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## **STATUS OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES WITHIN GAMBIAN EDUCATION POLICY: ENGLISH VS VERNACULAR LANGUAGES AS THE VEHICULAR LANGUAGE IN FORMAL EDUCATION CONTEXTS**

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## **Resume**

Analysis of the use of vernacular languages as the vehicular language of teaching within The Gambia Education system. The paper explores the use of indigenous languages in the formal educational context and investigates the impact on the development of students' second languages acquisition skills.

## **Abstract**

*Taking into consideration the National Education Policy (2004-15) that encourages the respect and preservation of indigenous languages of The Gambia and emphasizes the need to use vernacular languages during the first stages of formal education, this paper presents the results from observing the languages used to teach within the Gambian classrooms.*

*The investigation in the field focuses on finding and understanding the reasons that lead educators to choose either the vernacular language or the colonial language. The fieldwork is mainly conducted in lower basic schools in The Gambia, because it is the critical period when learners develop languages skills and will impact on the future acquirement of other foreign languages. Furthermore, the paper presents and explains briefly the situation within the whole education system from lower basic to tertiary education.*

**Keywords:** vernacular languages, colonial language, linguistic policy, illiteracy,

The Gambia, the smallest country on mainland Africa, is enclosed within the borders of Senegal, except the most western border which meets the Atlantic Ocean. As with most African countries, a wide variety of vernacular languages coexist peacefully with the colonial language: English. This multilingual context triggers a deep and intense debate inside the Department of Education; local languages are considered a symbol of identity for the population and English as the colonial language, conveying prejudices which create a favorable position for English in the formal education context. The reality is that The Gambia is willing to find an appropriate linguistic policy that promotes respect for both the vernacular as well as the colonial language. The purpose of this paper is to explain the current situation in The Gambia, to review the role of vernacular and colonial languages in crafting education policy and to analyse the new proposals to include indigenous languages in the centre of the teaching curriculum.

### **1. Linguistic situation**

According to many linguistic studies, it is possible to count up to 18 linguistic groups, including the varieties within the main language groups, in The Gambia. However, there are 10 main living languages<sup>1</sup> that dominate the geographical space of the country, five of them considered more predominant: Mandinka, Wolof, Pulaar, Jola, and Serahule. The most spoken vernacular language is Mandinka, with more than 40% of native speakers though its status is not as powerful as Wolof. Despite only being spoken by 15% of native speakers, it is used for commercial transactions because it is considered the lingua franca for business. English is considered the official language of the country, a status that was gained during the colonial period; nevertheless, barely 1% of native speakers speak English. Appreciatively, the

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<sup>1</sup> Data obtained from the Enciclopedia Ethnologue. Accesible in [www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)

multilingual configuration of the country allows people from different regions to communicate in other languages, apart from the colonial language. Many Gambians are considered functionally illiterate in English, because they are not able to write nor read English. This is characteristic of many African countries where local and colonial languages coexist.

Table 1 describes a brief scheme of the linguistic situation in The Gambia.

**Table 1. Linguistic situation in The Gambia.**

Country	Population (millions)	Official languages	Dominant local languages	Lingua franca	Other local languages
<b>Gambia</b>	1.8	English 0.094%	Mandinka 42% Pulaar 18% Wolof 15% Serahule 6.2% Jola-Fonyi 5,6%	Wolof Mandin ka	Serer 2.5% Mandjak 1.8% Maninkakan 1.2% N'ko Karon

The multilingual context currently present in this small country, with a population of 1.8 million, means that its inhabitants are able to speak and understand more than one language. Furthermore, it is impossible to find geographical areas where only one language is spoken. In fact, in The Gambia, most Gambians speak at least two vernacular languages: Wolof and Mandinka, both considered lingua franca to communicate in the village, playgrounds and commerce (mainly Wolof). However, English is the dominant language of government while over 50% of the

population is illiterate and are not capable of understanding what is written in English. Curiously, within this multilingual context, the Government of The Gambia offers a monolingual education around the colonial language that was introduced in The Gambia when the colonizers arrived in 1820 and began to train the potential political members of the Government in English.

