Escaping the tyranny of writing: West African regimes of writing as a model for multilingual literacy

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1 Setting the scene

Orthography is a social practice, and orthographic systems rarely evolve into the perfect phonemic systems that language technologists (e.g.: linguists and missionaries) envisage. (McLaughlin forthcoming).

The standard orthographies devised for West African languages by missionaries and linguists are barely used. Yet, other regimes of writing are thriving in the area: some of them have exploded with the advent of social media and mobile phones, and some of them have long predated colonial times. Taking inspiration from these unrecognized regimes, I argue in favour of abandoning a standard language culture for (most of) West African writing and for using actually occurring literacy practices as a model. These regimes offer a culturally anchored way of writing that is better adapted to the fluid multilingual contexts of this region than a regime relying on establishing and maintaining several monolingual standard language cultures in one of the most densely multilingual areas of the world.

In West Africa, every individual speaks at least two different named languages, and many speakers command very complex repertoires (Lüpke & Storch 2013 for an overview). Languages express social, historical, religious and political identities at best partly instantiated in prescriptive writing; they have no clear reference to and no direct manifestation in actual speech, which makes the use of languages or codes less than ideal to describe oral linguistic repertoires. Therefore, the concept of code or named language is used in this chapter only to
provide a heuristic reference point for a quick appraisal of complex and fuzzy repertoires. Dynamic and versatile patterns of multilingualism are not only present in the spoken domain but also characterize written language use, which is equally multilingual, but in systematically reduced form. In many cases, written domains do not represent those languages that Figure prominently in oral contexts (a practice that I call exographia, see Lüpke 2011). Writing in West Africa is also multigraphic, and the different scripts in use convey very different ideological stances (see Sebba 2007). In this chapter, I discuss the dynamics of spoken and written multilingualism in West Africa and illustrate them with examples, mainly stemming from my most recent research experience in Senegal, but drawing on other settings as well. I am endorsing an ethnographic approach to literacy as needed to grasp the complexity of these configurations without falling prey to a Eurocentric bias and to comprehend the complete “ecology of literacy” (Juffermans 2015; Mc Laughlin 2015). Such a perspective encompasses linguistic landscapes, crucially not only consisting of writing in citiscapes, but complemented by the visible words in peripheral and rural spaces, as well as their relationship with the full and rich soundscapes of the linguistic environment.

The chapter is structured as follows: general principles of the interaction of spoken and written multilingualism and the systemic differences between polyglossic and non-polyglossic multilingualism in West Africa are briefly discussed in §2. The performative nature of pre-colonial and recent writing practices, covering Latin-based and Arabic-based practices are introduced in §3. The tendency of both of these non-standard regimes to use the orthographies of a particular language as a “lead” are discussed there. An overview of normative writing is provided in §4, which also contrasts this type of literacy with the indigenous regimes introduced in §3. The potential of lead language writing for development language-independent multilingual literacy strategies that bypass standard language culture is introduced in §5.
2 Spoken and written multilingualism in West Africa

At different periods in their lives, at different moments of their day, or even simultaneously (with the help of digital means of communication, for example) speakers participate in several spaces that are socially and linguistically constituted in different ways. Each of these spaces has its own language regime – its own set of rules, orders of discourse, and language ideologies – in which linguistic resources are assessed differently. (Busch 2015: 4)

As discussed by Juffermans (2015), Lüpke & Storch (2013) and Mc Laughlin (2014; 2015) separate investigations of oral and written language use arrive at radically different assessments of the number of languages and the degree of linguistic diversity in West Africa. There is some degree of visible written linguistic diversity, but it is much smaller than that of the oral domain. Visible landscapes are dominated by public signs in the former colonial and official languages (French, English and Portuguese), complemented by a much lower presence of signs in major West African languages often in what has been termed “minimal” or “emblematic multilingualism” by Androutsopoulos (2006). Juffermans (2015) provides a Gambian case study including a discussion of linguistic landscapes, and Mc Laughlin (2015) offers an account of the “linguistic warscapes” of Northern Mali. In many of these contexts, signs are multilingual or exhibit the fluid registers widely attested in urban West African settings, combining major African languages with elements conventionally associated with a colonial language, as exemplified in the advertisement in Figure 1, which uses Urban Wolof (see Mc Laughlin 2001, 2008a, 2008b).
(New! Dolima (brand name) milk pudding. It’s so goooood, it’s relaxing.) Nouveau (new) and tellement (so) are conventionally associated with French; tellement is completely integrated into a Wolof sentence. Standard spelling is used for French, but not for Wolof, which is written in French-inspired spelling, instantiating lead language writing discussed in detail in §3.

