

*Adam Pomieciński**

The dynamics of multilingualism: teaching Slavic languages in multilingual Senegal¹

Dynamika wielojęzyczności. Nauczanie języków słowiańskich w wielojęzycznym Senegalu

ABSTRACT:

The article analyses the dynamics of multilingualism in Senegal in a postcolonial context, with particular emphasis on the teaching of Slavic languages, especially Russian and Polish. It highlights that language policy in Senegal is shaped not only by local communicative needs but also by global power relations, diplomacy, and political strategies. The text underscores the growing role of the Russian language in Senegal's educational system, supported by institutions and scholarships. Russian is taught at Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) and in many secondary schools, where it is gaining popularity and is often associated with narratives of Russia's strength and independence. Against this background, the text examines the place of Polish as a foreign language, which is taught as a supplementary subject with limited institutional support, maintained mainly by individual lecturers, informal networks, and the small Polish diaspora. Methodologically, the study is based on ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and interviews with students, teachers, and members of the diaspora in Dakar. The asymmetric position of Russian and Polish in Senegal's educational system demonstrates that

* Adam Pomieciński – Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1788-1065>, e-mail: adpom@amu.edu.pl

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languages function as resources of power and as spaces for the development of various forms of politicality.

KEYWORDS:

multilingualism, glottodidactic policy, Senegal, teaching Polish as a foreign language, Russian language in Africa

STRESZCZENIE:

Artykuł analizuje dynamikę wielojęzyczności w Senegal w kontekście postkolonialnym, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem nauczania języków słowiańskich, zwłaszcza rosyjskiego i polskiego. Zwraca uwagę, że polityka językowa w Senegal kształtowana jest nie tylko przez lokalne potrzeby komunikacyjne, lecz także przez globalne relacje sił, dyplomację i strategie polityczne. Podkreśla rosnącą rolę języka rosyjskiego w systemie edukacyjnym Senegal, wspieranego przez instytucje i stypendia. Rosyjski jest nauczany na Uniwersytecie Cheikha Anty Diopa (UCAD) oraz w wielu szkołach średnich, gdzie zyskuje na popularności i często kojarzony jest z narracjami o sile i niezależności Rosji. W tym kontekście artykuł omawia także miejsce języka polskiego jako języka obcego – nauczanego jako przedmiot uzupełniający, o ograniczonym zapleczu instytucjonalnym, utrzymywanego głównie przez indywidualnych wykładowców, nieformalne sieci i niewielką diasporę polską. Badanie metodologiczne opiera się na pracy terenowej o charakterze etnograficznym, obserwacji uczestniczącej oraz wywiadach ze studentami, nauczycielami i członkami diaspor w Dakarze. Asymetryczna pozycja języka rosyjskiego i polskiego w systemie edukacyjnym Senegal pokazuje, że języki funkcjonują jako zasoby władzy oraz przestrzenie dla rozwoju różnych form polityczności.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:

wielojęzyczność, polityka glottodydaktyczna, Senegal, nauczanie polskiego jako języka obcego, język rosyjski w Afryce

Introduction

Multilingualism in the postcolonial context is one of the key phenomena shaping the social and cultural reality of Senegal. As a country with a rich linguistic history, Senegal presents an interesting case for analysing the processes of language policy formation, adaptation, and variability in the use of different communication systems. After gaining independence, Senegal inherited a planned linguistic and educational system from the French colonial administration. The decision to adopt French as the official language came at the expense of indigenous languages, which were relegated to an

ambiguous and largely symbolic status as “national languages”², effectively confined to oral communication. From the colonial era to the present day, foreign languages such as French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese have been dominant in administration, governmental institutions, and, most importantly, education. They have played a crucial role in various assimilation policies. However, this situation in Senegal began to change in the 1970s and 1980s, when an increasing awareness of the potential of ethnic languages emerged³, leading to various experiments with bilingual education⁴ and a simultaneous redefinition of the role of French in identity processes.

Although French still holds a privileged position in Senegalese society, its dominance is increasingly being challenged in various spheres of communication. At the same time, there is a growing process of revitalisation and emancipation of local languages, particularly Wolof⁵. Some researchers also point to the rising importance of Arabic in Senegal’s educational system⁶. Moreover, in recent years, certain countries not traditionally associated with colonialism have begun to intensify their political influence in Africa by promoting their languages as alternatives to French and other European languages. A striking example of this trend is the establishment of the Confucius Institute in Dakar, which offers Chinese language courses⁷. In recent years, Russia has also expanded its influence by actively supporting its own language policy, which has been integrated into Senegal’s educational system.

² E. H. A. A. Faty, *Politiques linguistiques au Sénégal au lendemain de l’Indépendance. Entre idéologie et réalisme politique*, “Mots. Les langages du politique” 2014, nr 106, s. 13–26, <https://journals.openedition.org/mots/21747#quotation> [25.01.2025].

³ H. Dior, *La promotion des langues nationales au Sénégal: d’une nécessité au manque de concrétisation*, “Djiboul” 2022, t. 3, nr 2, s. 96–109, <https://djiboul.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/09.-Harouna-DIOR.pdf> [04.02.2025].

