Linguistic Fieldwork

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9 The give and take of fieldwork: noun classes and other concerns in Fatick, Senegal

Fiona Mc Laughlin and Thierno Seydou Sall

> The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place.
> Chinua Achebe, *Arrow of God*

The narratives that follow are an attempt to convey two perspectives, that of the linguist (Mc Laughlin) and that of the "informant" (Sall), on a particular moment of linguistic fieldwork carried out in Fatick, Senegal in 1989. The text has come together from conversations both tape recorded and remembered, written drafts and translations of drafts, and individual readings and critiques by each of the authors. During the process of discussing and writing these dual narratives we have had to confront the issues and problems of ethnographic representation in a very direct manner since we have, in a sense, entered into a dialogue about the representation of ourselves and each other. On several occasions we thought that we were undertaking an impossible task because the challenges of such representation seemed to be overwhelming. We have not solved them, we are merely more aware of them than ever. Perhaps the ambivalence of our perspective can best be conveyed through a conversation we had in Dakar in July, 1998.

SALL: Somehow one has the impression that we are always the object and never the subject. We are the "material" that toubabs[1] come to study.

MC LAUGHLIN: But this time, by presenting your own narrative, don't you think that you have an opportunity to be the subject instead of the object?

SALL: (Laughter). I'll talk about myself, but only at your initiative. So where does that put us?

Part I: Fiona Mc Laughlin

1.1 Fatick 1989

In January, 1989, as a Ph.D. candidate in linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin, I arrived in the small provincial capital of Fatick, Senegal, to conduct fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation (Mc Laughlin 1992). I arrived in Fatick after a change of field site, language, and topic from those

in my original grant proposal, accompanied by my husband, Leonardo Villalón, who was doing fieldwork for his own dissertation in political science. Due to what in retrospect was probably unfounded sensitivity to potential political unrest in Casamance in southern Senegal, we had allowed ourselves to be persuaded by American authorities in Dakar to change our field site from the comparatively lush and tropical region south of the Gambia to an area further north, somewhere in the savanna belt of the West African Sahel, a sandy arid region south of the Sahara desert. After researching several possibilities, we settled on Fatick, a rather unremarkable town in the interior, but a good site for my revised fieldwork project in terms of linguistic makeup.

Although I have conducted linguistic fieldwork on many occasions both in Fatick and in other places since 1989, I have chosen in this essay to focus on and describe that first intense period of fieldwork for a variety of reasons. The first is to situate the experience in time and place. No matter how much time linguists devote every day to eliciting or otherwise collecting data, going over recordings and field logs, organizing notes into the description of a language, and matching details of the raw material with our theoretical concerns, we are at the same time living in a society of which we in some sense become a part, through our relative degrees of integration or alienation; thus, the experience of fieldwork is inextricably intertwined with the experience of the field site and sense of place. During the year I spent in Fatick, our lives were disrupted by what are still referred to euphemistically in Senegal as *les èvènements*. While the news that the Berlin Wall had been opened, crackling across on the six a.m. BBC broadcast, seemed remote and of little immediate relevance in Fatick, a wave of unprecedented violence against the Moorish[2] population that spread throughout Senegal during Ramadan in 1989 had real effects on our life. Mawluud Fall, our Moorish shopkeeper neighbor, was "repatriated" to Mauritania, a country he had never even visited, and Leonardo, who had so often been mistaken for a Moor, had to lie low for several days in a friend's house in Dakar. Situated historically and geographically, each field experience is unique, and as such contributes a case study to the corpus of accounts of linguistic fieldwork, from which we can in turn start to extrapolate generalizations about the nature of such work. A second reason to focus on this initial experience of fieldwork is that for many linguists, or indeed for many who conduct fieldwork in other disciplines, dissertation fieldwork is frequently the only period during which it is possible to spend so much time in the field, since professional and personal obligations later on make it much more difficult to absent oneself for extended periods of time. Finally, a narrative of the first period of fieldwork is also, perhaps, more useful to potential fieldworkers in the sense that it recounts the process of learning to be a fieldworker, with all the mistakes and successes involved in such an apprenticeship with oneself.

Fatick is a Sahelian town. It is hot, dusty, and by any standards materially poor. At the time that I lived there, many of its inhabitants made a tenuous living from cultivating peanuts and millet in the sandy fields surrounding the town. The success of their crops depended almost entirely on the caprices of the rainy season since there was no alternative to rain as a system of irrigation. The day after we arrived in Fatick, in January 1989, the town was ravaged by pilgrim crickets. Writhing clouds of red insects swooped down on the town, and for several hours we were subjected to the demonical sound of tiny gnashing jaws destroying mango and guava trees, stripping palm fronds, and leaving Fatick almost without foliage or shade. With a certain resignation about the harshness of life in the Sahel, Maal, the chief of police, shrugged his shoulders as we surveyed the damage after the crickets left and said "*Kenn mënuci dara*" ('No-one can do anything about it.'). Fatick's residents provide a wry but accurate commentary on life in their town when they joke, "*Fatick, c'est fatigant.*"

Sufi Islam is the predominant religion of both Fatick and Senegal as a whole. Most Senegalese Muslims follow the religious guidance of marabouts (Sufi leaders) who occupy a place of great influence in Senegalese society and whose popularity is reflected in the cultural and material aspects of everyday life. The main constraint that living in a Muslim society entailed for us was a minor and self-imposed one. Leonardo's research focused on the role of the Sufi brotherhoods in local and national politics, and both out of consideration for many people – including the several local marabouts he was working with – and also to prevent tainting our reputation and thus endangering our fieldwork, we neither bought alcohol locally nor consumed it publicly. Our frequent association with religious leaders, attendance at (usually all-night long) religious events, and general interest in Sufism led to some apocryphal stories about us in the town – namely, that we were Muslims and that we fasted during Ramadan and prayed five times a day. We had to dispel this misconception delicately, since we wanted neither to misrepresent ourselves nor to offend anyone.

