How a lingua franca spreads

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1 Introduction

In terms of the relevance they have to people’s lives and the opportunities they afford them, African lingua francas are the most important languages spoken on the continent today. Their importance often gets lost in discussions of language in postcolonial Africa that offer a binary view of African vs. European languages, attributing economic and social advancement to mastery of the latter while failing to distinguish between the multiple roles that African (and European) languages might play. In this chapter I consider the ways in which one such lingua franca, Wolof, has become a vehicular language in Senegal and beyond, what it means to those who speak it, and how they value it. I will also consider how the former colonial and now official language, French, has contributed to the spread of Wolof, despite the efforts of the French colonial regime and its successor state to make it the language of the nation.

The spread of a lingua franca means either an increase in its number of speakers, an increase in the contexts in which it is used, or both. Sociolinguists are interested in how such changes take place and what they entail for the linguistic ecology within which a lingua franca is spoken. Central to the notion of language change is the repertoire, the sum total of an individual’s linguistic resources and the ways in which s/he deploys them. Repertoires can be especially complex in Africa, where there are high levels of societal and individual multilingualism. Gradually, a multilingual speaker may start to disfavor the use of one language and privilege the use of another, either out of necessity or because of the prestige, either overt or covert, associated with the language that is the object of shift. Sociolinguists employ multiple methodologies, some quantitative and others more qualitative and ethnographic. This study falls into the latter category. Accordingly, the research presented here is based on extensive linguistic fieldwork in Senegal, during which I observed and recorded naturally occurring discourse and metalinguistic commentary (talk about language), and conducted open-ended interviews in Wolof with speakers of multiple languages about language attitudes. I also supplemented my research through the use of historical documentation of written Wolof and secondary sources on language, mobility, urbanization, and related topics, including my own prior work on urban Wolof, to trace the ways in which this lingua franca has spread.¹

¹ A taste of the contingencies of fieldwork can be found in an essay I co-authored with one of my language consultants, where we narrate the process from two different points of view (Mc Laughlin & Sall 2001).
One of the narratives often put forward about language in Africa is that the colonial languages play a neutral and unifying role against a fragmented background of unwieldy, ungovernable linguistic diversity. To pick an African language as the medium of education or bureaucracy, for example, would be symbolically to marginalize or disfavor speakers of other languages, thereby running a great political risk, thus it is much easier to assign those roles to English or French. When Abdoulaye Wade, Senegal’s former president, tried to implement a policy whereby all civil servants and state employees would be required to know how to read and write Wolof, it was quickly shot down and regarded as divisive even though Wolof is a widely spoken lingua franca within the country (Mc Laughlin 2008b:86-87). Parliamentarians seemed to prefer the benign neglect of national languages that had characterized Senegalese language policy up to that point (Cissé 2005), and were content to allow French to occupy all the official roles, even though they commonly – but unofficially – used Wolof in the national assembly.

If any French colony was poised to become francophone it was Senegal. Not only was it France’s most favored sub-Saharan colony, from the middle of the 19th century until independence in 1960 four of its coastal cities, Saint-Louis, Gorée, Rufisque and Dakar, were given the status of communes and their inhabitants were considered French citizens (citoyens), albeit more in theory than practice, as opposed to mere subjects (sujets). Senegal was home to two successive capitals (Saint-Louis and Dakar) of the vast colonial territory of Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF), and housed the most important educational institutions, which drew students from throughout the AOF. Senegal’s first president at independence, Léopold Sédar Senghor, was a renowned poet and intellectual who became the first Black member of the French Academy, while his successor, Abdou Diouf, held the position of Secretary General of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie from 2003 to 2014. Yet, Senegal ranks below many other francophone African countries in terms of the percentage of the population proficient in French. Why this should be the case has to do with the important role of Wolof, the national lingua franca, which is spoken by somewhere between eighty and ninety percent of the population, although only half that number are ethnically Wolof. How Wolof has attained this important position and why it continues to spread unregulated and beyond the reaches of the state is the subject of this chapter.

2 The formal and informal language sectors

*Le français, c’est pas la peine.*
A. Pam, Dakar fishmonger

Economists who study Africa tell us that the continent’s informal economies are much more important to the everyday life of citizens than are its formal economies. Large informal economies are typical of developing countries, and in Africa they attest to the weakness of the state and its inability to provide
services or regulate economic activity in a satisfactory way. At a certain spot on the national highway between Louga and Kébémer in Senegal, for example, groups of village boys fill in potholes with stones while passing truck drivers show their gratitude by tossing them a coin. Maintenance of public roads is typically an activity of the state, but the failure of the state to repair the potholes creates an opportunity for the boys to earn money. This is a very small-scale example, but there are many much larger-scale activities like smuggling, which go on beyond the purview of the state and bring in substantial revenue.