⁴ P. B. Diouf, *Innovations pédagogiques pour l’intégration des langues nationales africaines dans l’éducation: quel état des lieux au Sénégal*, “Revue du Centre de recherche Analyse du discours”, 13.04.2019, s. 136–161, <https://hal.science/hal-03640374v1/document> [04.02.2025].

⁵ E. H. A. A. Faty, *Politiques linguistiques au Sénégal au lendemain de l’Indépendance*, op. cit.

⁶ S. M. Dramé, *Sénégal: la langue arabe progresse, malgré la domination du français*, “The Conversation” 2023, <https://theconversation.com/senegal-la-langue-arabe-progresse-malgre-la-domination-du-francais-219915> [05.02.2025].

⁷ S. Yinglun, *In pics: Confucius Institute of Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar in Senegal*, “Xinhua”, 21.07.2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-07/21/c_137339949_5.htm [16.02.2025].

The analysis of language policy in Senegal presented in this article focuses on the mechanisms shaping the multilingual landscape within a postcolonial context. The presence of specific languages in the educational sphere is not merely the result of bottom-up social processes but largely reflects global power dynamics, geopolitical strategies, and institutional support from various states and their specialised agencies. As such, this article addresses a research gap concerning the contemporary mechanisms that influence the presence of certain foreign languages in the educational systems of West African countries. In particular, it highlights the growing impact of non-traditional foreign actors on Senegal's language system – an area that remains relatively underexplored despite its clear implications for the country's geopolitical orientation and internal cultural transformations.

1. Justification and research objective

The main objective of this article is to analyse language policy within the context of postcolonial multilingualism in Senegal, with particular attention to the dynamics of foreign language education. Special focus is placed on the teaching of Slavic languages – especially Russian – which, due to political and institutional support, is gaining prominence while marginalising other Slavic languages such as Polish. The marginal status of the Polish language in this context highlights several key aspects – such as that foreign languages taught in Senegal are closely linked to global power hierarchies and geopolitical interests. The presence and development of a given language within the educational system depend not only on social demand, historical factors, and cultural embeddedness but increasingly on active institutional, economic, and political support.

The impetus for this research arises from the growing importance of language policy as a space of negotiation for identity, power, and postcolonial transformation in contemporary Senegal. As the country continues to grapple with the legacy of colonialism, while simultaneously being exposed to new global influences, language becomes not only a tool of communication but also a contested terrain through which political authority, cultural heritage, and social mobility are shaped. From a broader research perspective, the motivation for addressing this topic stems from the conviction that Senegal offers an exceptionally rich and insightful case for analysing language policy

in a multilingual and postcolonial context. As a relatively stable democracy with a well-established tradition of political engagement and intellectual discourse, Senegal provides a unique vantage point for examining how state and non-state actors negotiate linguistic diversity in both formal and informal spheres of social life. The country's specific history – its close ties with France, the increasing prominence of local languages, and its openness to emerging external influences – makes it an ideal setting to explore how language serves as a medium for articulating competing visions of modernity, nationhood, and social order.

The article adopts a critical and interdisciplinary approach, drawing on postcolonial theory and critical discourse analysis. Rather than treating language policy as a fixed or technical domain, this study views it as a dynamic and contested process, constantly shaped by historical legacies, socio-cultural forces, and geopolitical shifts. By situating the Senegalese case within broader theoretical debates on language and power, this paper aims to contribute not only to African linguistic studies but also to global discussions on decolonisation, linguistic justice, and cultural sovereignty. Ultimately, this research seeks to provide a nuanced and empirically grounded account of how language operates as a central medium of postcolonial negotiation in Senegal – reflecting both the country's aspirations for modernity and its pursuit of autonomy within a multilingual reality.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

The issue of multilingualism and language policy in Senegal has received significant scholarly attention across various disciplines, including socio-linguistics, postcolonial studies, education, and political science. Numerous researchers have examined the impact of the French colonial legacy on Senegal's linguistic landscape, as well as the complex dynamics between indigenous and foreign languages in the process of post-independence nation-building.

One of the foundational contributions to the study of language policy in Senegal is the work of Cheikh Anta Diop, whose arguments for the recognition and scholarly legitimisation of African languages remain central to the discourse on linguistic decolonisation. Diop asserted that African languages, including Wolof, possess the capacity to convey complex scientific,

philosophical, and ideological content – directly challenging colonial epistemologies⁸. His translations of canonical texts into Wolof – such as Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and Marx’s Communist Manifesto – were not only acts of intellectual resistance but also blueprints for constructing a decolonised national identity through language. Diop’s legacy has been continued by scholars such as Pathé Diagne, who emphasised the need for systemic reforms to make national languages a central component of education and public life in Senegal⁹.

Parallel to Diop’s linguistic nationalism, Léopold Sédar Senghor advocated a more conciliatory approach, promoting French as a language of unity, modernisation, and international integration. Senghor, a leading figure of the Négritude movement, did not perceive French as merely a language imposed by the coloniser but rather as a valuable cultural tool that could be appropriated and transformed by Africans. According to Senghor, the French language offered an expressive and universal medium for articulating African experiences, poetry, and philosophy¹⁰. This view, however, has been criticised by postcolonial scholars such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who argued that the privileging of colonial languages in African societies perpetuates epistemic violence and cultural alienation¹¹. Although Ngũgĩ’s critique primarily addressed the East African context, his arguments remain highly relevant in Senegal, where the persistent dominance of French continues to hinder the development and institutionalisation of indigenous languages.