In the first weeks that we were in Fatick, we spent our time and energy on the important banalities of setting up a healthy and basic but comfortable place to live. We rented an old and somewhat decrepit colonial house that had four large square rooms and an outside kitchen. The Lebanese landlady, who had moved to Dakar, had left some rudimentary furniture which we supplemented with beds and chairs made locally out of ronier palm fronds. The house had high ceilings and a generous overhang on the roof which kept it cool much of the time and at least bearable in the hottest months. Our bedroom was made more comfortable by the addition of a

table fan and a mosquito net. In the yard we found a concave stone that had once served as part of a water-filtering system. With the help of Djibi Ndiaye, an elderly man who had worked for the Lebanese family and who still lived in a small room at the back of our house, we scrubbed it out and reconstructed the whole system. The water filtered through the stone, dripping through a piece of cheesecloth into a large terra cotta jar from which we filled our bottles for drinking water. Because of recent changes in the water level, the tap water in Fatick is slightly salty, so we had unsalted deep well water delivered to the house on donkey carts. The mosquito nets and water-filtering system helped protect us from two of the most common health threats, malaria and water-borne illnesses; and the house we had chosen provided a refuge from the scorching heat. During the year that we lived in Fatick we were rarely sick and were able to work well in our relatively comfortable study.

The equipment that I took with me to the field was minimal, in part because I was unsure how reliable my electrical supply would be. Computers had not quite become *de rigueur* (or affordable) for graduate students at the time, and I did not buy one until I came back to Austin from doing fieldwork. I did not have a big equipment budget in my grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation, so I took with me two good microphones, a year's supply of blank cassettes, and a bag full of 3 × 5 blank note pads and boxes for slip files. In Dakar I bought notebooks for field logs and a multipurpose dual deck cassette player/radio that I used for all my field recordings, as well as for playing music and listening to the radio.

The focus of my research was noun classification. The revised goal that I had set for myself in Fatick was to research the morphophonology of noun classification in three northern Atlantic (Niger-Congo) languages, Wolof, Pulaar (Fula), and Seereer-Siin. These languages have some of the most extensive and elaborate noun class systems found in natural language. Pulaar has twenty-one classes, Seereer sixteen, and Wolof ten, and the nominal systems of all three are characterized to some extent by stem-initial consonant mutation conditioned by noun class. From a theoretical perspective I was interested in what these languages could tell us about the nature of morphological agreement, how derivational and inflectional morphology intersected in the class systems, and how consonant mutation could best be accounted for within an autosegmental framework. I had already had some experience with two of the languages by the time I arrived in Fatick. In my field methods class at the University of Texas we had worked with a native speaker of the Guinean dialect of Fula. This, in addition to the fact that Fula was a key language in the literature on autosegmental phonology, sharpened my interest in looking at Fula for myself, and also at related languages. I already spoke Wolof fairly well, since I had

taken an intensive course in Dakar in the summer of 1986, and I had continued studying and speaking Wolof during the six months I spent in Dakar in 1988, just before moving to Fatick. I had also written a qualifying paper on Wolof noun classification as part of the requirement to be admitted to Ph.D. candidacy, so I was familiar with the problems of noun classification in that language, although I was not altogether prepared for doing fieldwork on a topic that involved so much variation. Apart from the few written accounts of it that I had been able to find, Seereer was the unknown language in the picture.

1.2 *Work in the field*

The core of the linguistic fieldwork experience lies in the intense work one does with native-speaker assistants, thus the choice of assistants is one of the most important aspects of fieldwork, but also one over which the linguist, in many cases, does not have complete control. It is difficult to know at first who will make a good assistant and who will not, so before engaging anyone as a more or less permanent assistant, I worked with several people on a trial basis. My very first attempts to find an assistant for Seereer were close to home. I tried to work with RN, the young woman we had hired to cook and do laundry for us. I was baffled at first when I asked her for the word for the cardinal number two and she replied, "I say *hadak* but everyone else says *dik*." I questioned her about the alleged discrepancy but got nowhere. After a few elicitation sessions followed by checking the data informally with other Seereer speakers who stopped by the house, I realized that several of the lexical items that RN had given me were not typical of the Fatick Seereer speech community at large. Eventually she told me that she spoke like her mother, who was from one of the islands in the Saloum Delta, thus she spoke the Nyominka dialect rather than that of Fatick. As I got to know her over the course of the year, I realized that RN's speech was much more like that of other Seereer speakers in Fatick than she had led me to believe, but that she had supplied me with the Nyominka forms because she considered Nyominka to be a "deeper" or more authentic form of Seereer. This was not the last time that I would run up against the problem of "deep" forms of language. It recurred like a leitmotiv in my elicitation sessions and in the numerous conversations I had with people about language. In fact, it eventually became such a problem with Wolof that I abandoned formal elicitation altogether and switched to gathering data on noun classes from natural discourse.

In order to meet people and start establishing social networks, Leonardo and I volunteered to give English classes two evenings a week in a local school. Here I met two of my future assistants – SN, with whom I worked

9.1 Fiona Mc Laughlin (linguist) and Thierno Seydou Sall (Pulaar teacher).

on Seereer, and Thierno Sall, with whom I worked on Pulaar. The two turned out to be radically different in their understanding of what my goals were. SN, who was from the old Seereer neighborhood of Ndiaye-Ndiaye and who spoke French well, was convinced that my interest in his language was a first step towards finding out the "secrets" of Seereer culture, and never missed an opportunity to tell me that my undertaking was futile because the old people who knew those secrets would never impart them to me. Perhaps because he thought of my attempts to find out about Seereer as a tool for something else, he had an enthusiastically pragmatic approach to things. I had some trouble at first distinguishing between voiced and voiceless glottalized stops in Seereer, but each time I asked SN for clarification he said that the way in which it was pronounced was unimportant, and people would still understand what I meant to say. No amount of explaining what I was doing made any impression on him, and I quickly had to abandon working with him. He was quite disappointed about his dismissal and anytime I saw him afterwards I felt very guilty about it, until finally I was able to secure him a job as an interpreter for a team of American medical anthropologists.