The informal economy is one of opportunity, characterized by considerable resourcefulness and creativity, but it is also an economy of necessity that people turn to in the absence of other options. Informal, and even illegal, as such unregistered economic practices and activities might be, it is hard to see how African societies could function without them, and they are viewed by citizens not only as legitimate ways to get things done, but sometimes the only way to get things done. As Hansen and Vaa, in their study of informal economies in urban Africa, point out:

Informal activities and practices may be illegal but are not necessarily perceived as illegitimate by the actors concerned. It is likely that many urban residents consider what from the official standpoint is illegal or irregular as not only functioning but normal and legitimate practices (2004:7-8)

Informal economic activities and practices, in other words, are an indispensable part, and often the larger part, of the real economy (MacGaffey 1991).

Drawing on the distinction economists make between formal and informal sectors, I propose that parallels can be made with language, and that the concept of an informal language sector provides purchase in understanding the linguistic dynamics of postcolonial Africa, including – or perhaps especially – the spread of lingua francas. By the informal language sector I mean the linguistic activity that goes on unregulated, either wholly or partially beyond the reach of the state. There are a number of factors to be considered if the concept is to be useful, starting with how the state attempts to regulate language. In the case of Senegal, which is fairly typical of many African states, French is the official language, and there are other languages that are designated national languages. In order for a language to attain the status of national language it must be codified. This means it must have a standardized alphabet in the Latin script, a spelling system, and rules for writing and for the segmentation of words. The system must be based on linguistic principles and approved and validated by a body consisting of linguists and native speakers. It is then submitted for approval and ultimately attains the status of national language by
presidential decree and publication in the official state journal.\(^2\) If a language is not designated a national
language, it has no official status. This three-tiered system thus distinguishes hierarchically between 1) the
official language, 2) the national languages, and 3) all other languages. There is no other
differentiation between, for example, national languages, and all are treated as equal in the eyes of the
state. The question of national languages harks back to Senghor’s time. A promoter of French, which he
notoriously called the language of reason, Senghor encouraged the Senegalese citizenry to speak French
like Parisian bourgeois. But he also knew that it would be politically prudent and perhaps appease his
political opponents to allow a place for African languages to be recognized, thus he designated the six
most widely spoken languages national languages, but did little to promote them, either in education or in
the media, which with few exceptions were completely dominated by French. As Cissé (2005) has
discussed, Senghor’s position with regard to the national languages was one of benign neglect, leading to
frustration on the part of African language promoters and activists, and no new languages were admitted
to the list of national languages.

It was not until 2000, when opposition leader Abdoulaye Wade became president, that things
changed. Although he espoused a pro-Wolof stance, evidenced by his political misstep in proposing that
government employees be required to know how to read and write Wolof, he nonetheless opened the door
to other Senegalese languages becoming recognized national languages, provided they were codified.
The new regime of language was encoded, if somewhat inconsistently, in the 2001 constitution:

La langue officielle de la République du Sénégal est le Français. Les langues nationales
sont le Diola, le Malinké, le Pular, le Sérère, le Soninké, le Wolof et toute autre langue
nationale qui sera codifiée.

The official language of the Republic of Senegal is French. The national languages are
Diola, Malinké, Pular, Sérère, Soninké, Wolof and any other national language that is
codified.

(Constitution de la République du Sénégal de 2001, Article 1\(^{er}\), alinéa 2)

Confusingly, the two mentions of the term national language have different meanings. The first can be
interpreted as the \textit{de jure} status, while the second means any Senegalese language, a discrepancy that both
reveals the inadequacy of the terms, and which intimates that languages do not always submit easily to

\(^{2}\) Details on codification were kindly provided by Dieynaba Bathily of the Direction de l’Alphabétisation et des
Langues Nationales, Fary Ka of the Académie Sénégalaise des Langues, and Mamadou Ly of the NGO Associates
for Research in Education and Development.
such regimes, a theme that will be taken up further on. Thanks to Wade’s more liberal policy there are
currently more than twenty national languages with several others on their way to attaining that status.
The three-tiered system of official, national, and other languages, captures the formal, hierarchical regime
of language in Senegal, where French holds a dominant and privileged position.