Contemporary research increasingly focuses on the process of “Wolofisation” – a linguistic and cultural phenomenon in which Wolof is becoming Senegal’s dominant lingua franca. Scholars such as Faty¹² have analysed this trend, describing Wolof as a transitional language – evolving from an ethnic

⁸ Ch. A. Diop, *Les Fondements économiques et culturels d’un état fédéral d’Afrique noire*, Paris 1974.

⁹ P. Diagne, *Grammaire de wolof modern*, Paris 1971.

¹⁰ L. S. Senghor, *Le français, langue de culture*, “Esprit” 1962, nr 11, s. 837–844.

¹¹ N. wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, London 1986.

¹² E. H. A. A. Faty, *Politiques linguistiques au Sénégal au lendemain de l’Indépendance. Entre idéologie et réalisme politique*, “Mots. Les langages du politique” 2014, nr 106, s. 13–26, <https://journals.openedition.org/mots/21747#quotation> [25.01.2025].

to a national means of communication. Similarly, Diouf and Vieille-Grosjean¹³ emphasised the growing informality and prestige of Wolof in the media, urban youth culture, and political discourse, contrasting this with the institutional rigidity of the French language. These studies demonstrate that Wolof functions not only as a practical tool for intergroup communication but also carries symbolic value as an expression of a unique Senegalese identity – one that transcends colonial language hierarchies. The field of education has also been extensively studied; Anne¹⁴ and Diouf¹⁵ have analysed the implementation of bilingual programs that integrate national languages into the curriculum. These efforts have been marked by both experimentation and uneven success. While some pilot projects have demonstrated pedagogical benefits to learning in the mother tongue – particularly in early primary education – institutional support and political will remain inconsistent. Dior¹⁶ notes that the promotion of national languages often exists in tension with socio-economic pressures that associate French – and increasingly English and other global languages – with mobility, modernity, and international opportunity.

The question of language policy is also intertwined with broader theoretical frameworks concerning linguistic hegemony, language ideologies, and the formation of postcolonial identity. Particularly relevant in the Senegalese context is the concept of linguistic capital introduced by Pierre Bourdieu¹⁷. Bourdieu viewed language not merely as a means of communication but as a resource embedded within social hierarchies. In Senegal, proficiency in French continues to function as a form of linguistic capital, granting access to education, employment, and political power. In contrast, local languages are often undervalued in formal institutions, despite their widespread use

¹³ M. Diouf, H. Vieille-Grosjean, *De l'utilisation du français comme médium ou discipline dans l'enseignement élémentaire au Sénégal*, "Strathèse" 2017, nr 5, <https://www.ouvroir.fr/strathese/index.php?id=472> [21.02.2025].

¹⁴ T. Anne, *Quelle politique linguistique pour le Sénégal?*, SenePlus.com, 25.02.2023, <https://www.senepius.com/opinions/quelle-politique-linguistique-pour-le-senegal> [25.02.2025].

¹⁵ P. B. Diouf, *Innovations pédagogiques pour l'intégration des langues nationales africaines dans l'éducation: quel état des lieux au Sénégal*, "Revue du Centre de recherche Analyse du discours", 13.04.2019, s. 136–161, <https://hal.science/hal-03640374v1/document> [04.02.2025].

¹⁶ H. Dior, *La promotion des langues nationales au Sénégal: d'une nécessité au manque de concrétisation*, "Djiboul" 2022, t. 3, nr 2, s. 96–109, <https://djiboul.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/09.-Harouna-DIOR.pdf> [04.02.2025].

¹⁷ P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge 1991.

in everyday life. This situation can effectively be described as diglossia. The concept of diglossia, originally developed by Charles Ferguson¹⁸ and later expanded by Joshua Fishman¹⁹, provides a useful ethnolinguistic lens through which to analyse the hierarchical coexistence of languages in Senegal. French (as the “high” variety) and Wolof or other national languages (as “low” varieties) operate in distinct social domains, although this dichotomy is increasingly blurred by shifting socio-political realities.

This study also draws on the works of postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, who view language as both a site of domination and emancipation. Fanon’s analysis of linguistic alienation in *Black Skin, White Masks*²⁰ emphasises the psychological consequences of internalising the coloniser’s language and the resulting sense of alienation. Mbembe, on the other hand, highlights the ambivalent nature of postcolonial subjectivity, arguing that language is both a product and a medium of power relations²¹. These perspectives are crucial for analysing how speakers in Senegal navigate and negotiate their identity through multilingual repertoires.

Finally, the growing influence of new foreign languages – particularly Chinese and Russian – introduces a new dimension to the literature. Researchers such as Yinglun²² have analysed the role of Confucius Institutes in shaping linguistic and cultural diplomacy in Senegal, while Dramé²³ notes the increasing presence of Arabic due to the development of Islamic education. These new linguistic actors disrupt the traditional Franco-Anglophone dichotomy and suggest a broader geopolitical reconfiguration of Senegal’s linguistic landscape. Focusing on Slavic languages integrated into Senegal’s educational system situates this study within interconnected theoretical currents, primarily from political anthropology and the anthropology of institutions. Analysing educational institutions, including the hierarchical

¹⁸ Ch. A. Ferguson, *Diglossia*, “Word” 1959, t. 15, nr 2, s. 325–340.