The Arabic script also has a high visibility in West Africa: writing both in the Arabic language and so-called Ajami (or Arabic-script) writing of African languages is very widespread and dominates regions that lie in the sphere of influence of Islam. These literacies resemble grassroots literacies in the sense of Fabian (1990) and Blommaert (2008b) in being
marginal and non-standardized, but are to some extent supported by religious and political institutions and an infrastructure for their transmission and conventionalization.

From a perspective focusing on language boundaries, all of these linguistic landscapes are highly multilingual, but in very monolingual way: elements that can conventionally or etymologically be associated with distinct codes are combined in various ways, but no distinction between codes is made in the conventionalized writing regimes, regardless of the script. The writing regimes of West Africa thus strikingly mirror the absence of fixed boundaries in West African oral repertoires. Mc Laughlin (2015, 2017) also describes this fluidity, which she sees, as I do, as an advantage, pace Calvet (1994), who describes it as a symptom of a society moving from (fluid) orality to (fixed) scriptuality. This fluid character of writing becomes very salient in the signs in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Multiscriptal and multilingual signs in Touba, Senegal. © Sokhna Bao-Diop 2009

The signs in Figure 2 feature the following text in Wolofal, transliterated into the standard Wolof orthography and translated into English here: Sopp sériñ Fadiilu Mbake – Revere Seriñ Fadilou Mbacké! (bottom left), Fii danñu fiy poose bëñu yax ak bëñu oor balã ak raxas kadam – Here, dentures in bone and white gold and plaque removal (top left); Kii day
ñaan ci xeeti feebar ci fajum cosaan – Knows to treat diseases with traditional medicine (right).

In addition, the signs contain utterances in French, in the Latin script, and in Wolof in Latin script, using French lead language writing (Sope Serigne Fallou) rather than the standard Wolof spelling provided in the transliterations. See Lüpke & Bao Diop (2014) for a detailed discussion of Wolofal, the Arabic-based script for Wolof.

A shared property of all regimes of writing is that they do not feature the full extent of linguistic diversity but have a reduced repertoire mainly associated with larger languages. Reduced linguistic repertoires compared to the oral domain are also found in digital writing practices (Lexander 2010, 2010; Lexander & Lopes forthcoming; Mc Laughlin 2014 for the Senegalese context), where official languages are used alongside major national languages, and in which small languages are also largely absent. In stark contrast to the limited number of languages present in writing, the oral sphere in this area is characterized by rich spoken multilingualism in very diverse and locally and regionally meaningful constellations. (See Cobbinah et al. [Cannot display reference #3684, because the template "In-text citation - Unknown - (Default template)" contains only fields that are empty in this reference.], Lüpke forthcoming; 2016 for examples of very complex settings involving small, village-based languages from Southern Senegal, and Di Carlo 2016 and Di Carlo & Good 2014 for examples from Northwestern Cameroon). These mainly rural settings, in which multilingualism is a longstanding indigenous social practice at the local and regional scale, are overlaid by larger patterns at the national and West African regional level, where different languages of wider communication, including the official languages of colonial provenance, complete the kaleidoscope of oral diversity. Settings where official languages interact with major African languages have received the bulk of attention in (socio)linguistic research, which is understandable given the dire state of descriptive and documentary knowledge on all but the very largest African languages (Dimmendaal 2008; Lüpke 2015; Mous 2003). But the lack of
coverage of rural multilingual settings, which have been shaped under very different social conditions, and in which the official languages are marginal, also means that the development of models for literacy in national languages of Africa did not have the chance to be inspired by these settings.

