

# The Interpretation System of African Languages in the Senegalese Parliament Debates

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## Abstract

The present work deals with the interpretation system of local languages in the Senegalese parliament. In other words, it is devoted to the implementation of the simultaneous interpretation system in the Senegalese Parliament debates. The Senegalese parliament, in cooperation with the European Parliament and the European Union, implemented, some years ago, a system of interpretation devoted to translating (into) six local languages. But what does the interpretation system consist in? What motivates the choice of six local languages and not more or less than six? Why does the Senegalese parliament implement such system in a country whose official language is French? What are the linguistic consequences of this interpretation system on the local and foreign languages spoken in the Senegalese parliament? How is the recruitment of interpreters done? To answer these questions, we have explored the documents and writings related to the implementation of the simultaneous interpretation system in the Senegalese parliament, in particular, and of the interpretation system, in general. Field surveys as well as interviews of some deputies, some interpreters and other people from the administration have also been organized and analyzed in this study. This research has helped us have a lot of information and collect data for the corpus. After the data collection, we have moved on to data analysis and we have ended up with results that we have presented in the body of the text.

**Key-words:** interpretation, language, local, system, implementation

## 1 Introduction

Language had been a barrier in the Senegalese Parliament debates for several years, for some members of the parliament could not speak French, the official language or the other local languages spoken in the Hemicycle. This, not only, constituted

a great problem of understanding and participation of the debates, but it also caused confusion and problem between some deputies. The administration was also confronted with some difficulties when translating or transcribing words, ideas or speeches uttered in a few local languages when they recorded the debates. It is in this perspective that the Senegalese Parliament, in cooperation with the European Union and the European Parliament, implemented a system of simultaneous interpretation in the Senegalese national parliament debates in 2014. The system consists in interpreting and translating into/from six local languages all the debates during the sessions. These local languages belong to the Negro-African language family. The implementation of the simultaneous interpretation system in the Senegalese Parliament debates, aims to strengthen the democracy and allow each member of the parliament to be understood and to understand what is said in French if they cannot speak it and in other spoken local languages in the Hemicycle.

At the launching of the project, Dominique Dellicour, the then Ambassador and Head of the European Union Delegation in Senegal, informed that the simultaneous interpretation system is a tool to translate, into six local languages, the debates in the Hemicycle. In cooperation with the European Parliament, the European Union (EU) co-financed this interpretation system with the National Senegalese Parliament. Dominique Dellicour informs that the help from the European Development Fund has allowed the acquisition of seven mobile booths fully equipped with audio and sound equipment. To sustain this investment, she says that it's important to set up an administrative structure responsible for the Interpreters.

According to Penda Ndiaye Cisse, manager of the EU supporting project, on behalf of the Parliamentary Institution, the project is managed, as

the decentralized model, by a manager, an accountant made available by the authorizing officer of the Ministry of Economy, Finance and Planning etc. During the launching ceremony, Moustapha Niassé, the then President of the Parliament said that, from that day, any Member can have, in the Parliament, intervened in his / her mother tongue or local language they know best and be understood by all. Facing the satisfaction of his colleagues, deputies and chairmen of parliamentary groups, Niassé said that from then on, thanks to this system, every member has been able to listen and understand his or her colleagues, through his or her own language or French language.

Thus, the current work aims to analyze this system of simultaneous interpretation of African local languages in the Senegalese Hemicycle. In other words, it targets to show the importance of local languages in the parliament debates. In addition, the work highlights the linguistic consequences of the system on the foreign (French) and local languages. It is also devoted to the promotion of local languages around the world. However, to write the paper, a lot research has been conducted on the interpretation system and field surveys as well as interviews of some deputies, some interpreters and other people from the Senegalese Parliament administration have also been organized and analyzed in the study. This research has helped us have a lot of information and collect data that are composed of first and second hand data. So, the work is divided into four parts. The first part is devoted to the objectives and advantages of the implementation of the interpretation system. The second one is about the (six) chosen local languages and the interpreters and the third part deals with the linguistic consequences of the system. As for the last part, it lays the emphasis on the difficulties encountered by the interpreters and the deputies during the debates.