¹⁹ J. A. Fishman, *Bilingualism With and Without Diglossia; Diglossia With and Without Bilingualism*, “Journal of Social Issues” 1967, t. 23, nr 2, s. 29–38.

²⁰ F. Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris 1952.

²¹ A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley 2001.

²² S. Yinglun, *In pics: Confucius Institute of Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar in Senegal*, “Xinhua”, 21.07.2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-07/21/c_137339949_5.htm [16.02.2025].

²³ S. M. Dramé, *Sénégal: la langue arabe progresse, malgré la domination du français*, “The Conversation” 2023, <https://theconversation.com/senegal-la-langue-arabe-progresse-malgre-la-dominacion-du-francais-219915> [05.02.2025].

structure of the university, is crucial for diagnosing practices, behaviours, and ideas related to the institutional approach to organising and implementing language education, particularly concerning Slavic languages. These institutions not only shape bureaucratic resources and instrumentalise political practices²⁴ but also accumulate knowledge about the world in which they operate and actively contribute to its transformation²⁵. This is especially significant in the context of African countries, where language policy stems from specific historical, social, and economic conditions²⁶, as well as contemporary political expansions based on carefully designed glottodidactic strategies. Senegal offers a compelling example of such multilingual complexity, which directly influences educational policy, the shaping of national identity, and the reception and teaching of foreign languages.

3. Research methods

The main part of the research was conducted at Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar (Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, UCAD), which serves as the central hub for Slavic language teaching in West and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Department of Slavic Languages and Civilisations (Département de Langues et Civilisations Slaves) operates within its structure, where students receive linguistic education. This department functioned as a kind of “laboratory” for the anthropological research, which was based on participant observation and in-depth ethnographic interviews conducted primarily with Russian language lecturers, Slavic studies students, and Polish language instructors. The university also played a key role as a centre for organising various academic events, conferences, exhibitions, and occasionally public meetings between academic authorities and representatives of the diplomatic corps from different countries. Thanks to such events, contacts were

²⁴ J. McC. Heyman, *The Anthropology of Power-Wielding Bureaucracies*, “Human Organization” 2004, t. 63, nr 4, s. 487–500; C. Hoag, *Assembling Partial Perspectives: Thoughts on the Anthropology of Bureaucracy*, “Political and Legal Anthropology Review” 2011, t. 34, nr 1, s. 81–94.

²⁵ H. Kuipers, P. Van Amelsvoort, E.-H. Kramer, *New Ways of Organizing: Alternatives to Bureaucracy*, Leuven 2020; T. Lea, *Desiring Bureaucracy*, “Annual Review of Anthropology” 2021, t. 50, s. 59–74.

²⁶ P. B. Diouf, *Innovations pédagogiques pour l'intégration*, op. cit.

also established with Russian language teachers working outside of UCAD, mainly in secondary schools. Interviews conducted with these teachers constituted an important part of the research process, providing valuable data about Russian language pedagogy and its broader role in the Senegalese educational system. Additionally, conversations were held with members of the Russian and Polish diaspora permanently residing in Senegal. During my extended stay in Dakar, I also sought to collect diverse archival materials related to language policy in both historical and contemporary contexts. Some of these materials are held in the UCAD libraries. I regularly consulted my findings with staff from the Department of Slavic Languages and Civilisations at UCAD, whose insights played a significant role in shaping this study.

The methodology applied in this study was based on direct engagement with the academic and educational life of Senegal – primarily involving students, teachers, instructors, and university lecturers – from an ethnographic perspective rooted in attentive listening, observation, and dialogue. Fieldwork was conducted at Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) in Dakar over several months, from October 2024 to March 2025, during which the author actively participated in the daily life of Slavic studies students and lecturers. A total of 20 interviews were conducted with students and 10 with academic staff, focusing on their personal experiences, motivations for learning and teaching Slavic languages, and reflections on the role of language in their educational paths. Simultaneously, participant observation took place during Russian and Polish language classes, paying close attention to teaching practices, linguistic interactions, and the level of student engagement. The study was further enriched by participation in educational and cultural events promoting Slavic languages, including a popular academic panel organised during the “First Polish Day at UCAD de Dakar” (29 January 2025). Continuous contact with UCAD lecturers and staff enabled a multidimensional interpretation of the collected data. This methodological approach allowed for the identification of key tensions between language policy and everyday educational practices. Therefore, the article incorporates both a grassroots perspective (students and teachers) and an institutional perspective embedded within the broader geopolitical context of language policy (glottopolitics). Source triangulation was applied, combining interviews, observations, and literature analysis.

The data analysis process was conducted in stages, combining interpretative and critical approaches. The first stage involved transcribing and

organising empirical materials (interviews, field notes, documents). Thematic coding was applied, which allowed for the identification of analytical categories such as language as a tool of political influence, educational asymmetries, and institutional frameworks of teaching. In the next stage, the narratives of students and teachers were analysed to capture their experiences and perceptions of the role of Slavic languages in their education and social life. Simultaneously, the ways in which educational practices were linked to the actions of states (primarily Russia and Poland) in the field of cultural diplomacy were examined. At the meta-analytical level, a glotto-political perspective was employed, enabling the connection of microsocial data (collected at UCAD) with broader strategies of nation-states that treat language as an instrument of geopolitical influence. This was supported by a historical analysis revealing the sources of the presence of Slavic languages in the Senegalese educational system. Particular attention was given to the asymmetry in the perception of Slavic languages – Russian as a language with a relatively long institutional presence and state support, and Polish as a newer language developing under conditions of limited resources.

