de dominer à la fois comme langue d'enseignement et comme vecteur de mobilité sociale. Ce déséquilibre s'inscrit dans une histoire longue de marginalisation linguistique, amorcée durant la colonisation et poursuivie après l'indépendance.

L'objectif de cette étude est double : d'une part, revisiter l'évolution diachronique des politiques linguistiques éducatives au Sénégal, de la période coloniale à nos jours ; d'autre part, analyser les dynamiques contemporaines autour de la question du choix linguistique dans un contexte de plurilinguisme. L'analyse repose sur des données qualitatives issues d'enquêtes de terrain menées entre 2020 et 2024 dans des établissements scolaires.

Les résultats mettent en lumière une série d'ajustements politiques récents, notamment l'introduction du Modèle harmonisé d'enseignement bilingue au Sénégal (MOHEBS), censé étendre progressivement l'usage des langues nationales dans l'enseignement primaire. Toutefois, la mise en œuvre de ces réformes reste inégale, et les tensions entre normes institutionnelles et pratiques sociolinguistiques locales persistent.

Ce constat suggère que la question de la place des langues nationales dans l'éducation sénégalaise demeure ouverte. Si des avancées sont perceptibles, elles coexistent avec des formes de continuité idéologique et institutionnelle héritées du passé colonial.

Mots-clés : *Multilinguisme – Politique linguistique – Éducation bilingue – Sénégal*

Introduction

The Republic of Senegal presents a rich case study for exploring the enduring complexities of language and multilingualism in a postcolonial African context. As a former French

colony, Senegal inherited not only the administrative and political institutions of the colonial state but also its deeply entrenched linguistic hierarchies. French, the colonizer's language, was institutionalized as the sole official language and continues to dominate formal education, administration, and public life. Meanwhile, Senegal is home to over twenty national languages, with Wolof serving as the most widely spoken lingua franca alongside Pulaar, Serer, Diola, Mandinka, and others. These indigenous languages are vital to everyday communication and cultural identity, yet they remain largely excluded from official domains, particularly within formal education (Fall, 2024).

The dominance of French in Senegalese society is a direct legacy of colonial language policies, which aimed to establish French as the primary medium of instruction and administration. The French colonial model, grounded in assimilationist doctrine, viewed indigenous languages as obstacles to the metropole's civilizing mission. This ideology positioned French as a superior and universal language, essential for accessing modernity and civilization, while relegating indigenous languages to private and informal spheres. Post-independence, Senegal retained French as the official language to maintain administrative continuity and assert itself internationally. However, this decision has had long-term implications for social equity, educational access, and cultural preservation (Fall, 2025).

In education, French's continued dominance has created significant pedagogical challenges. For most Senegalese children, French is neither a first language nor spoken at home. Using French exclusively as the medium of instruction often results in low comprehension, high repetition and dropout rates, and poor academic outcomes—especially in early primary education. These issues are exacerbated in rural and peri-urban areas, where French-speaking environments are scarce. Educational linguistics research shows that literacy and instruction in a

learner's first language significantly enhance cognitive development and academic success. Yet in Senegal, political, ideological, and logistical barriers have hindered widespread mother-tongue education.

Despite these constraints, notable governmental and non-governmental efforts have promoted multilingual education. Since the 1970s, pilot programs and bilingual education initiatives have integrated national languages into early schooling. The 2002 law on education formally recognized national languages as potential media of instruction. Nonetheless, implementation remains limited and inconsistent, partly due to insufficient teacher training, lack of materials, and resistance from political and social elites who continue to equate French with upward mobility and global competitiveness. Recently, the Senegalese government has moved to institutionalize bilingual education, aligning with UNESCO recommendations for mother-tongue instruction. The *Modèle harmonisé d'enseignement bilingue au Sénégal* (MOHEBS) aims to gradually introduce bilingual education in public primary schools across nine regions, starting in the 2023–2024 academic year, targeting national coverage by 2028.

This analysis draws on sociolinguistic theory and qualitative fieldwork data from schools between 2020 and 2024 (Kébé & Diop, 2021; Kébé, 2024). While progress has been made, findings reveal inconsistencies in the state's glottological approach, with national languages still occupying a peripheral role reminiscent of their colonial-era status.

Adopting both diachronic and synchronic perspectives, this article critically examines the colonial evolution and contemporary implications of Senegal's multilingual reality, focusing on language's role in shaping educational access and equity. It investigates how colonial language policies have left enduring structural and ideological legacies influencing current language

planning and pedagogy. Further, it explores sociolinguistic tensions between French as a language of power and prestige and national languages as carriers of cultural identity and linguistic rights. Ultimately, by situating Senegal's language and education policies within a broader postcolonial framework, the paper contributes to debates on decolonizing education, fostering linguistic justice, and promoting inclusive multilingual models in Africa.

