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ABSTRACT

African Wolof society is divided into a number of ranked status groups or castes, the largest of which is the high-ranking noble caste. Wolof conceive of two styles of speaking, the restrained or noble-like and the elaborated or "griot"-like, and the two styles are connected by the presence or absence of "kerse," honor and self-control. The linguistic phenomena relevant to social rank are found in all aspects of speech performance: paralinguistic phenomena (such as intonation), phonology, syntax, and lexicon. Intonational features provide the most striking differences in style. Phonological differences seem to be related to differences in speech tempo. The griot style uses syntactic devices that lengthen the total utterance but add little or nothing to its meaning, while the noble style uses shorter, blander forms and intentional errors as a sign of high rank. The variants can also signal high and low rank within a caste. The use of intentional error can create confusion between a high-ranking individual and a linguistically incompetent foreigner. The linguistic system as a whole may have shifted in the direction of the high-status variant, and the reduction in surface elaboration is consistent with high-rank restraint and nonfluency, possibly arising from the general population's desire to appear more high-ranking. Thus the cultural valuation of speech can influence both the form and the direction of language change. (MSE)

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Wolof Speech Styles and Social Status

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Introduction

Wolof society is divided into a number of ranked status groups, or castes.[1] The largest of these is the high-ranking noble caste, about 70% of the population, while the rest of the population is distributed among various non-noble groups, including the former slaves and the several artisan castes. Each group has an occupational specialization. Of the low-ranking groups, the most numerous and conspicuous is the bardic caste, or griots, whose specialization is public speech-making. To some extent, however, speech-making is a prerogative of all non-noble castes because all of them can substitute for griots or participate in this activity upon occasion.

So there is among the Wolof a division of labor that corresponds to a division of society into ranked status groups; and in that division of labor, speaking plays a fundamental part. This paper concerns the relation of speaking and language to status differences. The crux of that relationship lies in the ideology of the caste system and the cultural premises that are found there. We will see, too, that these attitudes toward speaking influence the form of linguistic variation, in a fairly concrete way.

A Wolof Ideology

Looking first at the ideology of the caste system, the following points emerge. Wolof informants claimed that people are inherently unequal, having different essential natures that make them behave in different ways. These different behavioral dispositions give rise to differing but complementary forms of action, whence the occupational specializations of the caste system. Putting this another way, personality is thought to be inheritable; so personality differences will follow the lines of caste endogamy. A

person's birth, or caste identity, determines the personality, the disposition to action, that is the source of his caste's occupation. A central Wolof concept sums up this idea of inherited behavioral disposition: it is the notion of kerse, a word I translate as "honor" but that could also be called self-control, respect (for oneself and others), or a sense of shame. We can think of this as a personality or behavioral correlate of caste purity. The presence or absence of honor is supposed to underlie caste differences in character, motivations, and behavior.

The most important difference between persons who have great kerse and persons who have not concerns engagement in physical activity. Kerse is a disposition toward restraint and control of physical movements and processes; lack of kerse is a disposition toward unrestrained, excessive activity. A person with kerse -- a high noble -- is supposed to be relatively restrained, and physically inactive; a person lacking kerse (a non-noble, especially a griot) is supposed to be physically active, bustling about, unrestrained or elaborate in movement. Most important for us is that these attitudes toward activity include attitudes toward speech: speech is seen as a special kind of action, whose variation is patterned in the same way.

Let us look more closely at the way speaking relates to the idea of kerse or honor. An informant told me, "kerse is what makes a noble reluctant to say bad things." Actually, the need to be careful about what one says is magnified into a reluctance to say anything at all -- a restraint on speaking in general. It is a fundamental Wolof assumption that speech, especially in quantity, is dangerous and demeaning; it is likely to be false or at least frivolous. The tongue is "dangerous as a lion"[2] -- out of respect for others and for himself, a noble must not speak too much.

The dangers of speech have a double basis. First of all, talk is dangerous to the speaker, since the person to whom he tells a secret might do harm with it or at least tell it to others. Second, speech is dangerous to the hearer, because it may be untrue and trying to deceive him. If you talk a lot, it is only to persuade someone to believe something that is false -- if you really knew the truth, you would not need to talk about it. Villagers often quoted a proverb that affirms this attitude toward speech: "Speech will deceive people -- the manner may be pretty, yet the content is ugly." The more elaborate and pleasing the rhetoric, the more false or harmful the content. Nobles claim that the lower castes, who lack kerse, are particularly given to empty rhetoric.

The nobles' kerse, then, makes them relatively silent, compared to the non-nobles. In public situations especially, nobles make a special effort to speak less than the non-nobles, and so to distinguish themselves from the lower castes. Relative silence is a means by which nobles can set themselves off from non-nobles. For example, if a high-ranking person needs to communicate something to the public or to a large group, he will resort to an intermediary, usually a griot, to do so for him. The noble says something quietly to the griot, whispering it in his ear; the griot then repeats the message loudly, relaying it to its intended receiver(s). Sometimes two nobles will hold a conversation through double intermediaries -- their griots do most of the talking, conversing with each other on their nobles' behalf.