4. Historical and political context

The foundations of language policy in Senegal were shaped by the colonial legacy, which imposed a linguistic hierarchy long before independence was achieved. Multilingualism in Senegal thus has deep historical roots and is largely linked to the expansion of French influence in the region. The French language appeared in Senegal in the 17th century, following the earlier arrival of the Portuguese and the Dutch. Initially, its use was limited to Saint-Louis and Gorée, but as the French presence strengthened, it gained importance in administration and education. The first school teaching French was established in 1817 in Saint-Louis. It was primarily intended for children of mixed and Christian marriages, but the need to extend education to broader social groups, including Muslim children, was soon recognised²⁷. Officially, the first teacher appointed by the French colonial minister and sent to Senegal

²⁷ A. Lanly, *Le français dans les colonies et territoires français*, w: *Histoire de la langue française 1880–1914*, A. Gérard, R. Martin (red.), Paris 1999, DOI: 10.4000/books.editions-cnrs.9255 [15.02.2025].

was Jean Dard. He became not only a pioneer of French language teaching in the region but also the first person to adapt educational practices to the local context²⁸. Over time, the teaching of French was taken over by the Brothers of Ploërmel, who opened schools in Saint-Louis and Gorée, promoting a Franco-Catholic model of education based on the “civilizing mission of colonization”²⁹. They introduced a strict teaching method that demanded exclusive use of the French language, and any deviation was severely punished. Education was assimilationist in nature and focused on the Christianisation of the population as well as consolidating the colonial dominance of France³⁰. It was assumed that French-language education would not only “civilize” the inhabitants but also ensure the political stability of the colony.

In the mid-19th century, under the rule of Louis Faidherbe, a French general and governor of Senegal, France’s influence in West Africa deepened even further. At his initiative, secular schools were established, developing alongside Catholic schools. Faidherbe also sought to regulate the status of indigenous Quranic schools by forcing the marabouts who ran these institutions to send their students to French schools to learn the French language. Ultimately, he founded the *École des fils d’otages* (School of the Sons of Hostages), later renamed the *École des fils de chefs* (School of the Sons of Chiefs), aimed at preparing future officials capable of cooperating with France³¹. Graduates of these schools were intended to form the foundation of a new community of French citizens, appealing to the idea of French patriotism. After the creation of French West Africa, Senegal was the only region with a regularly organised public education system. However, until the early 20th century, French education mainly developed in coastal cities such as Saint-Louis, Gorée, and Dakar. In other regions, the teaching of French progressed slowly. In practice, therefore, the French schooling system influenced not the general population but rather the elite, who primarily staffed

²⁸ R. Colin, *Systèmes d’éducation et mutations sociales: continuité et discontinuité dans les dynamiques socio-éducatives*, Paris 1980, s. 179.

²⁹ D. Assane, *La formation des enseignants au Sénégal: des écoles normales aux Centres Régionaux de Formation des Personnels de l’Éducation (CRFPE), état des lieux et perspectives de renovation*, “Academia. A publication of the Higher Education Policy Network” 2013, t. 3, nr 1, <https://pasiithe.library.upatras.gr/academia/article/view/2077/2119> [20.02.2025].

³⁰ R. Colin, *Systèmes d’éducation et mutations sociales*, op. cit.; D. Assane, *La formation des enseignants au Sénégal*, op. cit.

³¹ A. Lanly, *Le français dans les colonies et territoires français*, op. cit.

the French administration and army³². Teaching French served to strengthen France's economic power and raise its national prestige. Local languages were completely ignored because their use would undermine the foundations of assimilationist policy, and this persisted for decades, with a breakthrough only occurring after the collapse of the colonial system.

5. The time of independence

After Senegal gained independence, the French language was granted official status; however, local languages were not included in this process. Senegal's first president and poet, Léopold Sédar Senghor, argued that these languages were not sufficiently codified and, therefore, he strongly supported the continued use of French in administration, education, and legislation. As a result, since 1960, French has been established by the constitution as the official and instructional language (Article One). French once again became a key instrument of the new political order, ensuring the state's hegemony and the need to maintain power³³. Proficiency in French continued to guarantee social mobility for Senegalese people. As a postcolonial state, Senegal thus returned to the earlier concept of an assimilationist policy – with all the consequences of that choice.

For Senghor and his supporters, the French language was also a national bond and one of the key tools for ensuring social peace, as well as maintaining economic and political ties not only with the former colonial metropolis but also with other former French colonies³⁴. Moreover, as a co-founder and advocate of the Négritude movement, Senghor did not see the French language as a threat to African identity. Négritude, as a critique of colonialism and a philosophy of reclaiming African roots, was for him not a rejection of the coloniser's language but rather a way to transform it into a tool for expressing African culture, experiences, and spirituality. Senghor believed that the

³² Ibidem.