1. Colonial Language Policies and Early Educational Models in Senegal

Senegal's geographic position at the crossroads of Black African, Arab-Islamic, and Western civilizations made it a hub for centuries of trade, cultural exchange, and political contestation. The Atlantic coast attracted early European navigators and traders, starting with the Portuguese in 1444–1445, who established trading posts and exploited the region's resources. Over subsequent centuries, the Dutch (1588), British (mid-18th century), and finally the French (solidified by 1815) exerted influence, with Senegal incorporated into French West Africa (Crowder, 1962; Ngom, 2009). Before colonial rule, powerful pre-colonial states such as the Jolof Empire and kingdoms like Baol, Cayor, and Walo thrived. These polities were political, economic, cultural, and intellectual centers with complex linguistic ecologies. Wolof, Pulaar, Serer, and other indigenous languages flourished alongside Arabic, primarily used for Islamic scholarship. Societies maintained sophisticated governance systems grounded in indigenous knowledge, oral tradition, and Quranic schooling. European arrival and colonialism introduced new economic structures (e.g., forced labor, export agriculture), political institutions, and cultural hierarchies that unsettled these systems.

Colonial Senegal became a "contact zone" where cultures met, clashed, and negotiated under domination and inequality

(McLaughlin, 2008). The power asymmetry imposed European languages and culture as dominant, marginalizing indigenous identities. French colonial authorities pursued assimilation, aiming to "civilize" subjects by eradicating native cultures and languages and replacing them with French language and values. This policy was underpinned by racial theories from intellectuals like Johann Blumenbach, Gobineau, and Buffon, who ranked humans hierarchically and justified colonial superiority.

French colonial language policy in Senegal strictly enforced French as the sole language in education. The system was designed to produce a small class of French-speaking intermediaries for colonial administration. Indigenous languages, despite their importance, were actively suppressed. Students speaking their mother tongues were subjected to harsh punishments—including humiliation and physical discipline—to enforce linguistic assimilation. This stigmatized native languages and alienated children from their cultural roots in school.

Though assimilation dominated, some educators recognized the value of indigenous languages. Jean Dard, the first colonial schoolmaster in Saint-Louis in the early 19th century, advocated mother-tongue literacy as a foundation for learning French, developing Wolof teaching methods and promoting bilingual education. However, his approach was sidelined as it conflicted with assimilationist goals prioritizing French as a tool of domination. Other advocates like Descemet supported bilingual policies but failed to shift official monolingual policy, which feared indigenous languages would foster nationalism and undermine colonial control.

Religious institutions, particularly Islamic marabouts, resisted colonial education. Marabouts, influential spiritual and political leaders, oversaw Quranic schools where Arabic and indigenous languages taught Islamic theology and literacy. They viewed French colonial education as secular and alien, encouraging

communities to prioritize Quranic schooling and maintain linguistic and cultural traditions, thus sustaining indigenous languages despite colonial suppression.

The long-term impact of colonial language policies remains profound. French continues as a gatekeeper for higher education, government jobs, and social mobility, while indigenous languages remain confined largely to informal domains. This legacy fuels ongoing debates on language policy, national identity, and educational reform, including efforts to incorporate national languages into formal schooling. In fact, this colonial linguistic legacy has created the condition of struggle for linguistic empowerment. Thus, it will be interesting to briefly unpack the nature of that postcolonial responses and the struggle for linguistic empowerment

2. Postcolonial Responses and the Struggle for Linguistic Empowerment

The marginalization of African languages persisted after independence; colonial language hierarchies shaped education and official discourse. French remained dominant in administration, education, and media, perpetuating linguistic imperialism by relegating local languages to informal spheres. The privileging of French created significant barriers to educational access and cultural expression. Intellectuals, like Cheikh Anta Diop challenged this status quo. Diop argued that education in a colonial language was alienating; African students faced the dual burden of decoding unfamiliar language and internalizing culturally distant concepts. This hindered meaningful learning and caused cultural dislocation. Diop's critique aligned with UNESCO's 1953 report emphasizing mother-tongue instruction's pedagogical advantages. Teaching children in their first language strengthens cognitive foundations and durability of literacy.

Influenced by such ideas, Senegal enacted Decree No. 72-862 in 1971, officially recognizing six national languages—Wolof, Pulaar, Serer, Diola, Mandinka, and Soninke—as integral to identity and education. Despite symbolic commitment, implementation lagged. Infrastructure, teacher training, and resources favored French, keeping national languages peripheral.

