

African multilingualism viewed from another angle: challenging the Casamance exception

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There are conflicting views on how to understand and account for multilingualism in the Casamance, Southern Senegal (Lüpke 2016; Sagna 2016). We argue that multilingual settings and practices are not the same everywhere in the Casamance. To support this claim, we argue that it is paramount to distinguish between what may be loosely termed (for want of a better term) “monolingual” areas versus multilingual areas, and individual multilingualism versus societal multilingualism. We argue, following Sagna (2016; Sagna & Bassène 2016) and Hantgan-Sonko (2017), that this distinction is a sine-qua-non for a better understanding of the current rural and urban multilingual situation of the Casamance.

Monolingual areas, as our study shows, are typically mono-ethnic settings where intra-village communication is monolingual, i.e. strongly normatively oriented towards a single default language. However, speakers from these areas do become multilingual, not through daily intense intra-village language contact, but essentially through “turnaround migration” (Linares 2003), i.e. seasonal migration to cities (or other villages) and, sometimes, coming back.

By contrast, multilingual settings, which are multilingual villages and districts in cities, illustrate the concept of societal multilingualism, where individual multilingualism is essentially due to intensive daily intra-village language contact as well as schooling in French. Language practices in multilingual settings may be even more complex in these contexts, with different languages “in competition” in the home (Ducos 1980; Lüpke 2016). This complex multilingual situation, which will be termed the “Baïnouk experience” is by no means applicable to the rest of the Casamance (Sagna 2016), Senegal, or the wider area (Hantgan-Sonko 2018). In fact, we argue that it only reflects the sociolinguistic reality of a minority of villages within the Casamance, which are generally located on national roads or other main roads, and around big cities like Ziguinchor.

Three separate studies are proposed to contrast the processes behind the rise of individual multilingualism in monolingual areas with those that lead to individual multilingualism in multilingual areas. First, we show that monolingual child language acquisition does exist in Senegal. Evidence comes from a longitudinal study of children aged 1;10 to 4;0 in four monolingual villages, where child-directed speech is in one language (Eegimaa, Atlantic Niger-Congo). Second, a statistical study of 100 language consultants’ sociolinguistic profiles, collected as part of language documentation and description projects between 2003 and 2015, shows a clear decrease in monolingualism, indicated by an increase in multilingualism between older and younger generations. We show that the increase in multilingualism is related to an increase in turnaround migration among speakers in ten Eegimaa-speaking villages. A third study shows that in monolingual settings, children born from exogamous marriages become multilingual mainly as a result of turnaround migration, rather than multilingual practices in the home or in the village. We conclude by contending that recognising the two monolingual and multilingual settings described above is an essential starting point to provide a clear account of African multilingual situations such as those found in the Casamance.

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