³³ A. Ndiaye, *Le français et les langues nationales au Sénégal: pour une cohabitation et tolérance linguistiques*, "Revue Roumaine d'Études Francophones" 2013, nr 5, s. 126–136; M. Diouf, H. Vieille-Grosjean, *De l'utilisation du français comme médium ou discipline dans l'enseignement élémentaire au Sénégal*, "Strathèse" 2017, nr 5, <https://www.ouvroir.fr/strathese/index.php?id=472> [21.02.2025].

³⁴ M. Cisse, *Langues, État et société au Sénégal*, "Sudlangues" 2005, nr 5, s. 99–133.

French language could become a means of artistic expression for Africans, helping them regain dignity and build a new, postcolonial identity, as well as enabling dialogue with the rest of the world. However, Négritude was not a monolithic movement. Although it initially expressed itself primarily in French, other supporters recognised great value in local languages such as Wolof. By advocating for French as the language of culture and education, Senghor stood in opposition to intellectuals who promoted the affirmation of local languages. Undoubtedly, one such opponent was Cheikh Anta Diop. He focused on translating scientific and ideological texts into Wolof. His work was an important step toward proving that African languages could convey complex scientific and philosophical knowledge, challenging the colonial prejudices of that time³⁵. Through these efforts, Diop consistently pursued Africa's intellectual independence, promoting the use of indigenous languages to transmit knowledge and ideas – a foundation of his vision for rebuilding Senegal.

Alongside Diop, a whole group of intellectuals, scholars, and artists emerged, people like Pathé Diagne – a Senegalese linguist, historian, and writer – and Ousmane Sembène, a pioneer of African cinema, who began creating works in local languages, primarily Wolof. These practices gradually started to change the linguistic situation in Senegal. The first decree concerning the codification of national languages appeared in 1971, marking a significant step toward a language policy that officially recognised their role in the state. This decree established the transcription of six national languages for their inclusion in formal education. These were Wolof, Pulaar (Peul), Sérère, Mandinka, Soninke, and Diola. This coincided with the emergence of local social movements driven by ideas of African identity revival and national language ideologies. Subsequent decrees in 1975, 1985, and 2005 introduced further adjustments and amendments³⁶. These reflected a gradual loosening of policies toward national languages and a weakening of the privileged position of the French language.

³⁵ E. H. A. A. Faty, *Politiques linguistiques au Sénégal au lendemain de l'Indépendance. Entre idéologie et réalisme politique*, "Mots. Les langages du politique" 2014, nr 106, s. 13–26, <https://journals.openedition.org/mots/21747#quotation> [25.01.2025].

³⁶ T. Anne, *Quelle politique linguistique pour le Sénégal?*, SenePlus.com, 25.02.2023, <https://www.seneplus.com/opinions/quelle-politique-linguistique-pour-le-senegal> [25.02.2025].

The resignation of President Léopold Senghor in December 1980 only accelerated the processes that can be described as the “Wolofization” of Senegal. The conflict between two tendencies – on one hand, the French language integrating citizens within state structures, and on the other, national languages as languages of everyday communication – created a complex diglossic situation in Senegal. In this arrangement, French began to serve as the formal language, while the national languages – particularly Wolof – dominated private life, interpersonal communication, and the informal public sphere. The dominance of French was gradually challenged by Wolof, which, initially limited to the Wolof ethnic group, over time transformed into a pan-ethnic means of communication that transcended ethnic boundaries. Over the years, it became the dominant language of everyday communication in Senegal.

6. Russian language in Senegal: The historical roots of education

The teaching of the Russian language in Senegal began in the 1960s, embedded within a broader context of cultural and educational policies promoted by the country’s first president, Léopold Sédar Senghor. His decision to introduce Russian into educational curricula reflected both the geopolitical power dynamics of the time and his vision of opening the Senegalese intellectual community to a diverse range of intellectual and linguistic traditions. Senghor, not only as a state leader but also as an intellectual and literary figure involved in the Négritude movement, showed deep appreciation for the achievements of Russian writers. He valued the universal humanistic values present in their works and recognised their decolonising reflections on the human condition, which resonated with his vision of the emancipation of African nations and peoples.

Undoubtedly, Léopold Sédar Senghor played a crucial role, both in paving the way for the teaching of the Russian language and in fostering Senegal’s relations with the Soviet Union. These relations were not one-dimensional. As a supporter of African socialism and the concept of Négritude, Senghor maintained contacts with Soviet intellectuals but was simultaneously sceptical of Marxism and Soviet interference in African affairs. Senghor maintained cordial relations with many Soviet writers, particularly Berdi Kerbabaýew

and Juhan Smuul, with whom he corresponded³⁷. He was also open to contacts with Soviet ethnologists and Africanists, such as Ivan Izosimovich Potekhin and Dmitry Alekseyevich Olderogge. He met the latter in person in Dakar, showing great interest both in Soviet African studies and in the research conducted directly by Olderogge³⁸.