## **2 Objectives and Advantages**

The implementation of the simultaneous interpretation system in the Senegalese Parliament debates, aims to strengthen the internal democracy. It allows each deputy to understand what is said in French or in other local spoken languages if they cannot speak these languages. The Senegalese Parliament has taken a major step as part of its mission of national representation. With the new simultaneous interpretation system in the Hemicycle debates, the language barriers are forever overcome. The in-

terpretation system of local languages also helps each member of the Parliament to intervene in their mother tongue or in the local language they know best and be understood by the others. Thus, thanks to this system, every member can listen and understand their colleagues' speeches, through their own language or through the French language.

In addition, using local languages in the Hemicycle debates occupies a very important place in the dynamics of promoting these African languages. Beyond facilitating exchanges and conversations and discussions between members, this simultaneous interpretation system allows the Senegalese people who are represented by the deputies in the parliament to follow and understand the various interventions of the deputies in their native languages, mainly during deliberations and decision makings. It, furthermore, helps the members of the parliament to be able to have the latest electronic votes instead of hands-raising for or against votes (even if they do not use the electronic vote for their own reasons). Thus, the system is very significant because it allows the Senegalese Parliament to be equipped with sophisticated equipment, a tool that impacts on the quality of debates between representatives of the people. It also helps all the deputies to ensure their mission of regulators and controllers of the government action.

## **3 The Choice of Languages and Interpreters**

The simultaneous interpretation system consists of twenty one (21) interpreters and seven booths in French, Seereer, Wolof, Joola, Pular, Soninke and Mandinka. The Interpreters were selected through a call for application. Graduates of higher education, with knowledge of two or more than two of local languages, have been selected following a call for applications. They have undergone intensive training of nine months in interpretation and translation techniques and have been dispatched into seven booths, three for each language, regarding their mother tongue or their first language (A language). However, all these selected interpreters have good knowledge of French language. As for the languages, six local languages that are Seereer, Wolof, Joola, Pular, Soninke and Mandinka are chosen thanks to the great number of their speakers in Senegal and their being codified.

### 3.1 Seereer

Seereer is a language which is interpreted in the Senegalese Parliament debates. It is a language spoken in Senegal and in some other African countries and whose origin and classification have given rise to a lot of debates within researchers in general and linguists and historians in particular. Thus, as Faye (2021:1) said in Possibility and Probability, several theses have been brought up for its classification and the main methods of classifying African languages, among other things, are to gather them in terms of groups, branches and families. This operation is essentially based on some comparisons of elements in terms of structures, phonologies, grammars, lexicon etc. of the current languages. However, Seereer language has linguistically been classified in various ways by many linguists and other scholars some of whom M. Delafosse, Cheikh Anta Diop, J. Greenburg, etc. According to the latter, Seereer is a language which belongs to the West Atlantic group of the Niger- Congo languages family (Greenburg: 1963).

So, belonging to the West Atlantic group, Seereer language has many dialects all of which are mutually intelligible. So, these dialects are divided into two groups: Siin (mainly called Siin-Gandum) group and Cangin group. However, it is the Siin Seereer language that is used in the simultaneous interpretation system at the Senegalese Hemicycle. It is more spoken in the center regions of Senegal.

### 3.2 Wolof

Wolof is also interpreted in the Hemicycle debates and is the most widely spoken language in Senegal, for the majority of the Senegalese people can speak it and may use it as a second language or as a lingua franca. It is almost spoken in all the Senegalese regions also in some other African countries. It is a language, like Seereer, that belongs to the West Atlantic group of the Niger- Congo languages family according the classification of African languages by Greenberg. It is composed of some dialects, any of which is spoken in a country or in a region or in some locality. It is used in literacy and in some formal education experiments. Wolof, a lingua franca of Senegal, is very vital in oral communication, in all acts of daily life, in the audio-visual press, in some religious sermons, in advertising, etc. Wolof is conquering new areas of use in the public life sector, debates on current affairs, training seminars for the nonformal sector, press conferences, etc.