The development of models adapted to the full scale of multilingualism must therefore be of prime importance, precisely because other regimes of literacy threaten the indigenous patterns of multilingualism that are vital in most parts of Africa. Africa is retaining this linguistic diversity because most of the continent has been spared from the full effect of Western nationalist language ideologies which have destroyed linguistic diversity in most parts of the world, since it had only very few settlement colonies in which these ideologies could show their full disastrous effect (Lüpke 2015; Vigouroux & Mufwene 2008). As a consequence, two different language cultures co-exist and are associated with different ideologies and spaces for concepts and use of language in the oral, but particularly in the written domain, namely that between polyglossic vs. non-polyglossic planes of language interaction. Polyglossic multilingualism can be traced back to colonial language policies and language ideologies endorsing a standard language culture most pronounced in official literacies. Non-polyglossic multilingualism is a continuation of pre-colonial, indigenous patterns of social interaction that continue to shape language practice. Polyglossic multilingualism emphasizes prescriptive standards and norms resulting distilling discrete codes which express social hierarchies and cement exclusion, leading to a “pluralisation of monolingualism” (Makoni & Pennycook 2007: 22). Non-polyglossic multilingualism is, in addition to choices determined by repertoires of speech act participants and language processing constraints, fuelled by the need to index situated identities (Eckert 2008; Silverstein 2003). The potential for signs to express social meaning is dependent on making variation meaningful, and hence on regimes that tolerate it and do not insist on a standard. Not surprisingly, then, performativity is particularly
characteristic of oral language use and regimes of writing in the shadow of official literacies (see Deumert 2014 for the performativity of mobile communication, which is also often described as an ‘oral’ way of writing). Because they rely on flexible and adaptive conventionalization rather than on fixed standards, performative writing regimes are particularly suited for the writing needs of multilingual writers. Because of their adaptivity, they are much easier to maintain than normative writing regimes. This advantageous trait is owed to the fact that in these regimes, orthographies are often extended to the writing of entire repertoires rather than only the languages they were originally created for. The following section explores how this transfer happens. The flexible and adaptive nature of pre-colonial African cultural practice as opposed to the rigidity of “invented traditions” stemming from colonial interpretations of it has been lucidly described in Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983), and their observations can be transposed wholesale to the domain of language and (post)colonial language policies.

3 Performative contexts leading to language-independent regimes of writing based on a lead language

Repertoires are, by their very nature, disorderly and resistant to facile analysis or regimentation, but they are real objects in the world, as opposed to the ideological constructs of bounded languages such as Wolof, Arabic, or French, reinforced by regimes of literacy. Perhaps the freedom that Fabian (1990) tried to identify in his initial articulation of the notion of grassroots literacy is just that, freedom from a strict regime of literacy and freedom to depict a repertoire rather than a language. (Mc Laughlin forthcoming: 23)
Although some institutions dedicated explicitly to the teaching of Ajami writing exist (Mc Laughlin forthcoming), and we still know very little about the exact ways of transmitting this longstanding writing practice, it can be stated that many of its writers learn it as a by-product of Q’uranic education aimed at creating readers, and to a lesser extent, writers of Arabic. Souag (2010) offers deep insight into the adaptation of the Arabic script to the writing of West African languages with very different phonological and morphosyntactic structures, which provides important insight into the strategies at work in exactly this context. Since the writing of African languages is not the primary goal of this writing regime, it factually results in creating language-independent literacies. Arabic serves as the lead language, with some innovations to make the script fit the more complex vowel systems and different consonant inventory of West African languages. These innovations do not correspond to a strict standard, as they are used to different degrees by different writers. Ajami writing is often performative in that it consists of religious poetry written for oral performance, of devotional writing to be recited, of instructions for the use of talismans and amulets featuring Arabic, and directions for the creation of objects for healing and protection with Arabic writing as the centre piece, such as magic squares and holy water. Figure 3 features instructions in Mandinka Ajami for the use of talismans consisting of Arabic text, and Figure 4 provides transliterations for some Ajami-specific graphemes. The writer has not provided the talismans themselves.
Figure 3: Mandinka Ajami instructions for talismans, written by Alpha Naby Mané in Agnack. © Alpha Naby Mané

TRANSCRIPTION: DIMBA BOORAMMU, ISAA SAAREE JAWO LA KORDAA KONO, DIMBA SIBOJEE. SAATEE JANIRAM MU. ISAA SAAREE TILIBOO ANING TILIJI.

TRADUCTION: PERMET DE METTRE LE FEU A LA MAISON D'UN ENNEMI, JUSTE ENTERRE LE TALISMAN SUR LES LIEUX. PERMET DE BRULER UN VILLAGE EENNEMI, ENTERRE LE TALISMAN A L'EST ET A L'OUEST (DU VILLAGE)
Alpha Naby Mané has written and annotated the example and provided the transliteration in Latin script and the translation into French himself. The English translation is as follows: Allows setting an enemy’s house on fire, just bury the talisman on the grounds. Allows burning an enemy’s village, bury the talisman to the east and west of the village.