The 1960s were also a time of establishing cultural cooperation and formal diplomatic relations between newly independent Senegal and the USSR. In 1962, Senegal's then-Prime Minister, Mamadou Dia, paid an official visit to Moscow, where he signed a series of agreements with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev. These agreements covered trade, economic, and technical cooperation, as well as a convention on cultural exchange. As a result, Senghor agreed to send Senegalese students to Soviet universities for their studies. Both countries also committed to establishing official diplomatic missions, leading to the opening of the Soviet embassy in Dakar, along with a consulate and a cultural centre. The latter began offering Russian language instruction, which gradually became more integrated into Senegal's education system, eventually emerging as one of Moscow's key instruments of influence in the region.

Léopold Sédar Senghor's personal fascination with the Russian language and literature, rooted in his broader vision of cultural dialogue between Africa and the Slavic world, combined with the establishment of diplomatic relations with the USSR, created a space for educational cooperation. As a result, Russian began to be taught in selected high schools in Dakar, such as Blaise Diagne High School, Maurice Delafoss High School, and Seydina Limamou Laye High School³⁹, as well as in other cities, including Kaolack and Saint-Louis. However, the initial reception of Russian in Senegal was limited – its teaching faced both methodological and social challenges. The language, lacking deep roots in local cultural realities and perceived by many as foreign to traditional educational patterns, failed to gain significant popularity among students and teachers. At the time, it functioned more as

³⁷ F. Blum, C. Katsakioris, *Léopold Sédar Senghor et l'Union soviétique: la confrontation 1957–1966*, "Cahiers d'études africaines" 2019, nr 235, s. 844–845.

³⁸ A. Kasse, *Izuchenie russkogo jazyka v Senegale: ekskurs v istoriju i nashi dni* [Изучение русского языка в Сенегале: экскурс в историю и наши дни], "Mezhdunarodnyj nauchno-issledovatel'skij zhurnal" 2024, nr 4 (142), s. 2, <https://research-journal.org/archive/4-142-2024-april/10.23670/IRJ.2024.142.136> [28.02.2025], DOI: 10.23670/IRJ.2024.142.136.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, s. 2.

a project of Senegal's intellectual and political elites, who viewed the USSR as an ideological ally. This affinity stemmed partly from a shared sense of historical struggle – the belief that both Africa and Russia had endured oppression, the former under colonial rule and the latter under Stalinist repression. Additionally, the intersection of *négritude* and socialism played a role, as both movements embodied aspirations for emancipation and the search for new social and cultural models – an especially pressing concern for a newly postcolonial state like Senegal.

Despite the establishment of formal diplomatic relations between Senegal and the USSR, and the introduction of the Russian language into select educational institutions, its influence on the local education system and culture remained marginal for decades. Even in the early stages of implementing Russian language instruction in high schools, its low popularity was evident. Senegalese students and teachers saw little practical utility in learning Russian. One of the key factors limiting the development of the Russian language in Senegal was the hegemony of French colonial heritage. As a former French colony, Senegal remained within France's sphere of influence, which was reflected in the structure of state institutions as well as the dominance of the French language in public life, education, and administration⁴⁰. Moreover, after the collapse of the USSR, Russia's influence in Africa, including Senegal, significantly weakened. Moscow shifted its focus primarily to domestic political and economic reforms, leading to a reduction in its activities on the African continent. In Senegal, the dissolution of the Soviet Union resulted in the closure of the Soviet cultural centre, the only Russian library, and a significant reduction in scholarship programs available to Senegalese students and interns in Russia⁴¹. As a result, Russian–Senegalese relations, like Russia's ties with other countries in the region, gradually lost their significance.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, s. 2–3.

⁴¹ M. Ndiaye, *Russkij jazyk v uslovijah obrazovatel'noj sistemy Senegala* [Русский язык в условиях образовательной системы Сенегала], "Русистика" 2008, nr 4, s. 44, <https://journals.rudn.ru/russian-language-studies/article/view/10033/9484> [12.03.2025].

7. Slavic languages in Senegal: Research findings and analysis

A breakthrough in teaching Russian as a foreign language occurred after Vladimir Putin came to power, when Moscow began to intensify its contacts with Africa once again. A symbolic expression of this shift was the Russia–Africa Summit held in 2019 in Sochi, which marked a new stage of Russian engagement in the region. The former legacy of Moscow’s support for anti-colonial movements and the education of African elites at Russian universities coincided with the Russian Federation’s renewed opening to Africa. Learning Russian became more significant for Senegalese people, primarily due to the strengthening political influence in Africa. Moscow’s clear interest in the African continent emerged after 2014, when Russia’s annexation of Crimea was met with sanctions from Western countries. Consequently, Russia began seeking alternative political and economic partners, and Africa, often perceived as a region less inclined to comply with Western restrictions, became one of the key areas for its expansion.

After Russia launched its large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and faced further tightening of international sanctions, it found itself in a position where diversifying its trade and political relationships became essential. Thanks to Russia’s increased activity in Senegal, more schools and high schools started offering Russian as a second foreign language. It is currently taught in several regions, including Dakar, Thiès, Diourbel, Fatick, Kolda, Matam, Kaffrine, Kaolack, Ziguinchor, Louga, Saint-Louis, Tambacounda, Kédougou, and Sédhiou⁴². Nearly every year, new Russian language classes are opened in various schools. For example, in Thiaroye, on the outskirts of Dakar, Russian language classes were introduced only a few years ago, similar to schools in other cities⁴³. In recent years, specialised Russian language classes have appeared in high schools such as Lycée Malick Sy in Thiès, Lycée Diop in Mbour, Lycée Valdiodio Ndiaye in Kaolack, and schools in

⁴² A. Kasse, *Izuchenie russkogo jazyka v Senegale: ekskurs v istoriju i nashi dni* [Изучение русского языка в Сенегале: экскурс в историю и наши дни], “Mezhdunarodnyj nauchno-issledovatel’skij zhurnal” 2024, nr 4 (142), s. 4, <https://research-journal.org/archive/4-142-2024-april/10.23670/IRJ.2024.142.136> [28.02.2025], DOI: 10.23670/IRJ.2024.142.136.