### 3.3 Joola

Joola, like the two first languages, is among the interpreted languages in the Senegalese parliament. It also belongs to the West Atlantic group of the Niger-Congo languages family. It is a language that is spoken in the South of Senegal and is composed of several dialects. However, it is Fogny and Casa Joola that are used in the simultaneous interpretation system in the Hemicycle.

### 3.4 Pular

Pular language, also known under a variety of meanings (Fula, Fulani, Peul, Fulfulde, Fulakunda, etc.) is, as Seereer, Wolof and Joola are, a West Atlantic language belonging to the Niger- Congo languages family according to the classification of African languages by Greenberg. These Pular language diversity denominations, respectively used in different areas are mainly referred to as Pular dialects. Thus, Pular language is more spoken in the North and in the South of Senegal country. That being so, the interpreted Pular at the Parliament is the one regarded as the "standard Pular", meaning the one spoken by both the North and the South Pular people.

### 3.5 Mandinka

Belonging to the family of the Niger-Congo phylum, Mandinka is part of the Mandingo group in Mande languages. The Mandingo dialects are mainly spoken in West African countries. Mandinka is a dialect of Mandingo language mainly spoken in the South and in the East of Senegal country. It is among the languages that are interpreted in the Senegalese Hemicycle debates.

### 3.6 Soninke

Soninke is part of the interpreted languages at the Senegalese Parliament. Like the other spoken languages in Senegal, Soninke belongs to the Niger-Congo language family. It is spoken in the East and the Northeast of Senegal and in some other African countries.

All in all these are the local languages that are interpreted in the Senegalese Hemicycle debates. They have been chosen thanks to their status and their being codified. As such, they are regarded as national languages. Furthermore, they are the most spoken languages in Senegal with more than 95% of speakers among the Senegalese population. Thus, beside these local languages that have the

status of national languages and are interpreted in the Hemicycle, there is the French language which is the official language in Senegal. All the debates in the parliament should be recorded in French even if they are uttered or interpreted in the local languages. However, the simultaneous interpretation of these African languages has some linguistic consequences on the local languages and on French.

#### 4 Linguistic Consequences

The simultaneous interpretation system of local languages in the Senegalese parliament debates has some linguistic consequences on both local and French languages. The usage of local languages in the Hemicycle debates occupies a very important place in the dynamics of promoting these African languages. Beyond facilitating exchanges and conversations and discussions between members, this simultaneous interpretation system shows the important role of these languages in communication. However, the contact of these languages with French language brings about a language interference and a codeswitching.

Local languages interfere when some deputies intervene in French and this interference is more remarkable in the grammatical, morphological syntactic, phonological, etc. levels. They (local languages) use the aspect (accomplished or unaccomplished) where French language focuses on tenses (past, simple present or future). This causes a problem of understanding to the secretaries, supposed to record the debates, and is reflected in their grammar levels. Thus, the fact that most of (or all) the interpreted languages are agglutinative languages also affects the speaking of French language, in the Senegalese parliament debates. The local languages words are made up of a linear sequence of distinct morphemes and each component of meaning is represented by its own morpheme; which does not exist in French and abates the deputies' understanding level. Thus, the formation of local languages' words interferes in the speaking of French in the Senegalese hemicycle. The local languages under study are agglutinative languages. Agglutination is a grammatical process in which words are composed of a sequence of morphemes (meaningful word elements), each of which represents not more than a single grammatical category. This term is traditionally employed in the typological classification of languages. So, an agglutinative

language is a language in which words are made up of a linear sequence of distinct morphemes and each component of meaning is represented by its own morpheme.