The consequences are stark. Over two-thirds of Senegalese youth under 20 are illiterate in all languages, and nearly 60% lack literacy in French (Diallo, 2010). Early grade assessments show one in five students cannot read a single French word (Le Soleil, 2010). These data highlight the failure of the monolingual French model, neglecting foundational literacy in mother tongues. Programs like *La Case des Tout-Petits*, aimed at early literacy, have disproportionately prioritized French, ignoring rural and religious communities where Arabic literacy from Islamic schooling is common. This oversight neglects the cognitive and cultural role local languages play in early education.

Thus, colonial language hierarchies perpetuate educational inequity. The unresolved question remains: how can children master French academic content without first acquiring literacy in their native languages, the cognitive basis for learning? The unresolved question has led to several challenges pertaining to unpopular language choice and challenges of equitable bilingualism.

3. Language Choice and the Challenge of Equitable Bilingualism

Senegal's linguistic landscape is complex, shaped by history, culture, and politics. The Constitution designates French as official, while recognizing over twenty national languages. Wolof dominates, spoken by nearly 90% of the population as lingua franca. Its use spans media, popular culture, commerce, and politics, a phenomenon described as the "Wolofisation" of

Senegal (Smith, 2010). Paradoxically, state policy resists elevating Wolof to co-official status to maintain national unity and avoid ethnic tensions. Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal's first president and Negritude leader, was pivotal in this policy. He viewed promoting any single national language, especially Wolof, as potentially divisive. Senghor favored Pulaar for its rich grammar and wider West African use, seeing it as a unifying language across ethnic lines. This balancing act continued under subsequent governments. According to Smith (2010), the lack of official Wolofisation allowed Wolof's organic expansion without provoking minority opposition. However, this also reflects widespread ambivalence toward prioritizing one national language despite Wolof's dominance. Public debates about language policy reveal sociopolitical tensions. For instance, a parliamentary proposal to mandate Wolof instruction in schools met strong resistance due to fears of linguistic centralism and cultural marginalization. Such debates highlight language as a key marker of identity, political representation, and cultural capital. Additional obstacles include low proficiency in standardized orthographies of national languages, due to limited formal education and scarce teaching materials. Oral fluency also varies with urbanization, migration, and multilingual exposure.

Urban linguistic hybridity is widespread, with French-Wolof code-switching common among educated Senegalese navigating social contexts and interlocutors (Juillard & Dreyfus, 2005). This sociolinguistic fluidity challenges traditional hierarchies and reflects dynamic localized bilingualism. Yet educational institutions often view hybridity as a deficit, and the dominant French monolingual model fails to leverage these competencies, complicating bilingual education efforts (ERNWACA, 2008; Ndiaye & Diakité, 2010).

Projects like ÉLAN (2010–2015) aimed to formalize criteria for introducing local languages into education, prioritizing languages with codification, non-formal use, linguistic research,

and educational literature. However, such top-down approaches often overlook community linguistic practices and cultural values, limiting effectiveness. The Fulani community (Pulaar speakers) exemplifies successful language education implementation, attributed to strong cultural attachment and sustained literacy traditions (Leconte & Kébé, 2013). This underscores socio-cultural investment's importance in language policy success, which is one of the thrust of this article major contribution.

Conclusion

This article traced the historical trajectory and evolving dynamics of language-in-education policy in Senegal, revealing persistent tensions between institutional frameworks and vibrant multilingual realities. Recent policy shifts toward bilingual education indicate growing recognition of national languages in schooling, but significant disparities persist between official goals and practical implementation. These highlight pedagogical, logistical, ideological, and political challenges shaping Senegal's language hierarchies. Beyond educational policy, a profound dilemma emerges: the institutional future and societal status of local languages relative to dominant French. This issue resonates across postcolonial Africa, where colonial languages maintain privileged institutional positions. At stake are questions of linguistic legitimacy, cultural identity, and sovereignty—a negotiation over which languages and voices are valued in nation-building. The tension between preserving indigenous heritage and maintaining global communicative capital reflects deeper power relations, historical legacies, and language planning politics.

This article contributes to debates on language policy by highlighting the divide between state-led, top-down formulations

("in vitro," Calvet 2017) and organic, community language practices ("in vivo"). Bridging this divide is a political and social imperative for equitable, effective policies. In contexts like Senegal, where language marks cultural identity and institutional opportunity, balancing these dimensions is crucial for inclusivity, cohesion, and linguistic empowerment.

One key recommendation is the implementation of a comprehensive national survey on language attitudes. Too often, language-in-education decisions are made without systematically engaging with how people perceive, use, and value different languages in their daily lives. Understanding these attitudes is essential for shaping policies that are not only linguistically sound but also socially accepted and pedagogically effective.

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