

HOW FOREIGN IS ACCENT? EXPRESSIONS OF PEACE IN CASAMANCE*

by Abbie Hantgan (SOAS)

Our journey from the Global North to the Global South entails two trips across the Atlantic Ocean: the first by air above the ocean from Europe for half a day, and the second aboard a ship overnight sailing down the Senegalese coast. Given that language families and regions are often based on their proximity to bodies of water, it's not surprising that most of the languages spoken in this region, Casamance, are classified in the Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo linguistic family tree. The latter trip by ship ends at the Casamance region's capital city, Ziguinchor, at the mouth of the Casamance River. From there we travel by land south-west 12 kilometres until we come to a Crossroads. The roads lead in three different directions: north-west for approximately six kilometres until we reach the first of the villages that make up Mof Avvi, "The Kingdom", south for only about one kilometre into Djibonker, or to remain in Brin which borders the paved road from the city. For each chosen path, there is an associated choice of language. Upon first arriving, the uninitiated Global Northerner is confounded by the confrontation with the multiplexity of language. Even the naïvely simple question "how do I say hello in your language" evokes multiple responses.

However naïve, even a first time linguistic fieldworker has usually encountered varieties of a language before that differ only in the pronunciation of words. Greetings and other formulaic expressions, in particular, are emblematic in representing the speaker's identity and background. In the context of cultures which are in close contact, the word for "hello" can serve a speaker who reaches such a crossroads as a means of asserting one's alliances to the place from which one has come, and at the same time delineates a boundary with the listener, who inhabits the place at which the speaker has arrived.

Because there are differences, there are decisions. Curiously, the new researcher is given the same choice as the long-time residents of the three villages that make up The Crossroads, the name we have given to this area of linguistic

diversity. We learn that the three named languages are the Jóola language, Kujireray of Brin, the Bainounk language Gubëeher of Djibonker, and the Jóola language Eegimaa of The Kingdom. Sometimes speakers, upon making a choice to follow a given path, seek allies among those they find at the destination. After establishing the contrasts there is the opportunity to converge. Because the locus of the potential convergence or divergence is often established through pronunciation, that is the line of inquiry which interests me the most.

The terms "accent" and "dialect" are often used interchangeably even though they refer to difference concepts. The term accent is defined here as being distinctive phonetic attributes that are detectable when a speaker is communicating in a language other than his/her own. Accent is distinguished from dialectal differences within a shared language. While differences in dialect and language also influence pronunciation, the scope of a regional accent goes beyond that of dialect and language; rather it is an indicator of the place where, and from whom, a person first learned to speak. An accent is formed and shaped from early childhood and is created by the phonological system of contrasts and rules present in the first language(s) a person learns; it is impossible to speak a foreign language without an accent. Listeners perceive speakers' accents and, depending on their own backgrounds, may be able to determine the language(s) a person learned early in their life and thus from where they originate. When speakers communicate across languages, information about their backgrounds is necessarily conveyed through their accents. Speakers can, to some extent, albeit often subconsciously, alter their accents to influence the perception a listener has of them. However, because accent is established so early in life, certain aspects of a person's phonology, the ways in which sound is organized in a speaker's mind, are difficult to alter.

While most studies of foreign accent are based on data from language learners with mono- or bilingual backgrounds, evidence shows that the more phonetic variability across phonological systems a person is exposed to at birth, the

more easily a person will be able to control his/her accent. The current study examines the speech of highly multilingual individuals living in a completely cooperative social structure in order to examine to what extent they manipulate their own accents when speaking each other's languages. Although a foreign accent can include any aspect of a person's grammar, my work deals with the phonetic outcomes of the phonological underpinnings of accent.

Results of a preliminary study reveal that the pronunciation of [k g] and [x h] are indicative of an accent in the Crossroads:

- Word-initially [k]: Kujireray
- Word-initially [g]: Eegimaa and Gubëheer
- Word-finally [h]: Kujireray
- Word-finally [x]: Eegimaa
- Word-finally [g]: Gubëheer

In many cases, the only distinction between words in the different Crossroads languages is pronunciation. Within that pronunciation, the velar sounds (those which are formed by the tongue touching the roof of the mouth in an area called the velum) [k g] play opposing roles among the Crossroads languages. Just as in the initial greeting illustrated above, whereas words in Kujireray may begin with [k], corresponding words in Eegimaa start with [g]. The change is minimal but noticeable and speakers are aware and often comment on the difference.

My preliminary hypothesis is that, because of the languages' individually complex prosodic systems, the degree of immersion of a speaker in a particular village is proportional to the influence of that village's associated language. That is, a person who has spent their childhood in Djibonker is more likely to have a higher frequency of sounds associated with that village's language, Gubëheer. The results of a study in which participants from Djibonker pronounced words in Kujireray shows that, despite their fluency, an accent is still audible and is indicated by a difference among the velar sounds.

Communication through speech is ephemeral. The speech act lasts no longer than its moment of utterance. Only the imperfect memories of the participants retain the discussion. Conversation is between speaker and listener and as such is private. It is a secret to be shared only among the parties which are present. Like a coded message in self-authorizing language, the absence of written words seems like a purposeful act of oral cultures to pass on only privileged knowledge.

The code is a continuum of convergence. At the ends of the spectrum are these emblematic sounds which quickly and clearly indicate the origin of a speaker: in the case of Kujireray and Eegimaa, [k]assumay vs. [g]assumay respectively, the words for 'peace', used as a way to say 'hello'. The directionality of accommodation is not always equal: all residents of Djibonker speak both Gubëheer and Kujireray, but few residents of Brin speak Gubëheer. Residents of Brin speak Kujireray and many at least understand Eegimaa, and vice versa. Although the two Jóola languages are more closely related to each other than to the Bainouk language, because of Brin's close proximity to Djibonker, Kujireray and Gubëheer overlap. While speakers can disentangle words, especially the roots of nouns and verbs, the pronunciation of prefixes is often fused, as illustrated here.