



Wolof: a post-colonial orthography (a literature review)

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Background

- Humans have been speaking for at least 50,000 years and writing only approximately 5,000 years.
- Writing started for pragmatic reasons for needs related to trade, food production, and of course religion.
- Not all languages came to be written at the same time or in the same way or under the same historic circumstances.
- This is why there are so many different scripts (e.g., “שָׁלוֹם” in Hebrew vs. “Shelby” in English) and even different spellings in different languages for the same words (e.g., “colour” in the UK vs. “color” in the US).
- Different spellings are quite obvious in **Wolof**, a language in which Western-type mass education has been incorporated more recently, when Senegal, where Wolof is the most used national language in urban areas, was a French colony.
- **French heavily influences Wolof writing** even though Wolof was codified, in the mid-20th century, with different sound representations than those of French.
 - For example: the sound that in English we represent with “oo”, and is represented with “ou” in French, is represented by “u” in Wolof - similar to what happens in Spanish and Portuguese.

Goals

- The goal of this project is to conduct secondary research on the topic of post-colonial orthography to prepare for a future primary research project to examine whether Wolof speakers find Wolof easier to read in French or in its native code.
- **Method:** A literature review to explore the ways in which language writing is affected by language contact.

Languages used for education in Senegal

- In 2016, USAID started program Lecture pour Tous (LpT, “reading for all”) in three national languages (Pulaar, Seereer, and Wolof). In 2021, LpT was transferred to the government of Senegal.
- Pulaar, Seereer, and Wolof have been codified (mid-20th century) using
 - The Roman script
 - Phonetic spelling (each symbol represents a speech sound)

The variable spellings of Wolof

- Wolof is spreading into domains previously reserved for French (e.g., government and white-collar sectors) (McLaughlin, 2008b).
- As of 2005, 90% of Senegalese speak Wolof as either first or second language and rises to 96% in capital city Dakar (McLaughlin, 2008a).
- Much commercial advertisement by national and multinational companies is in Wolof, as we can see in the pictures.
 - The ads present variable spellings of Wolof - in Wolof and in French.

Why is spelling important?

- Orthography (a set of conventions for writing a language) is a marker of identity because it contains icons.
 - The Cyrillic script as iconic of Russian, the letter ñ is iconic of Spanish and Spanish-speakers identify with this symbol (Sebba 2011).
- Orthographic choices tell the history of language contact, they attest to interlinguality (Sebba 2011).
 - The choice to spell México or Méjico is one of positioning oneself closer to the native languages of current day Mexico or closer to the spelling conventions established in Spain.

Full study plan

- The result of this project will provide the background and rationale to support the next step of the project:
 - Collecting experimental data from Wolof speakers, comparing French and native Wolof spellings across numerous linguistic tasks.



jàmm – peace, spelled in Wolof
jam, jàam, diam – peace in Wolof spelled in French



References

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