Thierno, on the other hand, proved to be an excellent assistant. Although his formal education was limited to religious and Arabic language training with a marabout, he had won a scholarship to a teacher's training college in Sudan, and was now employed as an elementary school Arabic teacher in Fatick. He understood from the outset what my goals were, and as we started to work together he was frequently two steps ahead of me, supplying me with the forms I wanted before I had to ask for them. Moreover, Thierno started to become very interested in how I was analyzing his language, and after each elicitation session he asked for explanations about his language, and started picking up the technical linguistic terms to describe Pulaar. After working with him for an extended period, I had complete confidence in his ability to record forms accurately, and after I left the field I even asked him to send me some forms by mail. The exchange of expertise between Thierno and myself was rewarding, and moved the level of the fieldwork dynamic from the extraction of raw material to a real intellectual exchange. Rather than being a solitary activity, my linguistic data collection had become the shared work of two people. Despite his lack of formal education, Thierno turned out to be a natural linguist, and several years later, after his uncle commented on my lack of fluency in Pulaar after I had spent so much time working on the language, he was able to explain to him successfully in Pulaar what linguistics was.

As I amassed more and more data on the languages I was working on, I started spending longer hours in the evening organizing my slip files and cataloguing data. For every hour I spent eliciting linguistic forms, I spent

roughly four hours going over them. Although it was not without its rewards, there was a certain tedium involved in this solitary work of double-checking and cataloguing, so when I got tired of it I switched over to the more exciting work of sketching out preliminary analyses, which eventually brought me back to more questions about the data I was working with.

1.3 Giving and taking

Meanwhile, I started working with MD, a student who was in his last year of high school. He had come by to introduce himself as president of the high school English club and I found out that he was a native Seereer speaker. Partly because he was so eager for contact with Americans, I decided to try working with him and proposed a short trial period. Although he did not seem particularly interested in what we were doing, MD was not difficult to work with and we continued to work together over the course of a few months, but not without some problems. Our problems were not of a linguistic nature, however. MD had at first told me that under no circumstances did he want to be paid for working with me. I, on the other hand, wanted to establish a professional working relationship which, in retrospect, I wanted to use for my own protection, so I insisted on paying him and told him that there was a budget in my grant destined for that purpose alone. I paid MD the equivalent of four or five dollars an hour for approximately ten hours a week, a sum that added up to a civil servant's salary and which, for a high school student, was enormous. One day, however, MD came on a formal visit to see me. After exchanging greetings he started into the purpose of his visit: "The human voice is a gift of God," he said. I suspected instantly that he wanted to be paid more and inappropriately suggested that this was the case. He vehemently denied it, so I retrenched and we started a very polite and formulaic back and forth about the value of the human voice. Finally, after half an hour of conversation, MD told me that a German linguist, who had been in the area several years earlier and had recorded some Wolof speakers, was now selling the cassettes in Germany and making lots of money from them. I doubted the veracity of the story, but saw where the conversation was heading. I then went on to talk about the field recordings we were making, to let him know that they really had no market value. I told him that if he wanted, I would give him copies of all of them (adding that I thought they would be very boring for him to listen to), and I even offered to write up a contract saying that I would not sell them, if that made him feel better. At this point we went back to the theme of the human voice being a gift of God. I told MD I agreed with him, but pointed out that just about everyone was in possession

of this gift. We talked in circles for a while longer, but then I went straight to the point again and said that if he wanted to be paid more I was afraid that it was not possible. I added that it was his choice whether he wanted to continue working or not, and that if he did not, I would find someone else, and, I added, very easily. He left and said he would come back for our regular session the next day.

I was upset by MD's veiled request for many reasons. I knew that I was paying him a very fair price, in fact more than any high school student could possibly think of earning, but at the same time his request had made me very uneasy. It was in a sense both a legitimate and an illegitimate request. As the extent of Fatick's material poverty continued to reveal itself to me, I became increasingly ill at ease with both my surroundings and myself. My unease stemmed primarily from my own pessimism about whether I would ever be able to integrate myself into life in Fatick, given the fact that the economic disparity between myself and the people around me was so overwhelming. Leonardo and I were, by virtue of the fact that we were toubabs, prime targets for continual requests for money. It seemed that not a day went by without someone catching up with me on the street or coming to the house to ask me for money for a naming ceremony, a medical prescription, bush taxi fare to visit a relative, new clothes for a religious holiday, or even a guitar! My response was emotional and frequently manifested itself as anger. The anger had to do with my desire to be treated as an individual and not just as a source of money. It reached its peak one day when a woman whom we did not know came to the door to ask Djibi Ndiaye bluntly "Where is the toubab? I need money." I was furious. While I wanted to believe that my economic status was incidental to my personality in terms of how people evaluated me, it was clear from that woman's comment that my personality was not even incidental to her, it was merely irrelevant. The only important thing about me was that I had money.

There was a darker side of this anger which took the form of a moral crisis. To say that I was not a wealthy person, merely a graduate student with a $7,000 grant, was a lie, because in the context of Fatick I was one of the wealthiest people in town. My moral crisis stemmed from the fact that I could occasionally go to Dakar for a weekend, have dinner in a good French restaurant, and maybe buy a Baule mask at one of the many art dealers' shops on Rue Mohammed V for a sum of money that could make a significant difference in the life of numerous Fatickois. It might provide someone with medicine or malaria prophylaxis for the family; it might mean the difference between being able to send the children to school that year or not; it might allow Arame Gueye, the woman who sold peanuts on the corner near our house, to replace the leaky thatched roof on her hut. "Money," Thierno told me at some point during that year in Fatick, "is for

solving problems." So was it immoral of me to go to Dakar and spend money on unnecessary things? Was it immoral of me not to give substantial sums of money to the people I knew in Fatick in order to help them? Now that the initial excitement of moving to my field site, settling in and starting work had faded, I had started to become obsessed with these questions and how I was to come to terms with the poverty around me.