Note that these norms that make a noble silent or soft-spoken handicap him when a real communication must be made. The high-ranking person is dependent on the lower ranks, especially the griots, to speak for him. (This is how speech enters into the caste system's division of labor.)

The restraint in speech that is supposed to characterize nobles and their kerse has its complement in the style of speaking associated with griots, and (to a lesser extent) the non-nobles in general. Nobles say, for instance, that the griots talk too much, and that their speech is too long and too fast. They complain that griots make too much noise, that they shout and quarrel all the time. Nobles also criticize the content of griot speech, branding it as lies or empty words. They see the griots as too much concerned with surface elaboration, at the expense of content. Griots agree with much of this description of their speech, but they tend to evaluate it differently, stressing a positive aesthetic in an elaborate and persuasive performance.

There is, then, a certain Wolof style of speaking that is thought of as griot-like; it is speech that is characterized by its relatively high speed, quantity, volume, and pitch; its semantic content is supposed to be "less" (relatively meaningless) or "bad" (false, or harmful). Griots are the typical speakers to use this style, so anyone else who uses it will be called "like a griot." But the same criteria are said to describe the speech of other low-status categories of speaker. The same contrasts that differentiate "noble" speech from "griot" speech also differentiate men's from women's speech and adults' from children's. So although Wolof describe this kind of speech as "griot-like," using caste referents, it is actually an attribute of low status in a more general sense, not just an attribute of low caste.

Two Linguistic Variants

In sum, Wolof conceive of two basic styles of speaking: the restrained or "noble-like," and the elaborated or "griot-like," and these two styles

are connected to the presence or absence of kerse, honor and self-control, in high- and low-ranking groups. We can now describe the formal characteristics of the two styles. Wolof themselves point out intonational and semantic features that distinguish the two types; most of these features, plus some others that informants do not mention, can easily be observed in the actual speech of members of the two castes.

The linguistic phenomena relevant to social rank are to be found in all aspects of speech performance: paralinguistic phenomena (such as intonation), phonology, syntax, and lexicon. I will consider the first three here very briefly -- some of this information is summarized on the attached Tables.

Intonation. Intonational features provide the most striking differences between the "griot-like" and "noble-like" styles of speaking. These features are summarized in Table 1. Now these are linguistic phenomena that are often omitted from formal description of a language, but here they carry a very distinct significance in differentiating the two status variants. They are also important because in their extremes they can be as much a barrier to understanding as a change of the entire code might be. For instance, on one occasion a noble listened to a quite clear recording of a griot from his own region, but only on the tenth hearing could he decide that the griot was speaking Wolof and not Mandinq, a quite different language.

Phonology. Phonological differences between the two speech styles seem to be related to differences in speech tempo (see Intonation). Phonology may be affected either by the haste of extremely rapid speech or by the drawl of very slow speech. Taking the speech of casual conversation as a standard, the very rapid griot performances tend to alter phonology in the

ways listed in Table 2. An opposite set of variations occurred at the other end of the social scale and the other style of speaking, in the speech of the few highest-ranking nobles in the village. There, the general effect is of drawl and low-pitched mumbling, exaggerated by certain habits such as holding the hand over the mouth while talking.

Morphology and Syntax. Table 3 represents certain syntactic forms that occur mostly in the speech of griots -- that is, griots greatly exceed nobles in these usages. These are all syntactic devices that lengthen the total utterance but add little or nothing to its meaning. The use of grammatical emphasizers, too, is consistent with the griots' emphatic intonation. In contrast, nobles tend to use forms that are short and bland. The table also shows a kind of grammatical variation that is associated with extreme nobility -- informants reported that the king, at the pinnacle of rank, had a kind of competence for error: he must make mistakes in minor points of grammar, because correctness in these points would be an unnecessary frill, an emphasis on fluency of performance or performance for its own sake, that would not be appropriate to this highest of nobles. Mistakes in the noun class system were especially singled out. Of course, there is no longer a king and so one cannot prove whether he actually spoke this way. Nevertheless it is clear that many modern Wolof (in the village where I worked) believe he did so, and that errors such as the misuse of noun class markers can be a sign of highest rank.

We have been able to characterize two linguistic variants, variants recognized by Wolof informants, that are associated with different social status groups. But the association of the two variants with certain status groups is not arbitrary. This is not just a marking of status differences that exist independently of language. On the contrary -- both linguistic

differences and social boundaries have a common Wolof conceptual basis. Cultural assumptions about the inherent nature of persons of different caste underlie a division of labor that includes speaking. And these underlying assumptions do not just bring about the existence of linguistic differences to correspond with social groupings, but they also influence the particular form those differences take. Thus the points that distinguish the high-caste variant from the low-caste one are unified in restraint and the minimizing of surface elaboration.

Code-Switching and the Direction of Language Change

Finally, let us consider the two speech variants in relation to the individual speaker's linguistic competence, and his ability to use language to manipulate social situations to his own ends. The two variants I have described are associated with caste, but actually (as mentioned before) they refer to high and low rank in a more general sense. Thus the variants can also mark relatively high and low rank within a caste. Any individual will have some control over both variants, and he switches between them as the particular situation and his own motives dictate. For instance, a young noble may use the low-status style when speaking to an older noble, but he will switch to the high-status style when speaking to a griot.

