

The Plural French Language: Power, Linguistic Insecurity and Mutual Understanding West Africa, focus : Dakar & Abidjan

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Introduction

Why speak about “Plural French”?

French is often presented as a homogeneous language

Yet its real uses reveal a plurality shaped by:

- history
- mobility
- multilingual environments
- cultural contact

This presentation explores:

- intercomprehension between francophones
- linguistic domination
- linguistic insecurity
- circulation of knowledge

Definition : Intercomprehension refers here to the ability to understand one another between speakers who speak the same language differently.

Research Context

Dakar and Abidjan

Corpus and fieldwork

- Everyday interactions
- Radio and audiovisual excerpts
- Professional and educational exchanges
- 15 years of professional experience in West Africa

Research questions

- Why do francophones sometimes misunderstand one another?
- How do linguistic hierarchies affect communication?
- Can intercomprehension become a democratic tool?

French Is Not Spoken the Same Everywhere

Paris ≠ Dakar ≠ Abidjan ≠ Montréal

Examples

Politeness markers differ

“Tu” / “Vous” do not have the same social meaning everywhere

The imperative form may sound authoritarian in one context and neutral in another

Example of temporal logic

“Je t’appelle si je finis le dossier”

- In Paris: conditional meaning
- In West Africa: “I’ll call you when I finish”

Nigerian Pidgin parallel

“I call you if I’m done with the file.”

Not to essentialize

Listening Differently

Intercomprehension

Intercomprehension is not about speaking the same way.

It is about:

- listening differently
- recognizing cultural references
- understanding implicit meanings
- adapting interpretation

Key idea

Mutual understanding requires linguistic and cultural decentering.

Why “Plural French”?

Why not simply “variation”?

Although legitimate in sociolinguistics, the term “variation” often suggests:

- deviation from a norm
- hierarchy between forms of French
- central vs peripheral legitimacy

Linguistic hierarchies is also defined by the words:

- so-called dialects or slangs
- “local” languages
- “day to day” languages

Cheikh Anta Diop & Knowledge Production

Language and legitimacy

Cheikh Anta Diop argued that African languages are fully capable of producing:

- scientific knowledge
- philosophical thought
- historical discourse

Reference

Cheikh Anta Diop, Nations nègres et culture

Key idea

Linguistic hierarchies are also hierarchies of knowledge.

What Is Plural French?

Plural French is not only about vocabulary.

It also involves:

- pronunciation and rhythm
- intonation
- morphosyntax
- discourse structures
- implicit cultural meanings

Akissi Béatrice Boutin :

Research on Côte d'Ivoire French shows:

- coherent grammatical structures
- endogenous linguistic rules
- article omission and postposed articles

Plural French follows linguistic logics. It is not “incorrect French.”

Plurilingualism and “Plurifrancism”

In West Africa

Speakers often navigate between:

- several languages (African and others)
- social registers
- several forms of French

Important distinction

A register is not a French.

Plural French is not simply informal French.

Concept : Plurifrancism: The ability to move between several forms of French depending on context.

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Linguistic Insecurity and Glottophobia

Philippe Blanchet

Glottophobia = discrimination based on the way people speak.

Effects

- self-censorship
- silence
- social exclusion
- symbolic domination

Key issue

Linguistic domination can exist inside the same language.

Intercomprehension as a Democratic Issue

When certain ways of speaking are delegitimized:

- knowledge circulation is reduced
- some speakers become inaudible
- inequalities increase

Intercomprehension becomes:

- a civic issue
- a cultural issue
- a democratic issue

Decolonial Perspectives

“Decolonizing” the French language

Here, “decolonial” refers to:

- coloniality
- persistent hierarchies inherited from colonial history

Key idea

The goal is NOT to reject French.
The goal is to recognize its plurality.

French today

French has become:

- an African language among others
- appropriated and reinvented
- transformed through contact with endogenous languages

“French is a war booty”, Kateb Yacine

French is:

- inherited from colonial history
- but also reappropriated
- transformed
- inhabited differently

Key idea

Language is not fixed.
It is reshaped by its speakers.

Education and Intercomprehension

Teaching differently

Teaching French today means:

- contextualizing language
- teaching diversity
- listening differently

EMILE / CLIL

Content and Language Integrated Learning

Objectives

- understand different accents
- recognize multiple discourse structures
- avoid linguistic hierarchies
- decenter perspectives

Educational Research Examples

Valérie Djè

Students may use plural French naturally to access meaning.

Example:

“Moisi” → used to explain “proletarian”
(meaning: someone without money)

Mélanie Mazoua

Students in Côte d’Ivoire evolve between several forms of morphosyntax

Example:

“tenue du cosmonaute la”

- postposed article structure
- coherent discourse logic

Conclusion

The future of French is plural

Plural French is not a threat.
It is a condition for the future of Francophonie.
The challenge is not to standardize voices,
but to create dialogue between them.

Final message

Understand to understand each other better

Dégg ngir gën déggante

Comprendre pour mieux se comprendre

Main References

- Philippe Blanchet _ *Discriminations : combattre la glottophobie*
- Akissi Béatrice Boutin _ French in Côte d'Ivoire
- Cheikh Anta Diop _ *Nations nègres et culture*
- Achille Mbembe & Alain Mabanckou _ “langue-monde”
- Valérie Djè _ plurilingual education in Côte d'Ivoire
- Mélanie Mazoua _ articulating forms of French in schools