

Dakar's Linguistic Landscape

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As part of my ongoing research on urban Wolof I spent some time in Dakar, Senegal, this summer documenting what has come to be known as the “linguistic landscape,” namely written language in the public sphere, which includes official signage, graffiti, advertising, and the like. Linguistic landscape is a relatively new yet thriving avenue of research within sociolinguistics, and its interest lies what it can reveal about language hierarchies, language vitality or endangerment, the economic value of particular languages, and the political power or lack thereof associated with any given language. In my own research I am particularly interested in the relationship between the linguistic landscape and the spoken environment in Dakar, and in what kinds of literacies make it into the public



sphere and what kinds remain private.

I documented Dakar's linguistic landscape at the end of my fieldwork by setting out early in the morning so that I could photograph the city before the streets got too crowded. I worked my way from one of the residential neighborhoods not far from the Université Cheikh Anta Diop, though the Fass, Gueule Tapée and Medina neighborhoods towards downtown, then out towards the port of Dakar.

Dakar's linguistic landscape is



characterized by digraphia, or writing in two scripts, namely Roman and Arabic, but as Calvet (1994) pointed out in *Les voix de la ville*, there is no straightforward, one-to-one relationship between language and script. Arabic, for example, can appear in the Arabic or Roman script, as can Wolof, and even French occasionally appears in the Arabic script. With regard to Arabic, Wolof and French, my documentation confirms Calvet's early observations, but there are also some new additions to Dakar's linguistic landscape, namely English, which appears to be written invariably in the Roman script, appearing much more frequently than when Calvet's study was conducted, and Chinese, written in Chinese characters and the Roman script.

French is the domain of most officialdom and much advertising and political graffiti, thus it dominates in the written environment whereas Wolof dominates in the spoken environment. Wolof has, however, moved more centrally into the advertising sector and many products and services are advertised bilingually in billboards

and posters whereas in the past only informal advertising was in Wolof. Religious graffiti tend to be written in Wolof or Arabic, and English appears primarily in graffiti that takes hip-hop as its sphere of reference. Chinese businesses often have bilingual signs advertising their businesses and goods in both Chinese and French.

What is striking about the Dakar linguistic landscape, and what I suspect might be true for other African capitals where the vernacular is not the official language, is how different it is from the spoken environment. So far, I think that the most significant aspects of the written environment are the less formal ones, and that when considered along with other contexts, such as text messaging, in which new literacies are emerging, we can begin to piece together an understanding of the relationship of written to spoken language in Dakar.

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