Turning now to the informal language sector, a very different picture emerges. There are, of
course, no ready-made designations here that allow us to distinguish between languages, and no truly
reliable statistics on language use. What kinds of methods, then, are appropriate to attempting to study
the informal linguistic sector? In her volume on the “real economy” of Zaire, Janet MacGaffey (1991:2)
suggests that an ethnographic approach is particularly well-suited to the investigation of such a topic
because it focuses on the qualitative details of economic interactions. Similarly, in recent work,
Blommaert (2013) argues for an ethnographic approach to understanding language, by which he means
one that is grounded in the temporal and spatial context of individual interactions, preferably observed
over a long period of time. An ethnographic approach to Senegal’s informal linguistic sector, then, would
be based upon observations of how people use language, what relevance different languages have for their
lives and what opportunities they are afforded by knowing different languages. From this perspective,
French recedes into the background, as the quote that opens this section attests to, and Wolof moves to the
foreground of everyday life as the vernacular language. By saying that “French isn’t worth the trouble,”
Mr. Pam, who speaks Pulaar and Wolof, means that it is of little use in his day-to-day life. French,
however, re-emerges in an interesting way that will be described below. The national languages come
into focus and we see that they are differentiated, with Wolof assuming a much more important position
than the others as an urban vernacular and national lingua franca. In fact, people commonly refer to
Wolof as the national language, a testament to its hegemony within a regime of language that is parallel to
the one espoused by the state, namely the informal language sector. There are distinctions, too, between
other languages that function as more local, regional lingua francas, especially in Casamance, the part of
the country south of the Gambia which is more linguistically diverse than the north (Lüpke & Storch
2013). These languages overlap to a great extent with the “national language” category of the formal
linguistic sector, because after Wolof they are the largest languages in terms of numbers of speakers. It is
exactly those speakers whom Senghor wished to appease by granting their languages a nominal official
status so that they would pose no threat to the state. There are also roles for minority languages as well,
given that they are, at the very minimum, home languages for smaller groups. A hierarchy of languages
emerges from this exercise which is quite different from the hierarchy of the formal sector. These
differences are summarized in Fig.1.
The informal linguistic sector is a term that is meant to capture how people really use language, and a pattern emerges the way it is organized. Speakers of a category 3 “other language,” that is, a smaller minority language such as Mancagne, spoken in Casamance, will generally speak a category 2 regional lingua franca such as Joola, as well as the category 1 national lingua franca, Wolof. In other cases there may not be an intermediate regional lingua franca, only Wolof. For example, speakers of a category 1 minority language such as Saafi-Saafi, discussed below, generally speak their native language and Wolof. For speakers whose native language is Wolof, however, the chances that they speak another Senegalese language is not very high. They speak the most useful language, therefore they have little need to learn another. In contradistinction to the formal sector where languages are given certain designations through a top-down process motivated by political interests, the informal sector captures a linguistic ecology within which speakers use different languages in different domains of interaction. This approach leads us to consider the notion of repertoire as central to understanding the informal language sector.

The “language of juridical statehood,” as Cruise O’Brien (2003) has called French in Senegal, has a prominent position in the formal language sector, but where is it in the informal sector? And is it even part of the informal language sector? The number of Senegalese who speak French as a first language or as a language of everyday communication is very small. Access to institutional (formal sector) life, such as schools and universities, government jobs, etc. is constrained by knowledge of French, of course, but in the hallways of these institutions, and often in their offices, speakers prefer to use Wolof. French has nonetheless played an important role in Senegal’s linguistic ecology in a far different way, namely as a lexifier for Wolof, a phenomenon that has urban origins but which has moved beyond the city as Wolof continues to spread. From a formal perspective, French has been and continues to be the linguistic foundation of a francophone state, but from the informal language perspective its importance lies primarily in the way it has interacted with Wolof to create a prestigious way of speaking that continues to attract new speakers. This may in fact be the greatest contribution of French to the linguistic ecology of postcolonial Senegal.

In the following section, I provide a brief sociolinguistic history of Wolof and argue, as I have elsewhere (Mc Laughlin 2008a,b,c; 2009), that much of Wolof’s success as a lingua franca can be attributed to the fact that it has served as an urban vernacular, first in Senegal’s early cities, especially the
Atlantic island city of Saint-Louis, and later in Dakar, the current capital. I then consider a series of Senegalese linguistic contexts and environments that illustrate the usefulness of Wolof to speakers of other languages, and finally I draw some conclusions about what a focus on the informal language sector can reveal, and what it can tell us about how a lingua franca spreads.