**Figure 4: Illustration of the creation of additional diacritics to write /ɲ/ and /e/, phonemes that are unattested in Arabic, in Mandinka Ajami, written by Alpha Naby Mané. © Alpha Naby Mané**

By their very nature, texts in Ajami are at least bilingual, if looked at from a perspective based on codes. Yet, since all languages in the sphere of Islam have integrated Arabic words into their vocabulary, and since their speakers and writers also intentionally pepper their speech with Arabic phrases, sayings and Q’uranic verses, language use is fluid and without clear
demarcations between codes, both in oral and written contexts. There have been attempts at standardizing Ajami writing (Lüpke & Bao-Diop 2014; Souag 2010); but since such endeavours would counteract the very essence of its being, they have not had any practical consequences so far.

Similar observations regarding performativity and fluidity hold for grassroots literacies in the Latin script. Just as Ajami writing is seldom a stand-alone literacy, grassroots literacies in the Latin script have a lead too. One and the same language can be written with very different sound-grapheme associations depending on which language provides the orthographic conventions serving as the lead. The family name /jamel/ is attested both in Anglographic Gambia and Francographic Senegal, and spelled according to the rules of English and French respectively, giving <Jammeh> for the current Gambian president, Yahya Jammeh, and <Diamé> for the French footballer of Senegalese origin Mohamed Diamé. (The designation ‘anglophone’ and ‘francophone’ for West African countries with English and French as their official language is often misleading, since in those countries with indigenous languages of wider communication, such as Senegal or Mali, the official languages are rarely spoken, cf. Manessy 1994.) Within one lead-language writing culture, however, the same principles of sound-grapheme associations are used for entire repertoires, without differentiation of different codes. Figure 5, an extract from a Facebook wall, illustrates the absence of boundaries in a text that appears to be multilingual from a code-oriented perspective:

Table 1: Comments on a Facebook Wall Illustrating Language-independent Writing Based on French as the Lead

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Les brinois Kassoumay!</td>
<td>Guys of Brin, hi there!</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Les si ŋiarou boudjé lobé</td>
<td>Hey the monkeys, what are you saying?</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>wa dji reme founah favou</td>
<td>What have you been drinking that day?</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sama gay vi beugue na lene</td>
<td>My guys/lions, I like you.</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The following fonts are used to represent codes identified by me: Jóola Kujireray, French, English and Wolof. Grey font colour is used for names and other linguistic element has not be attributed a code. In Table 1, such an indeterminate form is present with *gay*, which can be decoded either as a truncated form of Wolof *gañ* (lion), or as English guy.

The comments, on a photo showing young men joyfully posing, one of them with a Santa hat, testify to the playful, teasing characteristic of much of mobile communication (Deumert 2014) and make it a highly performative register. Elements conventionally associated with different languages are seamlessly integrated in the writing. The sound-grapheme associations of French are used. [u] and [ʊ], for example, are written as <ou>, as they commonly would in French (<kassoumay> – [kassomai]). The lead is applied language-independently, regardless of the association of words with different languages. The grapheme <e> is used as it would be in present-day French word-finally, to indicate that the preceding consonant is to be pronounced (<reme> – [rɛm], <lene> – [lɛn], where the former is associated with Jóola Kujireray and latter with Wolof). Where [ɛ] or [ɛ] are to be pronounced word-finally, they are written as <é>, as they would be in French (<lobe> – [lɔbɛ]). Only one letter is not part of the French grapheme inventory. This is <ñ>, corresponding to [ɲ], which is spelled as <gn> in French. Both spellings are used variably in the grassroots writing of Senegalese languages. The letter <ñ> is part of the official alphabet for languages of Senegal (Ministère des Télécommunications 2007) and is one of very few letters that have trickled down to the grassroots from the little used standard spelling to grassroots literacies. Other letters featuring in the standard alphabet that are sometimes attested in informal writing are <ë> (for [œ], in French corresponding to <eu>), and <x> (for [x], corresponding to the French spelling<kh>) (see Lexander & Lopes forthcoming; Mc Laughlin 2014 for corpus-based examples from Wolof). These additions to the French grapheme inventory can be interpreted in analogy to the
West African regional diacritics characterizing Ajami writing, i.e. they are innovations to better adjust a grapheme inventory to the phonology of other languages. The overarching traits that thus set conventionalized writing in Ajami and Latin script apart from normative writing in standard Arabic and standard orthographies for West African languages is the flexibility of spellings, with great tolerance for several conventions to exist alongside each other, and the fluidity of repertoires, without strict boundaries between what could be differentiated as separate codes attached to particular scripts. This flexibility can go even as far as writing French in Ajami, as observed by Mc Laughlin (2015) in northern Mali.