My moral crisis began to have deleterious effects on my fieldwork. The clear sense of purpose in the field that I had at the outset became obscured by these other pressing issues so much so that fieldwork now seemed almost to be a futile undertaking, an insignificant activity. Several events, all of which were linked to material poverty, conspired to contribute to my troubled state of mind. A newborn girl, the sister of Cheikh Thiam, a young boy who ran errands for Djibi Ndiaye and who had become part of our household, had been named after me. In her father's compound someone had died, and there was a suspicion of cholera. The health officials came to inspect the compound and said that the dead man's clothes should be burned; however, later on that day I learned that the clothes had not been burned, but simply washed and redistributed to other members of the household. Then, arriving back in Fatick from a weekend trip to Dakar, we found out that a young woman we knew well had just given birth prematurely to a baby the night before and it was doubtful whether the baby would survive. We went to the hospital to find her but were told that she had already left and was trying to take the baby to a hospital in Dakar. After half an hour of walking in the noon sun, we found the woman and her mother standing with the baby in the bush taxi park, waiting for a van to fill up with passengers so they could leave for Dakar. We found out later that there was an ambulance in Fatick for that purpose, but no one had the money to pay for gasoline. The prospects of the van filling up before four o'clock, when people were up and about again, were slim. Even though we had just arrived from Dakar, we had little choice but to pay for all the remaining seats in the van and head back to the capital with the baby. The ride was nightmarish, and by the time we got to Dakar the baby was dead, or as people said, it had "returned," never fully having been in this world. As I thought about it, I realized I had known more people in Fatick who had died in the short time I had been there than in the rest of my life.

I cannot say just how I worked my way out of the paralysis that had affected me and back into a renewed enthusiasm for the work I was doing. Certainly, the moral crisis was not resolved, and nine years later working in Dakar I have still not resolved it, although I have managed to find my own way through it. Getting away from Fatick for a trip to Mauritania shortly before Ramadan no doubt helped, since upon my return I felt that I was coming back to a place I knew and where, in an awkward way, I fit in. A few days after I returned, I walked in town with Abal Diallo, my neighbor and director of the Fatick Chamber of Commerce. Abal Diallo, dressed that day in a deep purple damask boubou with gold embroidery, was by Senegalese standards a prosperous man. As we walked, numerous people came up to greet him and make requests of him. He deflected some of the requests graciously with jokes and laughter, but to some he gave money. I commented to Abal that he got as many requests for help as I did, to which he replied, "All the time." A few days later Ndaan Diouf came into town from Dakar. Ndaan was an entrepreneur who owned the cloth shop next to our house, and he had plans to start a peanut butter processing factory in Fatick. As we were standing talking to him outside the shop, an elderly woman dressed in shabby clothing came up and prostrated herself before him, touching his feet and the hem of his boubou and repeating his last name: "Diouf, Diouf, Diouf." Ndaan was visibly embarrassed by the woman's display of submission in our presence and hastily exchanged some words with her, opened his wallet, handed her some money, and sent her on her way. She clutched the bills in her hand and muttered something about how good Ndaan Diouf was as she walked away. Because of his embarrassment I did not ask Ndaan who the woman was, but afterwards I asked Arame Gueye, the peanut vendor who had witnessed the unusual scene. "She's his slave," Arame told me. When I asked what that meant, she told me that it meant that Ndaan had to give her money. I questioned others about the event and found out that the behavior I had seen was an artifact of a social structure that had once been three-tiered in nature, the lowest tier being occupied by *jaam* or slaves. By this time I decided that there was more to the exchange of money than met the eye, and that there were certain rules, unknown to me, that were governing the exchanges. The muezzin from the local mosque who used to visit us with some frequency had stopped coming by, and told Djibi Ndiaye that it was because we never gave him any money. "Griots,[3] all they do is ask for money," Djibi volunteered. I talked to Thierno one day about the great number of requests that I got from people. Too discreet to say anything directly, he simply said, "Yes, there are some people who ask for things all the time." He then added that people asked him for money all the time, too. By this point I was coming closer to understanding the hierarchical social structure shared by most of the ethnic groups that made up Senegalese society, where people are divided into endogamous groups, known in Wolof as *géer*, *ñeeño*, and *jaam*. *Jaam* are slaves, but in Wolof and Seereer society the category has all but disappeared; *ñeeño*, usually translated as 'casted groups', are artisans such as blacksmiths, leather workers, and griots or verbal artists, all of whom work with dangerous materials, including language; and *géer* are non-casted people, generally referred to in French or English by what is

somewhat of a misnomer: 'nobles'.[4] This social structure makes for an elaborate patron-client network, in which *géer* give money and other gifts to *ñeeño* in return for securing their reputation. And even above and beyond these social considerations, the act of giving places one in a superior social position to a dependent. Seen in this light, those who asked me for money were giving me the opportunity to establish my reputation! And so it was. In the town, I was frequently embarrassed by people stopping me with their friends to say in front of me how good I was because I had given someone money to buy school books for her children. I felt almost more awkward in these situation than in those where I was asked directly for money, and quickly learned the formulaic response: "*Ñoo ko bokk*" ('We share it.')

I had occasion to reflect on all the work that had gone into establishing myself in Fatick when twice I felt threatened by association with American visitors whose behavior was untoward or inappropriate in the context of Fatick society, and I realized how proprietary I had become about my field site. After living in Fatick for several months I had learned how to conduct myself in a socially appropriate manner, had established a network of acquaintances, friends, and, as it turned out, dependents, and was thus a member, albeit a somewhat awkward one, of Fatick society.