3 From pre-colonial lingua franca to urban language
At present, Wolof is a language whose domain of use spreads far beyond the Wolof ethnic group. It has around twice as many speakers, somewhere between eighty and ninety percent of the Senegalese population, as those who consider themselves to be of Wolof ethnicity. The language, however, is in a complex relationship with ethnicity: In urban contexts those whose parents are of an ethnicity other than Wolof often claim to be Wolof because it is the only language they speak (Swigart 1990:4; Mc Laughlin 2001:158), and at the same time Wolof has become a cover term for a post-ethnic urban identity (Mc Laughlin 2001; Ngom 2004). It can thus lead nominally to the adoption of Wolof ethnicity, but it may also ultimately open the door to the abandonment of ethnicity as a defining characteristic of an individual. As reported elsewhere (Mc Laughlin 2001:170), in the early 2000s I witnessed a verbal interaction between two professors at the Université Gaston Berger in Saint-Louis. One of them had a distinctly Seereer last name, and when questioned about his ethnicity by the second professor he replied “I’m from Dakar!” prompting his interlocutor to joke “That’s the new ethnicity in Senegal now, to be from Dakar.” The transformative power of the urban setting is intimately linked to language. The attraction of city life and the potential it represents, coupled with the need that individuals have to feel that they belong in the city, are powerful incentives for adding Wolof to the repertoire and powerful disincentives for acquiring other languages. The history of Wolof is thus also a history of urbanization, beginning in the 17th century.

Wolof emerged as a lingua franca in northern Senegal somewhere between the 13th and 16th centuries (Klein 1968) due to the considerable military power of the Wolof kingdoms which dominated the surrounding areas politically. In 1638 the French staked a claim on the West African coast by establishing a comptoir or commercial outpost near the mouth of the Senegal River which was eventually moved upriver to the island of Ndar in 1659, renamed Saint-Louis du Sénégal. By 1678 the French had established an additional comptoir on Gorée Island, off the Cap Vert peninsula where Dakar is located today. The establishment of French comptoirs on these islands eventually attracted trade away from the old trans-Saharan trade routes and towards the coast. The coastal areas where contact with Europeans was sustained included the Wolof kingdoms of Waalo and Kajoor, thus the Wolof became the principal trading partners of the French. As the French became more interested in conducting military and commercial ventures into the interior they hired interpreters, known as laptots, who doubtless helped to spread Wolof along the riverine networks into the Pulaar-speaking region of Fouta Toro.
By the middle of the 18th century the comptoirs had grown into towns, and Saint-Louis had attracted a group of slaveholding Wolof women known as signares, from the Portuguese senhora ‘lady.’ Several signares, some of whose names are known to us from historical accounts, set up households on the island of Saint-Louis and formed mutually beneficial alliances with French merchants and sailors, often entering into both business and personal relationships with them. These unions gave rise to an influential Afro-European métis society that was to dominate politics and social life on the island for several generations (Jones 2013). No creole ever emerged from this social context, and although many of the signares and their offspring spoke French, they retained their Wolof culture and language (Searing 2005; Mc Laughlin 2008a).

By the middle of the 19th century Saint-Louis had become the most important French city in West Africa, and Wolof was its vernacular. Louis Faidherbe, Governor General of French West Africa and an amateur linguist, wrote in 1864 about the usefulness of Wolof:

The Wolof language is spoken in Saint-Louis, in Gorée, in Saint-Mary of Gambia, in the Waalo, in Kajoor, in Jolof. It is understood by half the inhabitants of Baol, Sine, and Salioum. It is the commercial language of all Senegal; half of the Trarza [a Mauritanian Berber confederation] speak it. It is also known along the African coast to Sierra Leone (Faidherbe 1864:4, cited in Mc Laughlin 2008a:152)

Faidherbe also comments on the “impure” nature of the Wolof spoken in Saint-Louis, a precursor of contemporary urban Wolof which makes liberal use of French borrowings, reflected in the entries of Faidherbe’s Vocabulaire:

It is the Wolof of Saint-Louis that we present here; it is not the purest, but it is the one that is most useful to know (Faidherbe 1864:4, cited in Mc Laughlin 2008a:153)

A second source on mid-nineteenth century Saint-Louisien Wolof was Louis Descemet, a prominent member of métis society. Descemet, who at the time was Faidherbe’s secretary, authored a volume entitled Recueil d’environ 1,200 phrases françaises usuelles avec leur traduction en regard en ouolof de Saint-Louis [Collection of around 1,200 everyday French phrases with a facing translation in the Wolof of Saint-Louis], which was published in 1864, the same year as Faidherbe’s Vocabulaire. Originally intended for use in schools, this fascinating document provides a glimpse at the way Wolof was spoken in the city in the mid-nineteenth century. In Mc Laughlin 2008c, which focuses in much greater detail on Descemet’s phrase book as a key to the origins of urban Wolof, I argue that bilingual
individuals such as the author served as linguistic brokers, who through their liberal use of French vocabulary in their Wolof contributed to the creation of a prestigious way of speaking that indexed an urban identity. The texture of this urban way of speaking is seen in the examples in (1)-(3), which are taken from Descemet’s phrase book and illustrate lexical borrowing from French. French words are in italics.