The structure of sentences in the local languages under study also constitutes a focal point in the learning or speaking of French in the Senegalese parliament in so far as they (local languages and French) do not structure their words or sentences in the same way. The definite form can be an illustration of it, for it (definite form) is always placed after the determined noun in Seereer and Wolof, for examples, whereas in French it always comes before the noun it determines. In addition, in these local languages, the definite form is a compound form, each morpheme of which has its own function and there is no difference as far as the gender of the determiner is concerned. This pushes some members of the parliament to misuse the French articles when speaking and writing. The pronunciation of words, furthermore, interferes when some deputies speak French, for there are some sounds that exist in this foreign language but do not exist in local languages and their pronunciation causes some difficulties to the representors who have a weak level in French.

Some linguistic consequences have also been noticed in the phonological level of some deputies' speeches. Phonology is the branch of linguistics concerned with the study of speech sounds with reference to their distribution and patterning. It aims to discover the principles that govern the way sounds are organized in languages and to explain the variations that occur. This study of speech sound is very remarkable in the speaking of French as a foreign language in the hemicycle. Some local languages sounds interfere when some representors take the floor.

There are some sounds (/v/, /z/, /f/, etc. ) in French language that do not exist in the studied local languages; which causes difficulties of their pronunciations. Some deputies face these problems and tend to use local pronunciation for these sounds. For /v/ sound they say /w/ and for /z/ they say /s/ and for /f/ they often say /s/. In addition, there are some letters that exist in all these languages but whose pronunciations are different. It is the case of the letter "c", which is pronounced /s/ or /k/ in French, depending on the following letters. But in local languages, it is pronounced like /tʃ/ in all cases; in other words, whatever the

following letters may be. The pronunciation of "s" in mid or final position also causes some confusion and misunderstanding, for it is pronounced /z/ when it is placed between two vowels (mid position). When it is in initial position or between a consonant and a vowel or preceded by a voiceless sound, it is pronounced /s/. In the local languages under study, it is pronounced /s/ whatever its position in the sentence may be.

French language also uses double consonants such as "ch", "th", etc. in initial position, whereas our local languages do not use double consonants in such position. However, Wolof language, for example, can use double consonants in final position. Ex: jàmm (peace), lakk (burn). Unlike Wolof, the other local languages like Seereer do not use double consonants at all. In other words, Seereer language uses double consonants neither in initial position nor in mid or final position. So, the fact that the interpreted local languages do not use double consonants in initial position causes a lot of pronunciation difficulties when some deputies speak French.

## **5 Difficulties and challenges of the system**

The interpretation system of local languages in the Hemicycle debates occupies a very important place in the dynamics of promoting these African languages. Beyond facilitating exchanges, conversations and discussions between members, this simultaneous interpretation system allows the Senegalese people who are represented by the deputies in the parliament to follow and understand the various interventions of the deputies in their native languages, mainly during deliberations and decision makings.

However, the members of the parliament face some difficulties due to the logistics. The materials used in the interpretation do not, sometime, function as well. Some other difficulties have also been pointed with the headsets and some micros that creak during some sessions and mainly when a deputy takes the floor.

Interpreters face sometimes difficulties when a deputy speaks quickly due to the fact that they have to analyze what the speaker just says and deliver it to the audience or listeners in their native languages (when the speech is in French or other local languages) or in French (when the speech is in one of the local languages), while still listening to the next works of the speakers. This action requires much

attention and excellent sensory and cognitive skills. That is, the interpreters have a lot of challenges. One of the biggest challenges in the interpretation system is that multiple processes take place at the same time. Interpreters start with listening and analyzing the speech, putting in short term memory efforts and then reproducing it in the languages of the audience. So, the fast pace of the speaker and unfamiliarity with the subject can make the process more difficult.

Another difficulty that interpreters of the Senegalese parliament face during debates is that while they are simultaneously interpreting the speaker's speech, they are also listening to the speaker's next phrase and analyzing it to deliver it in the native languages of the audience. This process continues until the speaker stops speaking, and their speech can last from three until fifteen or thirty minutes, depending on the speaker (when it is about a deputy or a minister) or on the type of the debates. All this requires strict concentration. The interpreters also have to make sure that they deliver the speech in the same style and tone as that of the speaker to ensure that the message reaches the audience in the right form. Moreover, they have to maintain the same level of fluency in the target language.