1.4 *The elusive noun class*

In looking at the noun class data I had elicited from MD, Souleymane Faye, a Seereer linguist at the University of Dakar, commented that MD must be a young speaker since the data contained numerous Wolof loan words. I decided to collect a corpus of noun class data in Seereer from an older, less urbanized speaker, and began working with ED, a peanut farmer who lived in Ndiaye-Ndiaye. Up until that point I had done all my elicitation through the medium of French, Senegal's official language, but because ED did not know French we had to work through the medium of Wolof. Although I spoke Wolof well, I would still have felt more comfortable working through French. After overcoming my initial trepidation, however, I found that there were some advantages to working on Seereer through Wolof. Since the two languages are structurally similar, it was easier to find exact equivalents between Seereer and Wolof, such as an iterative verbal extension, or an imperfective aspectual marker, or an inchoative verb, than between Seereer and French. In fact, in working through the medium of French on both Pulaar and Seereer, assistants frequently gave me a Wolof translation in addition to a French one, since the Wolof mirrored more directly the forms in those languages. In comparing ED's noun class forms with MD's, I saw that Souleymane Faye had been right. The variation between the two speakers' forms clearly showed the effects of Wolofization, the spread of

Wolof as Senegal's lingua franca, at the expense of other languages. Although ED had grown up speaking both Seereer and Wolof, he had always lived in the Ndiaye-Ndiaye neighborhood, spoke only Seereer at home, and used Seereer when speaking with his siblings. MD, on the other hand, had been to school, where Wolof dominates as the language used outside the classroom, and at home he had used both Seereer and Wolof – Seereer with the older people in his family, and Wolof with his brothers and sisters.

Variation in Seereer noun classes was something I could live with: at least it was consistent for individual speakers. Wolof noun classes, on the other hand, exhibited not only variation between speakers, but within the repertoire of a single individual. I had noticed this already as a language learner: my Wolof teachers in Dakar would tell me one day that a noun was in a certain noun class, and the next day they would put it in a different class. The same was true in eliciting data on noun classes in Wolof. People with whom I worked would frequently tell me that they said one thing, but that the "real" noun class was something else, and then later they would assign the same noun to yet a third class. I tried to find some patterns in the data I was getting, but found it difficult. One trend that I noticed was that in eliciting data, if my assistant assigned a noun to one of the rarer classes, then the next few nouns that I elicited were also assigned to that class, almost as if the order in which I was eliciting them was determining the class. As I reflected on what was going on, I realized that I had been working with speakers of urban Wolof, all of whom were in some sense aware that their language differed from rural dialects of Wolof spoken in the Wolof heartland. The two most noticeable characteristics of urban Wolof are, first, extensive lexical borrowing from French, and second, the tendency of nouns to be assigned to the default class. The people with whom I worked on eliciting Wolof were constantly holding their own speech up to be compared with a "deep" dialect of Wolof (*olof bu xóot*) of which they had only an imperfect knowledge.[5]

While discussing the Wolof problem with Thierno one day, he told me that he had spent several years living in a Wolof village as a teacher, and that he had a good command of the rural noun class forms. If I was interested, he suggested, we could go through my noun list and he would give me the classes for all of them. I rejected his offer on the grounds that he was not a native speaker of Wolof, an issue that I later had reason to reconsider. It did not matter to me what dialect of Wolof I recorded, but I could not seem to get beyond the interference of prescriptive notions in any of my elicitations. At this point I decided that I was getting an interesting metalinguistic commentary from elicitation sessions on Wolof noun classes, but not what I was after. I decided to abandon formal elicitation and rely entirely on

natural speech for noun classes and see what the results were, a strategy that met with success. There were one or two individuals with whom I was in contact on a daily basis for extended periods of time, and I focused on their speech. I found much more consistency in their speech than I had found in elicitation, and even the discrepancies tended to fall into patterns. There was heavy use of the default class, and in cases where they used two classes for the same noun, one of the two was, without fail, the default class. I became so accustomed to listening for Wolof noun classes that I found myself doing it all the time, even while listening to Senegal's preeminent rock star, Youssou Ndour, singing in Wolof. In listening to people in town, in the market, or in bush taxis, I could not always tell if their first language was Wolof, but given my experience with native Pulaar and Seereer speakers who spoke fluent Wolof, and learning that many of them could not remember a time when they did not speak Wolof, the very notion of a "native speaker of Wolof" was thrown into question. I had rejected grammatical judgments on Wolof from Thierno because he was a native Pulaar speaker, but could not he, or others like him, also be native speakers of Wolof? In this context, could it not be possible to have more than one native language? Although at the time I did not hold these views, I now think that the urban–rural distinction in Wolof is a much more salient variable in distinguishing between varieties of the language than whether the Wolof speaker has another mother tongue, such as Seereer or Pulaar.

1.5 *Speaking Wolof*

Linguistics was, predictably, just as misunderstood in Fatick as anywhere else. People in the town thought that I was learning to speak Seereer and Pulaar and were astonished that after so much work I could say so little. I had, however, devoted considerable time to learning Wolof, and found that the rewards more than justified my efforts. Not only did speaking Wolof facilitate social integration, but, as I have already illustrated, it also proved invaluable in my linguistic investigations. Being able to listen to and understand most anything in Wolof said within earshot opened up my experience of the language in a way not yet possible with Pulaar or Seereer. Rather than having to elicit linguistic forms, they came rolling at me from all sides during my waking hours, so much so that I sometimes found it overwhelming. I carried a small notebook around with me and took notes on all kinds of topics, ranging from noun classes in natural discourse to Wolof and French code mixing, and eventually amassed a wealth of unorganized data.

Some of my discoveries about Wolof came from corrections to my own speech. For example, in recounting an event to Cheikh Thiam, the seven-year-old boy who spent much time at our house helping Djibi Ndiaye, I was dismayed when he told me that no one spoke the way I did. It seemed that each of my Wolof sentences was in itself grammatical, but when strung together in the context of a narrative they became quite ungrammatical. In this way I was introduced to the grammar of Wolof discourse above the clause level. A second experience alerted me to the differences in speech between male and female speakers. In bargaining for fish in the marketplace I called the fish vendor *sama jigéen* ('my woman'), a common phrase that I had heard people – but as it turned out, only men – use in just such a context. Much to my humiliation, everyone within earshot burst out laughing at my utterance, and soon word had spread all over the market that I had spoken like a man.