(1) Djis-na ndieuggue ou nar tia place ou diangou-ba (Descemet 1864:42)
   ‘I saw a caravan of Moors in the church square’

(2) Ndax café-gou for-nà bou doy? (Descemet 1864:27)
   ‘Is the coffee strong enough?’

(3) Lo ouakh tchi roti-bou? (Descemet 1864:28)
   ‘What do you say to some roast?’

The most important attributes that contribute to a language’s spread are its prestige and its usefulness. Already in 1864 Faidherbe had commented on the usefulness of Wolof as a widely spoken lingua franca beyond the Wolof-speaking heartland, along the West African coast and northwards into Mauritania. Newly inflected with French borrowings, as Descemet illustrates, and associated now with the modernity of the city of Saint-Louis, Wolof assumed an urban prestige that has endured up to the present day, even as Saint-Louis has been eclipsed by Dakar, a cosmopolitan city of more than two and a half million inhabitants.

Dakar is a much younger city than Saint-Louis, founded only in 1857. Since its founding, however, it has been a highly multilingual city where Wolof has served as the urban vernacular and lingua franca for communication between people who speak different languages. As Dakar’s history shows, the city has always been characterized by large numbers of people who have migrated there from other regions of Senegal and further afield, thus although Dakar Wolof has served as the urban vernacular most likely since the city’s founding, Dakar has also been a multilingual city over the course of its history. A 1954 study, conducted only six years before Senegalese independence, presents some statistics that highlight the linguistic and ethnic mosaic of the city. In the study (Mercier 1954), forty-three African ethnic groups were documented in Dakar, with 60 per cent of the African population of the city belonging to the three largest Senegalese ethnic groups: Wolof, Haalpulaar, and Seereer, but of those interviewed, only 22 per cent had been born in Dakar. A second set of studies, carried out in the mid 1960s, documents generational language shift in the city. Based on surveys carried out among primary school
children, Wioland 1965 and Wioland & Calvet 1967 show that in Senegalese households where one parent speaks Wolof as a native language and the other parent a different language, the language of the household is almost invariably Wolof, and the children grow up with very little knowledge of the other parent’s language. This is a typical pattern that continues to the present day, and a similar kind of generational language shift is also common in households where both parents speak a language other than Wolof. Cissé (2005) estimates that at present as much as ninety-six percent of Dakar’s population speaks Wolof as a first or other language, an impressive figure for a highly multilingual city.

In the cases of both Saint-Louis and Dakar, urbanization plays a central role in the spread of Wolof. In the following section, I chronicle the way that Wolof’s usefulness and prestige have been felt in different regions and among different kinds of communities in Senegal as it ascends to the position of national lingua franca.

4 African mobilities and the usefulness of Wolof

To understand the allure of Wolof as well as its utility as a lingua franca, it is useful to turn to the repertoires and practices of different kinds of communities and individuals who live in the capital and beyond. In this section I describe the ways in which people in various Senegalese contexts acquire Wolof in addition to their native language, and consider their motivations for doing so.

4.1 Niodior

I begin with Niodior, a Seereer-speaking island in the Saloum Delta near the Atlantic coast, which has a population of about 7,500. Mobility as an important means of livelihood is a given in the Saloum Delta, starting with everyday movement between islands and along the rivers. As fishermen and navigators, the Seereer Ñominka have long fished and moved cargo along the West African coast, from the Saloum Delta south to Gambia, Casamance, Guinea-Bissau and Guinea-Conakry, as well as northwards to Joal and Fadiouth on the Petite Côte. Just as it was in Faidherbe’s day, Wolof is the lingua franca along the coast. The accumulation of capital within the extended family unit in Niodior depends in large part on these longstanding trajectories which, in the twentieth century, were expanded to include work on commercial fishing vessels, as well as on the mainland. The closest city is Kaolack where already fifty years ago, according to Paul Pélissier, the Ñominka occupied the entire neighborhood of N'Dangane during the dry season (1966:414 ft.), and worked primarily at the river port. And of course the Senegalese capital, Dakar, also attracts migrants from Niodior, although they often return to the island for the agricultural season, especially the harvest.

More recently, the trajectories that originate in Niodior have extended beyond West Africa to Europe, and Niodior’s fishermen were involved in transporting clandestine migrants to the Canary Islands
in the mid-2000s. Some of them naturally stayed in Spain where they work primarily as vegetable pickers and send home remittances which, after basic expenses such as food, housing, clothing and ceremonial needs have been covered, are reinvested in improving the family’s fleet of pirogues though the purchase of items such as outboard motors and nets, so that local fishing remains the core means of livelihood within the family (Dahou 2008). Remittances from Spain to the Saloum Delta, according to a survey carried out by Dahou (2008), do not exceed those that come from fishing activities along the traditional migration trajectories along the West African coast, to the south of the Saloum Delta.