Unexpectedly, even though English is the language encouraged for use in formal contexts, as pointed out before, roughly 1% of the population are native speakers and dejected educators are very often not able to speak and teach the language in a proper and correct manner. This occurs mainly because these professionals are not native English speakers and they have not had the chance to be trained with the specific tools to teach a second language; neither they have been exposed to specific training in second language acquisition. The above mentioned linguistic context is extremely difficult to reach an agreement regarding which vernacular language to use as vehicular language in Gambian schools as well as to find the correct position to the colonial language.

## **2. Vernacular languages within The Gambia legal framework**

It is necessary to analyse the position of vernacular and colonial languages within The Gambia legal framework to understand the current situation regarding the choice of the vehicular language in education. After a deep review of such documentation, it is apparent that the position of national languages within the education system is vague, imprecise and unclear. In the 1997 Constitution, vernacular languages are considered an essential part of basic rights for the population. Indeed they are considered a fundamental right for any citizen in the country:

Constitution 1997, Fundamental 17. Rights and Freedoms, (2) Every person in the Gambia, whatever his or her race, colour, gender, Language, religion, political or other opinion, National

or social origin, property, birth or other status, shall be entitled to the fundamental human rights and freedoms of the individual contained in this chapter, but subject to respect for the rights and freedoms of others and for the public interest.<sup>2</sup>

In article 32 of the constitution, there is another mention of national languages; however, it is not explained in which context it should be used and consequently it does not make any reference to its position in educational context:

Article 32, culture.

Every person shall be entitled to enjoy, practice, profess, maintain and promote any culture, language, tradition or religion subject to the terms of this Constitution and to the condition that the right protected by this section do not impinge on the rights and freedoms of others or the national interest, especially unity.<sup>3</sup>

Currently, the lack of laws that guide linguistic policies leads to the preservation of colonial trends, which were based on promoting the colonial language while leaving aside the vernacular languages. Such political situation is why the Government is not able to reach a national consensus regarding the role and position of vernacular languages within Gambia borders. Furthermore the fear of hurting ethnic sensibilities and the unity of the country impedes the Government in moving forward in terms of linguistic policies. Nevertheless, it should be noted that during the colonial period, local languages played an important role. The missionaries, whose goal was to evangelize the locals, implemented the use of vernacular languages to achieve their final purpose. It was just after the Second World War when the first indigenous members of

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<sup>2</sup> The Constitution of The Republic of the Gambia (Protection from discrimination 33) 1997 reprinted 2002, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> The Constitution of The Republic of Gambia (Protection from discrimination 33) 1997 reprinted 2002, p.28

the Government were taught and trained in English to be able to perform their administrative duties.

The linguistic situation within Gambian borders is complex because vernacular languages coexist peacefully with the colonial language, yet there is an urgent need to establish the use of the various languages in different contexts. Following the trends ascertained by missionaries, the question of whether to use colonial language or vernacular languages in formal education settings was raised in the early years of the creation of the Gambian Education System. Looking back to a document from 1954, in which the position of vernacular languages within the educational context is analyzed, Bathurst Secretariat asserted that that students perform better in their final primary years exam, when the teaching takes place in their vernacular languages rather in English. Additionally the need to create teaching materials in the five dominant languages is highlighted for the first time. It is just immediately after Independence when the position of vernacular languages within school setting is more observed, and the need to go back to indigenous roots creates a national movement among Gambians to re-connect to their origins through the recognition of vernacular languages. The current situation compels the Government to find a balance among local and colonial languages. Where local languages symbolize the roots, values, and customs of indigenous Gambians, the colonial language represents the future of the country, the linguistic bridge to connecting with other English speaking countries to open the door to new commercial trades and economic growth. Contrary to early concerns regarding the position of vernacular languages in the educational context, it will not be until around twenty years after Independence that local languages will have a position in the educational policy. In the first ten-year educational policy in the history of The Gambia, the Educational Policy Plan 1976-86 is stated that Mandinka, Wolof and Pulaar have an important role in teaching and

learning how to read and write in English, always without undervaluing the colonial language role in education that guarantees the national unity. The linguistic policies are still unclear and do not specify which language to use as a vehicular language of instruction. It is a well accepted fact that national languages need a place in the educational system; however the role and position of the colonial language cannot be displaced since it is held as the language of progress and economical growth. In the third approved official educational document, The Educational Policy Plan 1998-2003 and the following one, The Educational Policy 2004-2015, it is established that vernacular languages must be used during the first three years of basic education:

11.1.6. During the first three years of basic education (grades 1-3), the medium of instruction will be in the predominant Gambian language of the area in which the child lives. English will be taught as a subject from grade one and will be used as a medium of instruction from grade 4. Gambian languages will be taught as subjects from grade 4.<sup>4</sup>

Oddly, this approach lacks a global view and provides a rare window into the complexities of national language policies. The local languages seem to have found a place in the educational context; still their role is merely a tool to teach and learn English, and not to promote their acquisition and understanding. The current situation creates some important dilemmas. The teacher is the one who decides which vernacular language to use in the classroom and chooses whether to use the local or colonial language depending on his own judgment. Consequently, the arbitrary election of languages in Gambian schools is not only affecting students' learning process but also impacting negatively on the sole structure of the educational policy. Besides, this inadequate situation creates an atmosphere of disorganization and generates chaos among the

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<sup>4</sup> The Education Policy 2004–2015. Banjul: Department of State for Education, p.37



school community. Students and teachers do not know what to expect in the learning process. Local languages are therefore placed in a secondary position, merely a facilitator to learn the colonial language. Subsequently, vernacular languages are not acquired. In order to improve the current education system regarding the position of indigenous languages, major changes need to be implemented in the years to come within Gambian classrooms.

### **2.1 Looking forward: role of vernacular language in the Educational System**

In 2011, the biggest efforts to describe the position of vernacular languages in the Educational System arose. The goal is not only the formal inclusion of local languages but to assure the best quality teaching and learning context for Gambian students. This initiative was supported and well received by external partners of the Government who were willing to assist by funding this idea. The big change is described and explained during the first review of the Educational Policy 2004-2015. The change of approach lies in the idea that a proper acquisition of mother tongue involves a much better learning of other languages and other subjects. The strategies that learners acquire when learning how to read and write in their mother tongue are transferred to the learning of other languages, conveying a more significant learning experience. This approach represents an immense innovation regarding the position of local languages, which moves from just being a tool to teach how to read and write English to a new and independent subject to be taught from grade one. After lengthy deliberation, the Government decided to continue promoting the five most extended indigenous languages: Mandinka, Wolof, Pulaar, Jola and Serahule. The idea is launched in schools in a pilot program, where 125 classes with 30 students among the six regions will benefit from this new approach.

Finally, a real step forward is taken and for the first time in the history of the Gambia, vernacular languages will be a subject included in the syllabus. Students in this program will benefit from being part of an initiative that will provide them with better learning skills and habits. Obviously some challenges need to be overcome in order to succeed in such an ambitious task. At this time, it is necessary to point out, there are no pedagogical materials in the vernacular languages, thus it is necessary to create appropriate material in which the grammar, orthography and lexicon is defined, described and explained. Once these tools are developed, it is time to design didactic material focused on Gambian students' needs. This is not the only challenge to overcome. Training teachers to teach in vernacular languages is another task that will need time and a varied set of tools to be a reality. The Government proposed an accelerated training to the teachers in the pilot program focused, firstly, on ensuring that teachers were able to speak, read and understand the five national languages and secondly, providing the teachers with second language acquisition theories, and the tools needed to apply those theories in an educational setting. Such ambitious goals were achieved, although it was quite difficult, as it is shown in the results of the first midterm exams given in schools placed in the pilot program. It was noted that students in this program had enormously improved their reading skills not only in the local languages but in English as well. They were able to transfer the knowledge acquired while receiving proper teaching in their mother tongue to the learning of another second language, in this case, English. The number of students incapable of reading a word in their vernacular language or in English was enormously reduced.