One of the topics that interested me the most, but to which I would have had limited access without my knowledge of Wolof, was the phenomenon of surrogate speech (Yankah 1995: 8). *Géer*, or other socially prominent people in Wolof society, refrain from speaking robustly in public, and have griots or verbal artists speak in their stead. A common situation in a public talk given by a socially prominent person is for that person to speak softly so that the audience cannot hear very well, and for the griot to report loudly what he or she said, often adding interesting embellishments. One night I attended a talk given by a Tijani marabout and was able to sit close enough to the front so that I could hear what the marabout said before the griot reported it. The marabout was quite eloquent but spoke softly. He used many French words in his Wolof, which in this case were intended to show his erudition. In reporting this discourse the griot expunged the French words and substituted somewhat arcane Wolof words, thus exhibiting to an appreciative audience his mastery of *olof bu xóot* or "deep Wolof" and, especially interesting to me, its requisite noun classes. But when the marabout stopped using French terms conspicuously, the griot sprinkled the reported discourse abundantly with French to show his own expertise in that language. Because of the griot's linguistic prowess, an aura of erudition was reflected back onto the marabout. The implications of that speech event are too complex and far reaching to elaborate on here, but it is clear that without my knowledge of Wolof, the surrogate speech event would have been closed to me. While formal linguistic elicitation works in some instances it may not be sufficient, as my experience with Wolof noun classification clearly shows. In such cases the knowledge of a field language is invaluable in that it further enables the linguist to observe the language in its natural environment.

1.6 *Conclusion*

Although it is a perhaps a cliché to say so, the period of fieldwork that I spent in Fatick conducting research for my dissertation was in many senses

an initiation. It was an initiation into working as a field linguist by learning to trust my own judgment without being able to confer with fellow students or the professor in a field methods class. After returning to Austin from Fatick I was thus anxious to write my dissertation, graduate, and move beyond my status as a student. It was also an initiation into the larger academic community of Africanists, most of whom share the experience of having done fieldwork on the continent, a common base that has played a great role in fostering interdisciplinary research among Africanists. And finally, the time I spent in Fatick was an initiation into the realities of living in the third world, with all the dilemmas and rewards involved in such an experience.

Part II: Thierno Seydou Sall[6]

2.1 *My home town, 1989*

It had already been several days since I first noticed the presence of a couple of toubabs in Fatick. (A toubab never passes unnoticed in a little Senegalese town like Fatick.) I crossed them in the streets of Fatick and sometimes I saw them pass near my house. I had no idea what they had come to look for in my home town.

One day, I learned that free English courses were being given by an American couple, and for someone like me, who had studied alone and who was preparing, as an independent candidate, to take secondary school exams, where English occupies a very important place, it was a golden opportunity. In fact, up to that point I had never studied at school at all. I had received only a religious education in Arabic at the *daara* (Koranic school), and through this education in Arabic I eventually won a scholarship to study at the African Islamic Centre in Sudan. This in turn had allowed me to become an Arabic teacher in the primary schools upon my return to Senegal, a profession that I exercised at that time. But through my own efforts I had learned to read and write in French, which is the official language of my country, and so through the medium of reading I had access to the different subjects taught in school programs, such as mathematics, natural science, English, history, and geography.

So I went to find out more about the English courses, and the Americans in question turned out to be none other than the toubabs that I had been seeing for some time in the town. My inquiries came rather late because the English courses were about to finish, but to console me the Americans invited me to come by their house so they could give me some English books that they had used in the program.

Through our discussions and conversations they discovered that I was an

Arabic teacher, a fact to which Leonardo was not indifferent, since he was there to do research on a subject that was related to Islam for his doctorate. But I think that it was especially the fact that I am Haalpulaar, a speaker of Pulaar, that captured their attention. In fact, Fiona, who was preparing a dissertation in linguistics, needed both a Haalpulaar assistant and a Seereer assistant, and it was I who would eventually become the Haalpulaar assistant. I think that the fact that I also spoke other languages like Wolof, which is spoken by the majority of Senegalese, Seereer, which is spoken by the majority of the inhabitants of the region of Fatick (Siin), Arabic and French, was a favorable factor in my becoming her assistant.

2.2 *Being a linguist's assistant*

Fiona, who was a linguistics student, had engaged me as her assistant for collaboration on a linguistic project on noun classes in Pulaar. This collaboration, which gave me great satisfaction both on the intellectual and material level, was carried out with only minor difficulties. What few difficulties there were revolved around three points. First, although I speak several languages, I did not have a clear notion of what the field of linguistics actually was, and so I had some trouble in the beginning understanding what my "student" expected from me. I call her my student because when I think in Pulaar or Wolof, I really cannot call her anything else. For me, a student is someone who wants to know, and she was the one who asked me questions to find out about my language, and I tried to answer them. When I started working on the project with Fiona, because we did not know each other well at the time, it was very hard for me to be natural in talking about my language. I had a tendency to focus on what was correct and what was incorrect in Pulaar because I thought that there were certain expectations about the way I should speak. I thought that if I knew something was incorrect, even if I normally said it that way, I should try and give her the correct form. For example, the word for the plural form of curdled milk is really *kocce*, but most people say *kosameeje*, so I told her *kocce* first, and *kosameeje* afterwards. I thought she could use this information to eventually speak good Pulaar, but after she explained it to me, I quickly understood that her goal at that point was not to speak Pulaar, but to study a part of the mechanism of the language. I should say that for many people it is not easy to understand that one can study a language in any way other than learning to speak it. I had a vivid example of this when I went home once with my student. My uncle spoke to her in Pulaar, but she could not reply. My uncle was astonished because he thought that she had studied enough Pulaar by now to be able to speak it. So I was obliged to make a great pedagogical effort to explain the reality of the situation to him, but he still seemed to

find it bizarre. I was a bit bothered because I had the impression that my uncle thought that if my student still did not speak Pulaar, it was because my teaching was not good!