For the Seereer-Ñominka, Wolof is a lingua franca that they use in working along the West African coast and in the cities of Kaolack and Dakar, as well as in their trajectories to the Canary Islands. In spite of their insularity and remoteness from continental life, they are highly mobile and use Wolof as their language of mobility.

4.2 Bandia

The second locale I consider is Bandia, a Saafi-Saafi (Safen) speaking village of slightly more than one thousand inhabitants, located off the main road, about fifty kilometers from Dakar. The village’s proximity to the capital means that many people go there to work, often as night guards or domestic workers, but they return to Bandia frequently and may spend the agricultural season there as well. Perhaps the interesting question to ask about Bandia is why Wolof has not supplanted Saafi-Saafi as the language of the village. Adults all speak fluent Wolof, and it appears that they have done so for a very long time, yet children speak only Saafi-Saafi until they leave the village to go to school, where they acquire Wolof. There is no need to speak Wolof in the village, unless a stranger comes there, so Bandia is a classic case of a situation in which people use their own language at home and in their village, and a lingua franca for any interactions with outsiders. The ethnolinguistic homogeneity of Bandia provides a linguistic ecology in which Saafi-Saafi can thrive. There are many similarities between Bandia and Niodior whose inhabitants use Wolof only when communicating beyond the confines of the village and whose children first learn a language other than Wolof.

4.3 Thilogne

The third community is the historic town of Thilogne in the Pulaar-speaking heartland of Fouta Toro in northern Senegal, close to the border with Mauritania. Thilogne has a population of approximately twenty thousand, and for decades there has been a steady stream of migration, either temporary or permanent, from Thilogne to Europe and more recently to the United States for work. Migrants have continued to send significant remittances back to the town and have kept a say in local politics (Kane 2010). Although it is located in the Pulaar-speaking heartland, Thilogne is on the main road that leads
from Saint-Louis on the coast to the eastern towns of Matam and Bakel, so there is a significant presence of Wolof merchants there. In addition, there are many marriages between Haalpulaar and Wolof, and many Pulaar-speaking families who have members who went to school or even grew up in Saint-Louis or Dakar or otherwise spent time there. Pulaar is the dominant language of the town, but it is nonetheless rare to find an adult who does not speak Wolof as well. Children learn Pulaar at home and speak it to each other, but they see Wolof as a prestige language associated with youth culture and the city, and are highly motivated to learn it. Television plays a role in consolidating the prestige of Wolof, especially because they broadcast traditional Senegalese wrestling matches, which are narrated and commented on in Wolof, as well as popular comedy shows known as “Wolof theater.” Faty (2011), who conducted research in a smaller village in the same region, recounts an interview with a Pulaar-speaking woman who had only a very rudimentary knowledge of Wolof. She told him that she wanted to learn it in order to be able to understand Wolof theater so that she could laugh along with the others. Pulaar speakers represent the most vocal opponents of wolofization, yet they too view it as a language of modernity that carries prestige.

4.4 Fatick

The fourth locale is the town of Fatick, a small regional capital of under 30,000 inhabitants. Fatick was eclipsed as a river port at the beginning of the 20th century when it was bypassed by a railway line that served the nearby town of Kaolack, and has seen only a slow pace of development since then, boosted to some degree by becoming a regional capital in 1984 and by the fact that Macky Sall, the current Senegalese president, is from Fatick. Fatick is a multiethnic town with a distinct Seereer neighborhood, Ndiaye-Ndiaye, and its population is religiously mixed, with both Muslims and Catholics playing an important role in civic life. With the exception of Ndiaye-Ndiaye, where Seereer dominates, Wolof is the lingua franca of Fatick. Children acquire Wolof alongside the language of their household if it is different. Here I take the case of Momar (a pseudonym), a boy who was born into a socially and religiously conservative Pulaar-speaking Muslim household, the youngest of five children. Momar’s father grew up in a Pulaar-speaking household in a nearby Seereer village, and went to a Qur’anic school in Dakar when he was older. He claims not to remember a time when he did not speak Wolof; he also speaks Seereer, in addition to Pulaar which is his native language. Momar’s mother grew up in a Pulaar-speaking household in a small town near the Gambian border where Wolof is the lingua franca and she speaks it quite fluently. There are several families living in the compound. The adults all speak Pulaar among themselves and to the children, but the children speak Wolof to each other. As Lüpke and Storch (2013) have pointed out, in Africa children play a dominant role in socializing other children linguistically, and children typically spend more time speaking with older siblings and cousins than with
parents, a situation that is true for Momar, although certain adults enjoy a teasing relationship with him in Pulaar. Momar acquired Pulaar and Wolof almost simultaneously and there is some evidence that he is becoming increasingly Wolof dominant. The following examples, gathered when Momar was four years and seven months old, illustrate how he incorporates Wolof loanwords into his Pulaar when speaking to his parents by using the Pulaar verb *waddé* ‘to do’ as a support for a non-finite Wolof verb. The Wolof word in each case is in italics.