Only 2% of the school population in primary years was exposed during the Pilot program. Hence; it is difficult to reach a final conclusion. However, the positive results obtained, such as the improvement of reading skills and the transfer of learning habits to the acquisition of

second languages, is an important outcome that encourages a continuation of the program among a wider school population. Currently, linguistically speaking, English is said to be the dominant language in The Gambia. However, as pointed out previously, only 1% are native speakers and most Gambians are not capable of reading or writing English. The goal is not to create a breach between the colonial and the vernacular languages but to find a balance. The ideal setting would promote the learning of vernacular languages in order to acquire cultural awareness and national identity and the appropriate skills to learn the colonial language. By transferring the acquisition techniques applied when learning the mother tongue, students find easier the learning of another language. It was revealed in field observations that students who, in first observations were not able to read nor in their vernacular languages nor in the colonial languages, have enormously improved their reading skills in their local language as well as in the colonial language, after the implementation of the pilot program. The situation is complicated by the fact that English is used to explain mathematics, social sciences and other subjects, and it has not been taught properly from a linguistic perspective. Students are forced to understand complex topics and concepts explained in English despite most of them being illiterate in English. If the teaching of mathematics is in the local language, the learning results would be more satisfactory because students at least, would be able to understand what is being explained. There is some debate among researchers about which language should be used as the vehicular language in classrooms. Some researchers believe that the current role of English in Gambian schools has a negative impact on students' learning achievements, and therefore they believe that to assure that students learn and acquire the syllabus content the vehicular language for teaching should be the vernacular languages. Other researchers believe that the colonial language should be the only language used in school settings. To justify this choice they put on the table arguments such as

the economical development of the country, the possibility of providing students with a powerful tool of communication and to preserve political unity. These are strong arguments but how are these students are going to learn curriculum content if they do not understand the colonial language? The answer to the linguistic problem within the Educational System in The Gambia lies in this question, and it should be a starting point to justify the need to teach Gambian students in their vernacular languages.

By teaching in local languages the educational system would be assuring the acquisition of the academic content included in the curriculum. English should be a major subject, because it is the language mainly used in communication worldwide, it has a very important role in The Gambia as it is the colonial language of the country and it is often labeled as the official language. By finding this balance Gambian students would be able to develop and nurture their national identity, their roots and recognition of their linguistic and cultural heritage, while learning at school. The problem appears again when trying to decide which local language should be used to teach, because many communities are multilingual and because by restricting the use of some vernacular languages over others, article 33 of the Constitution is not being considered:

In this section, the expression “discrimination” means affording different treatment to different persons attributable wholly or mainly to their respective descriptions by race, colour, gender, **language**, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status whereby persons of one such description are subjected to disabilities or restrictions to which persons of another such description are not made

subject, or are accorded privilege or advantages which are not accorded to persons of another such description<sup>5</sup>.

Once again the multilingual context present in The Gambia complicates the task of choosing a language over another without breaking the Constitution of The Gambia. It is not just a complicated task to choose among the eighteen varieties spoken in the country but to train and prepare teachers to teach in those languages. Such task requires, above all, a great amount of time, funding partners to create teaching materials in the different languages, adequate infrastructure and human resources to implement the program among all primary schools in the country. Has the Government covered all these aspects? If not, what is the route to follow to reach this point? These questions are difficult to answer for many reasons, but mainly because the debate created regarding the choice of a vehicular language in education is an old debate that began over fifty years ago and that it seems not to have an end in sight.

However, the 2011 initiative should not be underestimated. The positive results seen in the improvement of reading and writing skills of Gambian students should be a starting point to justify financial support to create materials in the five national languages and to train teachers on teaching mother tongue and second languages. The Gambia strives to be a better country, and to evolve into a more developed state. The best way to achieve this goal is to make sure that children get the best education possible because they are the future leaders of the country.

Assuring a strong education system, around multilingual theories and various methodologies will nurture students with better learning skills than monolingual systems and will have a strongest sense of national identity as they will not lose their roots by forgetting their mother

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<sup>5</sup> The Constitution of The Republic of the Gambia (Protection from discrimination 33) 1997 reprinted 2002, p. 28

tongue languages. By encouraging the educational system to include formally, the learning of local languages, The Gambia is assuring the continuation of the ancestors' legacy, the perpetuation of ancient traditions and moreover the assurance of learning other languages much effectively and faster. English, the colonial language, must always be present in the educational context, because this language is one of the most powerful languages and a potent tool to divulge the culture of The Gambia outside its borders, to make better business transactions and deals, and to export Gambian knowledge to other countries. As Nelson Mandela pointed out some years ago, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." If The Gambia wants to be a more productive, powerful and rich country, the weapon with which to achieve this objective is a quality education system.