I also had some difficulties regarding my own language. Pulaar is my native language which I learned in a natural way rather than a structured way. I was thus unable to know the difficulties and the limits of my language. So I started work with absolute confidence, but as the work advanced I started to discover difficulties about things that I had taken for granted, and I ran into some insurmountable limits. For example, one day we were doing compounds composed of two nouns, and I had to give Fiona the noun class for those words. For some of the words, the noun class could be that of either the first noun or the second noun in the compound, but for others there was only one possibility. After a while I started to question my own judgment. I did not know what sounded right or wrong to me any more, and so we had to stop. Another example was that I at first thought that I could translate anything from French or Wolof into Pulaar, but then I realized that there were ideas that Pulaar could not manage very well because it was, above all, a question of culture before being a question of vocabulary.

The other difficulties that we had were tied to my level of French. Our working language was French, but my competence in French was nonetheless still lacking. (One could say the same of my student's competence in Wolof.) Added to that was interference from local languages, all of which together meant that I spoke a rather idiosyncratic type of French. It happened more than once that my student understood something other than what I had intended to say, or that I said something that I had not meant to say. But when things did not work in French, we repeated them in Wolof and that usually worked. I think that this was the first time that I had occasion to speak French for hours on end, so it was a good opportunity for me to practice what, up to that point, I had learned only through reading and listening. My French improved considerably through our discussions. Not only did I become used to speaking French, but I was also able to correct myself. This was an opportunity for me to examine the way I spoke French and to improve it. So I was learning.

I also learned a lot about my own language, Pulaar. I had never paid any attention before to the existence of noun classes in Pulaar, even though I evoked them every time I spoke. I also found that a few classes were associated with a category of meaning such as liquids or a certain shape. My student was puzzled one day when I told her that many words in the class that took the article, *ngoo*, were almost but not completely flat, like a hand. She did not understand what I meant, so I held my hand out as if to receive something, and showed her how it was almost flat, yet curved up at the edges, like the wooden spoon for stirring porridge (*holfo ngoo*), or the cover for a milk bowl (*ñorgo ngoo*), or a bird's beak (*hoggo ngoo*). I discovered grammatical phenomena of which I had not been conscious since I spoke Pulaar correctly without having to think about grammatical rules, and I also learned some linguistic terms. A few years later, when I was teaching in a school in Dakar, one of my superiors was talking about the way Wolof could make a noun out of a verb by changing the initial sound [f] to [p] or [s] to [c]. I was able to tell him that it was called consonant mutation, but I think that he was annoyed that I knew this, and held it against me for quite some time. Nonetheless, these advances on the intellectual front, and being able to discuss intellectual questions on a consistent basis, were for me a real source of satisfaction.

My student was interested in noun classes in Wolof as well as Pulaar, and although she wanted to get the forms from someone who was a Wolof, as opposed to a Haalpulaar like myself, we discussed the problems associated with that language. I grew up in a Seereer village in a Haalpulaar family, so when I was a small child I spoke Pulaar and Seereer better than Wolof, but even then, I cannot remember ever not having known Wolof. When I was fourteen I went to Dakar where my Wolof improved, and then I spent five years in Kayor, the heart of Wolof country, where pure Wolof is spoken. By pure Wolof I mean Wolof with very little French in it. Fiona thought that I could not give her the noun classes in Wolof, but for me, it would be the same thing as giving them to her in Pulaar. I speak Wolof very well. Maybe I am mistaken, but I think I even speak Wolof better than certain Wolofs who live in Dakar or Fatick, even though it is possible that I have an accent in Wolof. I correct other people's Wolof, and I correct their noun classes. Part of the reason that people in Dakar do not know the right noun class is that Wolofs there mix and live with non-Wolofs, so the Wolof of those who are not Wolof influences the Wolof of those who are, and it goes around that way. In fact, non-Wolofs make no distinction between classes when they start speaking Wolof, so they use the article *bi* indiscriminately for all the classes. I speak deep Wolof, which is different from urban Wolof in that there are rarely any French words in it, and there are often words that people in Dakar do not know, so they use French. All the same, I can understand that Fiona wanted to be prudent and not get the Wolof noun classes she needed from a Pulaar speaker like myself.

2.3 *The socio-cultural dimension*

In the beginning, when I first met my American friends, I was of course aware of the very great cultural and economic distances between us, and it took some time to overcome my fears and hesitations. My fears were

"two-way" in nature. That is to say that I feared making my friends victims of my prejudices, just as I feared being a victim of their prejudices, too. At first, because I was worried about offending them, I could not behave naturally around them. I was afraid of becoming too familiar with them, and afraid of visiting them too often (which would be normal among Senegalese), even though I had the impression that they encouraged me to do so. And when I did visit them, I was afraid to stay for a long time because I thought I might overstay my welcome.

On the other hand, although very soon after I got to know my friends my fears were assuaged, there are certain prejudices we have about toubabs which means that we have no choice other than to be prudent, and thus a bit unnatural, around them at first. Of course these prejudices are sometimes silly, but sometimes they are well founded. We have seen toubabs who, once they are here in Senegal, consider everything that falls under their eyes to be a touristic object. They do not hesitate to take photographs of people in markets and other public places, without authorization, as if those people were animals. And one cannot help but wonder about what they will ultimately do with those photos. Every time I see postcards of young women with naked breasts bathing in the river, I wonder if they were ever asked their opinion or informed about the final destination of those photos. Today, ten years later, I realize that perhaps I had too general a vision of toubabs by putting researchers and tourists in the same category, but sometimes I also have to wonder what it is that is so interesting about us that so many researchers, it sometimes seems like thousands of them, come here to study us. We are always the object of the studies, and the object of tourists' photographs.

