

Centenaire Pidgin: Senegal's Newest Urban Language

FIONA McLAUGHLIN



My current research focuses on the sociolinguistics of language contact in urban West Africa, and while my original intent before I left for the field in 2013 was to look into the linguistic ecology of urban Fula (Pulaar and Fulfulde) in Dakar, Bamako and Niamey, my plans were thwarted by the cancellation of all Fulbright programs in Mali due to political instability following the coup d'état of March 2012. An extended stay in Dakar, however, resulted in a fruitful new area of research on Dakar's newest language, which I am undertaking in collaboration with Minna Zhou, a Fulbright researcher from Northwestern University. In Niamey, and especially in conversations with graduate student Hamza Abdoulaziz in the Linguistics Department at the Université Abdou Moumouni, I became interested in an urban variety of Hausa that has emerged out of contact with Songhay, which I hope will become part of a future project.

As Dakar evolves from a post-colonial capital into a globalized metropolis it has started to attract new kinds of migrants and with them, new kinds of language contact. Beginning in the late 1990s, a significant number of recently arrived Chinese shopkeepers began moving into one of the central residential areas of the city, known as Centenaire. They rented space from local owners along the Boulevard Général de Gaulle, established stalls from which to sell their merchandise in the garages or front yards of the residences,

and eventually built shops along the street in front of them. This influx of Chinese retailers quickly transformed what had formerly been a residential area inhabited primarily by Senegalese civil servants into a hub of commercial activity. Currently there are two hundred small businesses concentrated along the boulevard, and the name Centenaire has become synonymous with the Chinese market.

Most of the Chinese merchants in Centenaire are Mandarin speakers from Henan province. They spend long hours in their shops, interacting with their Senegalese employees and customers who come from Dakar and other parts of Senegal, as well as from neighboring countries such as Mauritania, Guinea and Guinea Bissau. Outside work hours, however, they socialize almost uniquely with other Chinese, thus their domain of linguistic interaction with African speakers is mostly limited to the workplace. These are the classic circumstances under which pidgin languages – simplified languages that generally arise in situations of commerce among speakers of different languages – emerge, and in this case a unique language, which we have dubbed Centenaire Pidgin, serves as the lingua franca of the market.

Like creole languages, pidgins are often discussed in terms of their lexifier and their substrate. The lexifier is the language that has contributed most of the vocabulary (or lexicon) to the pidgin, while the substrate contributes grammatical structures. In almost every pidgin or creole that has an African and a European component,

the African language serves as the substrate and the European language as the lexifier, but Centenaire Pidgin is different in that it has been lexified primarily by an African language, namely urban Wolof, and to a certain degree French, while the substrate influences are from Mandarin. Not only is this different from the majority of documented pidgin languages, it is also different from what is found in Chinese markets in other parts of West Africa, where English appears to dominate.

Our research on Centenaire Pidgin is starting to yield some interesting results, some of which were presented at the France Florida Research Institute's workshop on "French in Contact" in November 2013. We look forward to publishing a first account of this language which has changed, ever so slightly, the linguistic ecology of Dakar.

Fiona Mc Laughlin is associate professor of linguistics and African languages and chair of the Department of Linguistics. Her research in Dakar during the spring and summer of 2013 was funded by a Fulbright Africa Regional Research Award.