An individual's linguistic competence, then, includes both variants, but the nature of these Wolof speech variants gives the phenomenon of code-switching a special twist. The cultural definition of the high-rank variant as "competence for error" makes for a potential confusion between this variant and the incompetence of a foreigner or a moron. There is a kind of linguistic double standard here: "error" in grammar, or slurred pronunciation, may show extremely high rank or it may show incompetence.

Phonological and syntactic "correctness" may preserve one from being thought a foreigner or a mental defective but may tend to identify one with a low rank. This linguistic double standard shows up, in particular, in speakers' uncertainty, even anxiety, about noun class markers. (The noun class system was something informants singled out as an appropriate place for high-caste "error.") Informants often said they were uncertain what class a noun belonged in, and they declared that the assignment of noun classes was something "difficult" about speaking Wolof proficiently.

Now it seems to me that the social aspirations and fears of speakers are bound to affect the long-term fate of a grammatical form consciously singled out in this way as a marker of social rank. And in fact we know that the noun class system in Wolof has been undergoing rapid change. Linguistic materials of 50 and 100 years ago are precise enough to show that between then and now there has been a sharp reduction in the elaboration of the noun class system. And in general, modern Wolof shows a broad reduction in surface elaboration, when compared with related languages.

What I want to suggest is that the linguistic system as a whole may have shifted in the direction of the high-status variant -- that the definition of grammatical "correctness," though never identical with the most socially prestigious speech, has tended to follow after it. The reduction in linguistic surface elaboration is consistent with the restraint and non-fluency in performance that higher ranks are supposed to show. This linguistic trend could arise from a social situation in which everyone was trying to appear higher-ranking than others in his caste -- a social situation that I have argued elsewhere is in fact the case.

In short: we have seen that cultural valuation of speech, and assumptions about the relation of speech and rank, can influence the form of

linguistic variation. They can perhaps also influence the direction of linguistic change.

Footnotes

1. The fieldwork on which this paper is based was carried out in 1970-71 under Field Training Grant Number 1 FO 1 MH47638-01 from the National Institutes of Health. Research centered on a Wolof village in the Kayor region of Senegal.

2. Though I am quoting my own informant, the same simile is to be found in Baboucar Ly, "L'Honneur dans les sociétés Ouolof et Toucouleur,", Présence Africaine 61:32-67. (1967).

Table 1. Intonation.

	"Noble-like speech"	"Griot-like speech"
Pitch:	Low	High
Voice:	Breathy	Clear
Volume:	Soft	Loud
Contour:	Pitch nucleus last	Dynamic and pitch nucleus first
Tempo:	Slow	Fast

Table 2. Phonology.

"Griot-like speech":

"Lenis" final stop in unstressed syllable → Ø

Unstressed syllable CV// → C// (each speaker always maintained a contrast in vowel length even if some of the short vowels had to disappear altogether)

Initial [k] in unstressed syllable → [ʔ]

Some vowels fronted and raised: [ï], [ëy], and [uy] raised toward [ɨ]

"Noble-like speech":

Vowels drawn out (distinctions of vowel length, very important in Wolof, tend to disappear as short vowels are extended almost as much as long vowels. Compare griot speech, where these contrasts are clearly maintained in spite of a different phonological realization.)

Non-nasal stops become affricated and/or nasalized: e.g.,

[p] → [p͡f]

[b] → [b͡f], [ᵐb], [mb̥]

Table 3. Morphology and Syntax.

"Griot-like speech":

Inserting forms like ngga ham në "you know"

Use of demonstratives and other emphasizers, e.g. bii, bee, booba (demonstratives for the bi noun class), de "indeed", dall "only"

Parallel and repetitive constructions, e.g.:

(a) nyu yobbu ko, nyu yobbu ko dïkk bu nyu wah Gateen
"They brought her, they brought her to a town that they call Gateen."

(b) nyu-i laaj tyosaan-i rëëw mi, di laajte it, lan my am tyi rëëw mi tyi santïr, ak yii gitarist ak yii wahkat yu baah ak yi tïggkat yu nekk fi.
"They were asking (about) the traditions of the country, they were asking also, what there is in the country, in the centers (singers?), with the guitarists, with the speakers who are good, with the drummers who are here."

Use of the continuative verb form with the auxiliary di

Use of certain forms of topicalization by fronting: fronting an object NP, and substituting a Pronoun in the original VP. Thus: radyo bi, dëgg naa ko "The radio, I listened to it", instead of other syntactic possibilities such as dëgg naa radyo bi "I listened to the radio" or radyo bi laa dëgg "The radio is what I listened to."

"Noble-like speech"

Short, bland constructions (opposite of the above)

Incomplete agreement of adjectives and pronouns with nouns in classes other than the bi class (tendency to use bi pronouns throughout)

Extremely high-status speech:
"Error" in assignment of nouns to classes -- use of wrong noun class markers.