(4) Trying to tie his father’s leg to a table with a cord, like a sheep:

Mi waɗat ma yeew
1sg V:do.IMPERFECTIVE 2sgOBJ V:tie up (an animal)
‘I’m tying you up’

(5) Looking at a photo of himself in which he is biting his lip:

yéew mbad mi mattr
V:look.IMPERATIVE V:do 1SG V: bite.REFLEXIVE
‘Look, I’m biting myself!’

(6) Talking about a car accident:

Oto o waddii mo mbëkk
car DET V:do.PERFECTIVE 3SG.OBJ V:hit
‘The car hit him’

Momar’s father characterizes his use of the verb *waddé* ‘to do’ to support Wolof verbs in his Pulaar as a childish way of speaking. The adults in the household also occasionally incorporate Wolof verbs into their Pulaar, but they use a different strategy, illustrated in (7), the equivalent of Momar’s utterance in (6). Here the Wolof verb stem becomes fully inflected as a Pulaar verb and is therefore much more integrated than in Momar’s strategy.

(7) Oto o mbëkkii mo
car DET V:hit.PERFECTIVE 3SG.OBJ
‘The car hit him’

There is much more that could be said about data of this sort, but for current purposes it shows that Momar has acquired a more extensive vocabulary in Wolof than in Pulaar and often resorts to using
Wolof words as a communicative strategy. There is no indication that he uses the opposite strategy of incorporating Pulaar loanwords into his Wolof. If he is not already, there is every chance that Momar will be Wolof dominant, marking a generational change in this Pulaar-speaking family. His situation is thus different from the children of Bandia who are monolingual in Saafi-Saafi until they go to school and acquire Wolof, a fact that has to do with the different linguistic ecologies of a linguistically homogenous village and a larger, ethnically and linguistically mixed town where Wolof is the lingua franca.

4.5 Centenaire Market
The last case I present is that of Dakar’s Centenaire market, a small-scale China Town of sorts, where approximately two hundred Chinese-owned shops dominate both sides of the Boulevard Général de Gaulle, an important thoroughfare in the Centenaire neighborhood close to the center of town. Beginning in the late 1990s, a new type of small-scale entrepreneurial migration from China took root in Senegal, and by the early to mid-2000s the Chinese presence in the city had diversified from that of the engineers and manual laborers who worked on large-scale Chinese government sponsored construction projects to include this modest merchant class whose collective businesses have made the name Centenaire synonymous with the Chinese market. The situation up until April of 2014 was that Senegalese resellers who bought goods from the Chinese merchants set up their merchandise on the sidewalk in front of the Chinese-owned shops. Customers could pass between the two rows of sellers, Chinese and Senegalese, and there was much conversation and movement between the two. After work hours, however, there was almost no interaction between the Chinese and the Senegalese. The linguistic ecology of the market at the time the data mentioned below were collected was such that a pidgin, lexified by urban Wolof, had emerged as a trade language. Although the Chinese shopkeepers often arrived with Chinese-French dictionaries as tools for survival in Dakar, the environment in which they found themselves was one where Wolof completely dominated. The ecology of the market changed in April of 2014 when the government evicted the Senegalese resellers for the Independence Day parade, and they were not allowed back afterwards. The market was much quieter when I visited it in 2014 and 2015 than it had been before the eviction, and the Chinese merchants lamented the loss of the resellers.

A preliminary study of Centenaire Pidgin (McLaughlin 2014) reveals a lexicon of approximately three hundred items. While many of these items ultimately have a French origin, they are loanwords that are commonly used in urban Wolof, thus their pathway into the pidgin is via Wolof. Quite strikingly, however, the personal pronouns are almost always from French, a puzzle that can perhaps be explained by the complexity of the Wolof pronominal system, in which different forms are used

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3 The spoken data in this study come from Minna Zhou’s corpus of in situ recordings in the Centenaire market, carried out in 2012 and 2013. I thank her for sharing these data with me.
depending on the information structure of the sentence. The examples in (9) show the use of the French words *après* ‘after’ and *bagage* ‘merchandise’ which are part of the lexicon of urban Wolof, while the verb is a Wolof verb and the pronoun is from French.