4 Normative writing contexts and standard orthographies expressing strategic essentialism

Orthography is a tool in the symbolic fusion of language and identity. In Decrosse’s terms, it is orthography that creates the idea of a ‘Mother Tongue’: a potent metaphor of self and community united in a shared primordial attachment to language. (Jaffe 2000: 505)

We have seen that indigenous writing does not follow central principles of standard orthographies; there are no strict spelling rules and grapheme inventories, and there are no strict boundaries between languages. These properties set performative writing regimes apart from standard regimes of writing. The following section explores why standard language cultures are still a dominant model in West African language development, and what different goals are associated with them for their makers and would-be users.

In the light of the rigidity and costliness of standardization for multilingual societies, it is surprising that African institutions invest in it in order to strengthen national languages, and it is worthwhile having a closer look at the origins, motivations and real scope of the
normative writing regimes instantiating it. Standard language culture in Europe began in the Renaissance, fuelled by the needs of religious reform movements to translate the Bible into its hitherto unstandardized vernaculars. For the needs of the printing press, these vernaculars needed to be tamed, and standard languages and standard literacies thus went hand in hand from the outset. The export to Africa of this policy and the continuation of its ideological stance is striking: standard language culture there started in the 19th century, with the central involvement of missionaries and colonial administrators (Blommaert 2008a; Irvine 2008; Pasch 2008). To this day, faith-based NGOs such as SIL and missionary organizations such as the New Tribes Mission are central protagonists in describing Africa’s small and mainly unwritten languages and creating writing systems and Bible translations for them, with the goal of creating a literate population able to read the Bible in them. While these activities are sometimes welcomed for purposes of symbolic representation, it is by no means always desired by local actors that communication in the church or literacy campaigns take place in local languages. See (Fast 2009) for a case study situated in Burkina Faso whose findings resonate with Blommaert’s observation: “L1 promotion is a form of symbolic upgrading of marginalized resources, and resistance is often based on an acute awareness of the persistence of real marginalization. If performed within a monoglot strategy (i.e. a strategy aimed at constructing ‘full monolingualism’ and rejecting bilingualism as a road to language attrition or language death), L1 promotion is thus seen as an instrument preventing a way out of real marginalization and amounting to keeping people in their marginalized places and locked into one scale-level: the local.” (Blommaert 2010: 46f.)

The education systems of (West) Africa are struggling with their central task, that of producing writers (and fluent speakers) of the official languages of colonial provenance (Brock-Utne & Skattum 2009; Dumestre 1997; Ouane & Glanz 2010; Skattum 2010). Where experiments have been undertaken to introduce standard forms of national languages, the
obstacles have been manifold, and it is sufficient to quickly survey polyglossic settings around
the globe to find that those which manage to sustain several standard language cultures are few
and limited to the wealthiest countries in the world. The results of forty-odd years of piloting
(and failing to establish) standard language culture for African languages have revealed that
this concept is not transferable to these contexts, unless the very linguistic diversity that it is
supposed to nurture has previously been trimmed down to a reduced number of standardized
codes. The official recognition of a language is now linked to its “codification”, a
harmonization process consisting of the creation of an orthography and a sample of written
texts, which I have described in more detail for the Baïnounk languages in Lüpke (2011; 2016)
and in Lüpke & Storch (2013). In many cases, faith-based organizations assist language lobby
groups in this task. While their motivations are clear and transparent, those of the speakers of
the languages in question and of the national governments deserve some thought, particularly
in the light of the fact that these orthographies remain unwritten in practice even for the largest
languages – see Mc Laughlin (2008) for Wolof, the largest language of Senegal, and Dumestre
& Canut (1994) for Bambara, the largest language of Mali. Yet, for their speakers, who prefer
to write these languages in the more flexible writing regimes described in §3 above, if at all,
the fact that their languages are codified is a source of great pride. Speakers whose languages
have not taken part in this standardization process often demand it, but are similarly unlikely
to read the primers, story-books or Bibles produced in its wake. While this often frustrates
those involved in their production, the demand for literacy is not motivated by a need for
written communication in these languages, but, as Jaffe (2000) reminds us, by issues of identity
creation and self-representation.