### **3. Recommendations for positioning linguistic policies in The Gambia**

As it has already been explained and thoroughly analysed, one of the most difficult tasks relies on the choice of the vernacular languages to be used as vehicular languages in schools. A possible solution might be to follow the trends implemented by our neighbour country, Senegal, as they have a very similar linguistic situation. The biggest difference lies in the fact that Senegalese laws describe better the position of vernacular languages in its Constitution. Indeed, in contrast to The Gambia, the explicit disposition of national languages in the Constitution of Senegal has greatly helped to position the role of local languages in education. By following Senegal's steps, if The Gambia clarifies the linguistic laws, it would be moving forward to the establishment of linguistic policies among the school system, the parliament and the media. In Senegal, the linguistic setting is nearly the same, however the situation among schools is totally different from that in The Gambia.

Senegal took early measures regarding the linguistic chaos in which the country was immersed. The first allusion to the importance of national languages was mentioned in December 1978 in the reviewed version of the third Constitution published in 1963, « La langue officielle de la République du Sénégal est le français, les langues nationales sont le diola, le mandinka, le poular, le sérère, le soninké et le wolof »<sup>6</sup>. Nearly two decades later, in 1991, another revision to the position of local languages was made in the Orientation Law 91/22, approved on February 16<sup>th</sup>. This revision comes from the premise that learners acquire knowledge better when they are taught in their mother tongue, which is why article 6 states that « l'Éducation nationale est sénégalaise et africaine, développant l'enseignement des langues nationales, instruments privilégiés pour donner aux enseignés un contact vivant avec leur culture et les enraciner dans leur histoire...»<sup>7</sup>. By highlighting the importance of national languages as privileged tool in teaching, the Constitution of Senegal gives political importance to the use of local languages in the classroom.

Describing a clear, precise and explicit linguistic policy will obviously help to value the role of national languages in The Gambia. English is used among most official contexts in The Gambia, politicians communicate in English and the vehicular language for teaching up to now has been English. To really find a position for national languages in this context, the Government needs to change its approach towards vernacular languages. How can the Government promote a change of thought regarding the use of indigenous languages in certain specific contexts? The government can do this by assigning value to vernacular languages and

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<sup>6</sup> Official language in the Republic of Senegal is French, national languages are Jola, Mandinka, Puular, Sere, Soninke and wolof (Translated by the author). Document de politique de l'éducation non formelle et de développement des langues nationales du Sénégal dans le cadre d'une approche holistique, intégrée et diversifiée de l'éducation, Ministère de l'éducation nationale du Sénégal, 2010, p.6.

<sup>7</sup> National Education is Senegalese and African, by promoting the teaching of national languages, the learners will be privileged a rich contact with their culture and history. (Translation made by the author).

establishing them as central to the curriculum, so that students will improve in the learning of other languages.

Wolof and Mandinka are unofficially recognized as lingua franca for trade among Gambians and merchants from bordering countries. It is also well known as the language of communication between Gambians from different areas of the country who do not share the same local language. Curiously, these two vernacular languages seem to have found a proper place in The Gambia. They are mainly heard when trading and, from personal observation, in educational settings as well. So, the Government of the Gambia should recognize the role of at least these two national languages to open the eyes of the population who think that national languages are only for poor people, and that if your expectation is to be rich or have a higher social class status, you should only speak in English. Indeed, most of the traders in The Gambia perform their transactions in one of these local languages, Written and audio-visual media is communicated in Wolof or Mandinka. When buying in Serekunda Market, the most spoken language is Wolof. Consequently the Government should seriously reconsider and redefine the role of these languages within its constitution.

By doing such a review, they would be assuring a more significant and successful educational policy that will promote the learning of national languages as well as the colonial language, providing students with better skills to communicate within the country and neighbouring countries, and with Anglophone countries. The impact of such a deep reform would be immediately seen in the economic growth of the country, by having a more educated population. In promoting a multilingual population, the country is ensuring the perpetuation of the national heritage as well as economic advancement. The key is to find a balance and to open the eyes of Gambian society to the idea that being a multilingual country only brings advantages.



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Status of Indigenous Languages within Gambian Education Policy: English vs Vernacular Languages as the vehicular language in formal education contexts

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