(9) Après sàcc lui bagage
    ‘Then he took his merchandise’

Further evidence that urban Wolof is the principal lexifier of Centenaire Pidgin comes from the informal lexicons and phrase books that the Chinese merchants create for themselves in order to help them communicate, and which they pass on to newcomers. These notebooks, written in Chinese characters, make no distinction between Wolof and French words, and simply record the ambient language, urban Wolof. They turn out to be much more useful to the merchants than the (formal) French dictionaries they brought with them from China.  

5 Conclusions

Focusing on Senegal’s informal language sector allows us to look at the mechanisms by which an African lingua franca spreads. As the discussion has shown, Wolof, a language that within the formal regime remains undifferentiated from any other Senegalese national language, has long assumed a dominant position, thanks to its history as a pre-colonial lingua franca, followed by its evolution into an urban language, first in Saint-Louis and then in Dakar. At present, urban Wolof has spread beyond the confines of the capital, not only to smaller towns like Fatick, but to villages like Niodior and Bandia where, even if it is not spoken very much in daily interactions, inhabitants speak it fluently and use it when they leave the village. The term “urban Wolof,” so useful in accounting for the success of the language, has perhaps now outlived its usefulness, given that the Wolof spoken in places like Niodior is just as “impure” as the contemporary Dakar variety or the Saint-Louis variety of 1864. As the case studies reveal, Wolof also spreads through the schools. This might seem surprising given that with the exception of some pilot programs there is little formal education in any language other than French in Senegal, but French is merely the language of instruction while the language of communication in the playground and hallways is Wolof. These case studies also show how Wolof is a language of mobility. The examples are drawn from Senegal, but there are significant groups of Senegalese migrants and traders in various African cities such as Niamey, Libreville and Cape Town, as well as in Europe and the United

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4 Photos of these notebooks were collected in May of 2014. I am grateful to Tracy Lu for helping to photograph them, and to Delin Deng for her help in their transcription.
States. Here too Wolof serves as a lingua franca among Senegalese who are abroad, and some may even learn Wolof abroad.

The role of French, which is of course pre-eminent in the formal language sector, is more important in the informal for its contribution to urban Wolof from the 19th century (and perhaps earlier) on. This raises a number of questions that are pertinent to current ways of looking at language which have moved away from the bounded, named and artefactualized systems that terms like French and Wolof would seem to imply. Rather than focusing on idealized entities such as these, the ethnographic perspective on the informal linguistic sector moves us away from languages and towards the notion of language as a type of human behavior. It also shows us that a repertoire is a more useful concept for understanding language in postcolonial Africa than are languages. Although the title of this essay is “How a lingua franca spreads,” the only agency involved is that of individual speakers who make individual choices to expand their repertoires by acquiring Wolof. Wolof—or French or Pulaar—can be viewed in this light simply as a heuristic device that describes part of a heteroglossic repertoire.

Languages, as bounded entities, require a powerful regime of language, including institutions like the French Academy, grammars and dictionaries, and spelling rules, to maintain their borders. They are the domain of the official sector and especially of the African state whose international identity is heavily invested in language. In the case of Senegal, which we might most accurately describe as a francophone state and a Wolof-speaking nation, this regime of language is enacted through legal designations and requirements. There is no room here for the hybrid language that Wolof has become, not for the way people write it. Writing is an area that is particularly susceptible to regimentation and standardization as the requirements for codification described previously show. Although the topic lies beyond the scope of this paper, it is worthwhile mentioning that the official writing system for codified national languages is rarely used outside of (usually adult) literacy education carried out by NGOs and missionaries, or in pilot programs in national languages embedded in public schools.5 This does not mean, however, that these languages are not written. In the case of Wolof, which is used quite extensively in text messaging and other informal digital media, writers follow French spelling conventions, illustrating that writing systems are always predicated on prior writing systems (Sebba 2007). And although the codification of national languages always involves the Latin alphabet—even, surprisingly, for Hassaniyya, an Arabic dialect spoken in Mauritania and Senegal—there is a robust ajami writing system for writing Wolof in the Arabic script (see Ngom, this volume). This tradition, which has been practiced since pre-colonial times, is known as wolofal, and is an innovation whose origins can be traced to Qur’anic schools (Ngom 2009; 

5 The situation in Senegal differs quite drastically from the situation described by Peterson (this volume), where the standardization of Swahili, Yoruba and Shona resulted in the flourishing of a vernacular literature with high symbolic value.
Souag 2010). Ajami writing, which is also used for Pulaar, Maninka, Seereer, and possibly other languages (Mc Laughlin to appear, 2017) is often dismissed as an informal writing system, and is not counted in official literacy statistics. But as I hope this chapter has shown, just as the informal economic sector can tell us more about how people actually get by in African societies, so too can the informal language sector can tell us much more about how language is used in Africa, including how a lingua franca spreads.

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