In Figure 5, I present an extract from the statutes of the Baïnounk lobby organization
BOREPAB in Senegal, uniting under the ethnic label “Baïnounk” speakers of three languages
so different that they use French or regional *linguae francae* to communicate with each other.
BOREPAB stands for ‘Bureau de Recherches et d’Etudes sur le Patrimoine Baïnounck’, a diaspora organization mainly active in Dakar and Ziguinchor since 1982. This extract forcefully illustrates this symbolic power of writing and the great awareness of its authors of the ideological context in which they are attempting to achieve language status:

**Figure 5: Extract from the statutes of the BOREPAB (BOREPAB 1982)**

(Just like the other languages that transcription has for ever liberated from the anathema cast on them since always by the written languages, for the BOREPAB, the transcription of the Baïnounck language will be a necessary complement, allowing it to codify itself, to stabilize itself, to enrich or be enriched by contact with other languages.)

Standard orthographies are thus a direct a response to language ideologies originating in Europe and present in West Africa through the introduction of official languages with standard orthographies that serve a model not just for writing, but for ‘languagehood’. The very different attitudes of language technologists and potential readers and writers to issues of writing in West Africa illustrate the different nature and scope of these language ideologies in their lived language experience. Proponents of Western standard language culture have been raised in fictionally monolingual contexts and have learned to expect to write each language they are exposed to in its separate standard orthography, even if only to a limited extent. This is the type of language culture they aim to recreate when involved in literacy campaigns in West Africa. Proponents of the multilingual language culture in West Africa have been raised in contexts where fluidity is present in the oral and written domain, and where multilingualism
is not conceptualized as several stacked-on complete monolingualisms (see also Auer 2007 for a critique of this Western model of multilingualism). Their motivation to participate in standard language culture is thus not a practical, but a political one – an expression of “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1990) that enables their symbolic participation on this ideological plane. Some examples are in order to illustrate this radical difference. McLaughlin (2015) describes how French soldiers stationed in Gao, in northern Mali, write on the side of their tank Gardez vos distances and also provide a translation in Songhaï: Wa morou (Stay away). Songhaï is the most widely spoken language of Gao, so the French soldiers are clearly guided by the thought that this fact also must make it a widely read language. However, as Mc Laughlin shows, a translation into written Songhaï in Latin script is redundant in the multilingual context of Gao, where first literacy is in Arabic or French, and where everybody able to read Latin letters has previously become literate in French. French soldiers are acting based on their own language ideologies, which are flouted in a context where spoken and written language use does not align in accord with monolingual standard language culture. Development communication during the Ebola outbreak in the region between 2013 and 2015 provides another poignant example for the impact of ideological misunderstandings. The underlying assumption of many Ebola communication leaflets is that a health education message needs to be communicated in an individual’s mother tongue in order to be efficient, resulting in the translation of identical Ebola information leaflets into many West African languages, from the largest to the very smallest, in their standard orthographies. Figure 6 shows Ebola information in Bambara and Wolof, the most widely spoken languages of Mali and Senegal respectively. The leaflets were created by SOS International for Bambara, and by the Y’en a marre initiative for Wolof.
The same misunderstanding as for the Songhaï example applies here: the vast majority of readers in Mali or Senegal able to read the Latin script will have learned to do in school, and hence in French. In contrast, those readers able to read Bambara or Wolof will mainly use an Arabic-based, so called Ajami script. Depending on how one wants to look at them, these posters are thus either in the wrong language or in the wrong script. Wolof and Bambara are major languages of wider communication, which have undergone a process of reification that has established them as languages on the polyglossic plane. An Ebola poster symbolically confirms their status, so even if it is of little practical use, it has some ideological significance. For more locally confined languages, the creation of any form of written communication carries even higher stakes for their speakers. Two examples from Senegal may serve as an example here.
For the Casamance region, Ebola-related health information was translated into three Jóola languages and Manjaku by SIL Senegal. Figure 6 shows the resulting posters in the three very closely related Jóola languages. For development communication, the creation of these posters is superfluous, and, as in the case of Bambara and Wolof, even dangerous. The availability of these documents creates the illusion that important health information has reached audiences excluded from information in other languages. Yet, this goal has not been reached, as presently, there are no literacy campaigns in any of the Joóla languages. Everybody able to read this information can do so because they have learned French; nobody who has not been schooled in French will have access to it. The very documents supposed to transcend marginalization thus contribute to its increase.