As I continued to work with Fiona I started to feel more at ease around her and her husband, but there was one barrier that I had a great deal of trouble overcoming. It was very difficult for me to invite them to my house and to meet my family because they would see the conditions in which I lived, in a household where the standard of living was of the very lowest. Poverty showed itself on every level. For example, a single room in my house served at the same time as a bedroom, living room, storage room, and sometimes even a kitchen! My family is a large traditional family in which no one of my generation had ever been sent to school, and there are practices that are unhygienic that we and many other Senegalese are in the habit of doing, such as keeping a communal drinking cup on top of the water jug for everyone – including people with colds or other illnesses – to drink out of. Bad hygienic conditions are the result of two factors: overcrowding, which is in itself a consequence of poverty, and lack of education. I have always been conscious of the inhumanity of these living conditions, despite being used to them, but I thought that inviting people whose standard of

living was exactly the opposite (so as not to say "people who had almost everything") would be to expose myself and leave me open to humiliation. But despite that hesitation, I also thought that it was not rational to see things in that way, because there should not be any shame associated with being poor, since I was not to blame for it. I thought that I should be able to show myself to people as I am, naturally and without being ashamed, but it was a struggle for me. Although the situation has changed now, I regret that I did not invite them sooner and more often to my house that year when they lived in Fatick.

Once my relations with the American researchers were well established, I found myself in an ambiguous position. For many Senegalese, to have good relations with toubabs is synonymous with having material advantages, and they are not always wrong. And there was no shortage of people who wondered why I did not take advantage of my "privileged" position. Some even asked me to intervene with my friends on their behalf in order to solve financial problems or obtain visas for the United States, for example. Such a conception of relations with toubabs put me in a rather awkward position. Because of this conception of relations with toubabs, certain people would not hesitate to prostitute themselves, so to speak, in order to fulfill their material needs. Consequently, anyone who frequents toubabs could easily be suspected of such behavior. And for someone like me, having received an education at a *daara* and belonging to a traditional family where individuals are controlled by social pressure, that would be shocking. All these reasons, then, contributed to the fact that I sometimes felt the need for discretion in my relations with my American friends, although I eventually began to feel at ease with them in public.

When Fiona first proposed to me that I be her assistant, I immediately accepted without thinking of being paid. I was predisposed to do it, not only because I knew that I would derive intellectual advantages from it, but also because I thought it was my moral duty, all the more because Fiona had given free English courses to the inhabitants of Fatick. Then some time afterwards she proposed discussing the payment before beginning work. I let her know that I did not expect to be paid, especially since this did not cost me anything. I had the time and the work did not demand any preparation on my part. But she insisted. So I told her that I could not fix the payment and that she should just do as she pleased. In any case, I was prepared to do the work with or without payment. She proposed a sum, and I admit that I was very surprised. She proposed 1,500 CFA francs, the equivalent of five dollars. After all her insistence, I found the sum quite ridiculous, but I did not say anything because I would still have been willing to do the work for nothing. But my surprise was even greater when after just a few days of work she went to pay me. I had expected 1,500 CFA francs for a

month of work, but she counted the hours that we had worked together and gave me a large sum of money. And since at the outset I had not expected payment, this sum was like a gift for me. I admit that I was very happy that year, and I was able to solve a lot of problems with that unexpected money!

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NOTES

1 *Toubab* is a term (derived from Arabic word for 'doctor') used in many parts of West Africa to refer to a Westerner or a white person.
2 The Moors are a Hassaniya-speaking Berbero-Arab ethnic group who constitute the majority ethnic group of Mauritania. Smaller communities of Moors are also found in Senegal, Mali, and other countries in West Africa.
3 A griot (Wolof *géwél*; Pulaar *gawlo* (sg.), *awluɓe* (pl.)) is a West African verbal artist or musician whose typical occupation is praise-singing and the recital of genealogy.
4 Caste in societies of the Western Sahel is a controversial topic. Various reconsiderations of the hierarchical nature of these societies are presented in the collection of essays in Conrad and Frank (1995).
5 The issue of variation in Wolof noun classes is discussed in Irvine (1978) and Mc Laughlin (1997).
6 This narrative was originally written in French by Sall and translated into English by Mc Laughlin.

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10 Phonetic fieldwork

Ian Maddieson

Phoneticians typically distinguish three principal sub-disciplines within phonetics: these are concerned with how speech is produced, the nature of the sound itself, and how a human being reacts to speech stimuli. These first two areas are commonly referred to as articulatory (or physiological) phonetics and acoustic phonetics. The third encompasses auditory and perceptual phonetics; that is, it concerns both the way that the human auditory system works and the effects of various levels of further processing in the brain, in which a speaker's linguistic knowledge and experience play an important role. It is frequently difficult to separate auditory and perceptual effects since their investigation commonly relies on overt responses collected from listeners in which the sum of both kinds of processes is necessarily reflected.

A phonetic research project, whether in the field or in the laboratory, may be directed at investigating articulatory, acoustic, or auditory/perceptual facts alone. However, many studies consider the relationship between articulatory or auditory/perceptual facts and the acoustic layer which mediates between them. A naïve native speaker's sub-conscious phonetic knowledge about his or her language concerns only production and perception, and not acoustic properties, nor the strictly auditory processes which transform the acoustic signal. However, the articulatory organization of speech must succeed in encoding information in acoustic form, and the perceptual apparatus must succeed in extracting the information from the acoustic signal. Because a good deal is known about articulatory/acoustic relationships, an examination of acoustic patterns can provide indirect information on articulation. For example, looking at the acoustic pattern of vowels may permit inferences to be made about production mechanisms which are hard to observe directly. Much is also known about the auditory/acoustic relationship, and examining acoustic data in the light of this knowledge helps to clarify which aspects are likely to be of perceptual significance. Less is known about perceptual processes *per se* and so about the perception/acoustics relationship. It is clear, though, that any two utterances which differ functionally in their sound structure must contain some