The interpreters in the Senegalese hemicycle also face some challenges related to mental and physical fatigue, maintaining accuracy, quick thinking, technical issues and cultural differences. The inability to understand the speaker due to the speaker's accent, ability to project, or delivery, but also to audio equipment failures such as a deficient sound system is, furthermore, one of the great difficulties that these interpreters are facing during the debates. Another challenge that they face is the long lasting debates mainly when they are voting for the budget. This budget vote can last three or four weeks. Undoubtedly, this can be challenging on them. They can be "on" constantly and their throats can get sore and they can get tired quite easily; which may sometimes take a toll on the quality of the service, especially for simultaneous interpretation.

In addition, the interpreters encounter difficulties related to complex or technical words. Some of the ministers of deputies use technical or complex terms. Eventually, there would also be words that would not be found in normal situations or that are specific to one of the Senegalese cultures. In this context, the interpreters have to know and under-

stand the exact translations of these concepts. This is in order to get the meaning across to those who are non-native speakers. In order to get through this type of challenge, they have to learn these words and concepts. In other words, they are given the rapports before the debates and this allows them to practice and work on the transcriptions or translations of these words or concepts before the debates. The humor or mood of some deputies that pushes them to utter insults or cry over others or to quarrel is one of the challenges that interpreters are also facing in the Senegalese hemicycle debates. These can include a lack of fluency in a language, or the use of jargon or technical terms that the receiver is unfamiliar with and to overcome language barriers, it is important to use simple and clear language, and to avoid using jargon or technical terms that the receiver may not understand.

Interpreters also have to accurately and idiomatically turn the message from the source language into the target language without any additions, omissions, or other misleading factors that alter the intended meaning of the message from the speaker. The interpreters of the hemicycle are sometimes confronted to filtering, selective perception, information overload, emotional disconnects, lack of source familiarity or credibility, semantics and gender differences.

## 6 Conclusion

The implementation of the simultaneous interpretation system in the Senegalese Parliament debates has strengthened the internal democracy. It has allowed each deputy to understand what is said in French or in other local spoken languages if they cannot speak these languages. The Senegalese Parliament has taken a major step as part of its mission of national representation. With the new simultaneous interpretation system in the Hemicycle debates, the language barriers are forever overcome.

However, this system has some linguistic consequences on both local and foreign languages. Local languages interfere when some deputies intervene in French and this interference is more remarkable in the grammatical, morphological syntactic, phonological, etc. levels. They (local languages) use the aspect (accomplished or unaccomplished) where French language focuses on tenses (past, simple present or future). This causes a problem of understanding to the secretaries, supposed to record the debates, and is reflected in their gram-

mar levels. Thus, the fact that most of (or all) the interpreted languages are agglutinative languages also affects the speaking of French language, in the Senegalese parliament debates. The local languages words are made up of a linear sequence of distinct morphemes and each component of meaning is represented by its own morpheme; which does not exist in French and abates the deputies' understanding level.

We have also noticed that through the implementation of the system the members of the parliament face some difficulties due to the logistics. The materials used in the interpretation do not, sometime, function as well. Some other difficulties have also been pointed with the headsets and some micros that creak during some sessions and mainly when a deputy takes the floor. In addition, interpreters face sometimes difficulties when a deputy speaks quickly due to the fact that they have to analyze what the speaker just says and deliver it to the audience or listeners in their native languages (when the speech is in French or other local languages) or in French (when the speech is in one of the local languages), while still listening to the next words of the speakers. Another difficulty that interpreters of the Senegalese parliament face during debates is that while they are simultaneously interpreting the speaker's speech, they are also listening to the speaker's next phrase and analyzing it to deliver it in the native languages of the audience. The interpreters in the Senegalese hemicycle also face some challenges related to mental and physical fatigue, maintaining accuracy, quick thinking, technical issues and cultural differences.

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