Figure 6: Ebola information posters in Jóola Banjal, Joola Gusiilay and Joola Foñi (from left to right)

Why then are speakers of these languages taking part in the creation of materials that will have no or little use? As evoked above, strategic essentialism is a likely answer. Language has become a central identity marker in nationalism, and in the polyglossic multilingual sphere of present-day West African states, ethnolinguistic identities are expressions of this powerful
ideology. Every language and every variety that has not been affirmed as such through entering the canon of codified languages, a status only to be achieved through its very own and distinct written standard language culture, is non-existent. This motivation is very present in the posters, which make the languages, which only differ in a limited number of lexical and grammatical features, look very different, although the task set by the SIL workshop was one of translation. Through different word orders, lexical choices and paraphrasing, different language were not translated but in fact created.

What can we take away from this? West African speakers and writers navigate different ideological planes. On a polyglossic plane dominated by Western and monolingual ideas of writing, participation is the main concern in order to achieve visibility, even if successful communication cannot be achieved by these means. This observation contains a powerful message for language technologists: literacy models need to be rethought if they intend to go beyond the symbolic.

5 Lead language writing as model for multilingual literacies

I can write any language now. Laurent Manga (Member of the Crossroads transcriber team)

Normative writing has little future in the fluid settings so common in West Africa and beyond. Indeed, South Africa, which is leading the continent in terms of developing models for multilingual education, is struggling with the standard culture model, and new initiatives are centred around allowing “translanguaging” (García & Wei 2014) practices, although for now mainly confined to oral interaction in educational settings (e.g. Makoe & McKinney 2014). The grassroots writing practices introduced in this chapter have a very strong potential to take languaging into the written domain. Since these practices are language-independent, they allow
the writing of changeable linguistic repertoires better than prescriptive literacies. Such writing practices are also superior for supporting “polynomy” (Jaffe 2005) in that they are able to accommodate full and variable repertoires and offer a real alternative to the domino-like ripple of symbolic mini-standard language cultures created by prescriptive writing regimes.

There is one formal writing regime practiced mainly by linguists that explicitly aims at transporting characteristics of speech into the domain of writing. This regime is the one of phonetic or phonological transcription. Of course, linguists are mostly proponents of standard language culture and so traces of prescriptivity can trickle down into transcriptions, but if this impulse is absent, transcriptions can be very close to performative writing. In the current Crossroads research project, we have adapted this form of writing for the transcription of complex repertoires in very small languages, thus offering a first example of the potential of transfer of this writing to small languages without them undergoing the process of reification and standardization. Table 2 shows an example of such a multilingual transcription.

Table 2: Example of a Multilingual Transcription, Featuring Repertoires Conventionally Associated with Four Languages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Namuge!</td>
<td>Il a tué!</td>
<td>Camille</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Nifacaw!</td>
<td>Une bonne fois!</td>
<td>Jean-Tomi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fujin beenoor ufe</td>
<td>Le taureau de Beenor est là!</td>
<td>Dodo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Éò innuŋ?</td>
<td>Où est la maman?</td>
<td>Camille</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Innoŋ bijeen.</td>
<td>Elle est là-bas.</td>
<td>Jean-Tomi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dodo!</td>
<td>Dodo!</td>
<td>Dodo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Père!</td>
<td>Père!</td>
<td>Dodo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Qu’est-ce qui’il ya ?</td>
<td>Qu’est-ce qui’il ya ?</td>
<td>Damace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Père naka mu ?</td>
<td>Père, comment ça va ?</td>
<td>Dodo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Kät réunion où bien ?</td>
<td>Peut-être une réunion ou bien ?</td>
<td>Damace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Waaw, réunion, liggey lep!</td>
<td>Oui, réunion, travail. tout!</td>
<td>Dodo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The example presents the transcription of a segment of multilingual speech from the Crossroads in table format. Members of the Crossroads transcriber team have transcribed and
translated natural speech and tagged the languages which they attribute to the segments, thus offering insight into their language ideologies and offering us a heuristic for analysis. The following fonts are used to represent codes they identified: Jóola Kujireray, *Bâinounk Gubëeher*, French and Wolof. Grey font colour is used for names and other linguistic elements that has not be attributed a code. See Cobbinah et al (Cobbinah et al.) for a detailed discussion of patterns of multilingualism in this example.

The main difference to the other lead-language literacies discussed so far is that in our transcription practice, the lead language is Wolof in its standard orthography. This lead is applied to all parts of the repertoire, with one exception: French sometimes keeps its distinct visual identity and is differentiated in writing by maintaining its standard spelling, cf. *<père>* and *<réunion>* in Table 2 above.

The choice of lead is one made by the Senegalese state; the official codification of the languages attested in our area uses the standard alphabet for languages of Senegal, which *de facto* is the standard alphabet for Wolof. The grapheme inventory is close to the phonologies of most languages of Senegal. This lead-language writing is less ideologically contested when used in contexts that are not performative, such as in the transcription above, because it is more aligned with self-representation not linked to (post)colonialism. Since it has been used for literacy campaigns for some languages other than Wolof, including Jóola Foñi, it is sufficiently detached from Wolof to be acceptable even in the south of Senegal, where Wolofization is perceived as a threat. Most of our transcribers had never written anything other than French or French-lead language writing before. All of them state that they feel empowered by being able to write their complete repertoires, similar to the Malian writers whose grassroots writing practices are observed by Mbodj-Poye (2013). Because of the positive uptake of this writing strategy and of its potential for crossing language boundaries in a highly multilingual area, we
are currently piloting LILIEMA (Language-independent Literacy for Inclusive Education in Multilingual Areas) teaching in two villages in the Crossroads research area.

Investment in language-independent literacies promises to liberate its writers from the tyranny of writing, by removing barriers created by monolingual standard language cultures. A particular strength of this model is that it is compatible with the symbolic efforts to create a written standard language, such as those of SIL Senegal, laudable in their intent of supporting small languages, and an added advantage is that is also an important strategy of minority language speakers themselves to become visible on the polyglossic plane. Language-independent literacy using officially approved writing systems demonstrates that a language can be written, a central ideological goal in a polyglossic world, while at the same time removing the coerciveness of using such a standard language in practice. In Africa, such practices have survived 150 years of language planning activities attempting to annihilate them. As a model taking the fluidity of West African language use to the written domain this strategy is in line with globally emerging communication practices in digital media.

Standard orthographies and their associated standard language cultures are not equipped to handle linguistic diversity, as multilingualism and heteroglossia need to be dramatically reduced before they can be introduced. It is therefore paradoxical that language development initiatives aimed at strengthening the status of African languages often still see the introduction of standard writing as the gold standard of language development. Such an approach leads to countless atomised and incomplete “simulations” of standard language cultures with full representations (Deumert 2014: 75), which exacerbate the inequalities they are intended to overcome. Rather than pointing to a deficit, the longstanding existence and ongoing use of language-independent writing demonstrates the strength of West African societies to sustain diversity. It is time to valorize these practices. Their extension holds great promise for freeing their education systems from the shackles of colonial language policies.
Acknowledgements

The research reported in this chapter is funded by the Leverhulme Trust, through a Research Leadership Award for the project “At the Crossroads – investigating the unexplored side of multilingualism”. I gratefully acknowledge their support that allowed me to develop a holistic perspective on multilingualism by enabling me to build an interdisciplinary team. As always, I am deeply indebted to team members Alain-Christian Bassène, Alexander Cobbinah, Abbie Hantgan, Samantha Goodchild, Chelsea Krajcik, Rachel Watson and Miriam Weidl for their inspiring research and constructive feedback. My biggest “thank you” goes to the Crossroads multilingual transcriber team – Aimé Césaire Biagui, Alpha Naby Mané, Laurent Manga, David Sagna, Jérémie Sagna and Lina Sagna. Their amazing multilingual transcription and writing skills have inspired this chapter. Finally, I am grateful for Kasper Juffermans and an anonymous reviewer for their constructive feedback and insightful suggestions. I am also grateful to Elisabeth Gerger (SIL Senegal) for her constructive feedback on an earlier version of this chapter, and for engaging in a fruitful dialogue on visions of literacy as a social practice in Senegal.
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