⁴³ M. Ndiaye, *Russkij jazyk v uslovijah obrazovatel’noj sistemy Senegala* [Русский язык в условиях образовательной системы Сенегала], “Rusistika” 2008, nr 4, s. 44–48, tu s. 44, <https://journals.rudn.ru/russian-language-studies/article/view/10033/9484> [12.03.2025].

Bambey. In some cases, such as at the lycée in Bambey, more students are learning Russian than German, Spanish, or even Arabic⁴⁴. This phenomenon indicates an increasing integration of the Russian language into Senegal's educational system. Currently, Russian is taught in Senegalese schools starting in the fourth year of high school as an optional second language. French is the official national language, and English is the first foreign language. Students can then choose another foreign language, including Russian. These efforts contribute to changes in educational networks, curricula, and cooperation with Russian institutions, which are increasingly influencing this system. This also results in the creation of alternative career paths for Senegalese students, not only directed toward Francophone or Anglophone countries but also toward Russia. Furthermore, the increasing number of Russian language teachers and the creation of new educational institutions focused on teaching this language are influencing the structure of the local labour market in the educational sector. According to estimates, over 7,000 students in Senegal are studying Russian in secondary schools, and more than 120 teachers are instructing the language⁴⁵. Other estimates suggest that over 45,000 Senegalese people speak Russian or are learning it in schools, universities, and at home⁴⁶. These figures are significant not only in the context of foreign language teaching but also in relation to local and ethnic languages in Senegal, some of which, such as the Bassari or Balante languages, have fewer speakers.

8. Russian language in the Senegalese education system: Perspectives of teachers and students

Russian is often taught in local educational institutions by graduates of Soviet and Russian universities, as well as by their students who have received their education in Senegal. Many of these teachers, with personal experience of the

⁴⁴ N. A. Baranchuk, *Russkij jazyk v Senegale: sovremennoe sostojanie* [Русский язык в Сенегале: современное состояние], "Polilingvial'nost' i transkul'turnye praktiki" 2009, nr 3, s. 41, https://journals.rudn.ru/polylinguality/article/view/1801/1274/ru_RU#13.03.2025.

⁴⁵ M. Ndiaye, *Russkij jazyk v Senegale* [Русский язык в Сенегале], interview with Maniétou Ndiaye, University of Dakar, 2024, https://vk.com/wall-155688991_196176 [13.03.2025].

⁴⁶ M. Ndiaye, *Russkij jazyk v uslovijah obrazovatel'noj sistemy Senegala*, op. cit., s. 44.

Russian education system, play a key role in the development of Russian studies in Senegal. As one teacher emphasises: “I studied in Moscow, my wife is Russian, we started a family. After returning to the country, I began teaching the culture and language of the great Pushkin” [Respondent 1, 16 November 2024]. Another, who had the opportunity to study in the USSR, points out: “After finishing school, I managed to go to the Soviet Union. I received a scholarship and was able to continue learning Russian there. After returning to Dakar, I quickly found a job at a high school as a Russian language specialist” [Respondent 2, 18 November 2024]. It is worth noting, however, that the development of Russian studies in Senegal is also influenced by individuals who began their education in Senegal and later developed their professional skills further. As one female teacher states: “I learned Russian in schools in Senegal. Later, I only briefly went to Russia. Now I continue my education in Senegal, but I already teach others in various Russian language courses” [Respondent 3, 15 January 2025]. These stories show how graduates of Russian universities and their protégés have become active participants in the development of the Russian language. Thus, a kind of “educational chain” has been created, strengthening the position of the Russian language within the Senegalese education system.

Russian glottodidactic policy relies on various institutions whose tasks include, among others, effectively supporting the teaching of Russian abroad. These institutions include Russian universities and higher education schools, certain agencies subordinate to the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs such as Rossotrudnichestvo (Россотрудничество), and Russian cultural centres. A significant role in Africa is also played by Russkiy Mir (Русский мир) – a foundation established in June 2000 by decree of Vladimir Putin. Its mission is to maintain a proper image of Russia worldwide and to promote the Russian language and literature. Its activities are funded by a special budgetary grant approved by the State Duma and the Federation Council⁴⁷. The increase in initiatives aimed at popularising the learning of the Russian language, alongside the development of educational institutions supporting its teaching, indicates growing coherence in Russian language policy. At the same time, there has been a strong linkage between Russian language

⁴⁷ K. K. Klomegah, *Usefulness of Russian Language Still Blurry for African Learners*, “Modern Diplomacy”, 04.12.2023, <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2023/12/04/usefulness-of-russian-language-still-blurry-for-african-learners/> [12.03.2025].

education and geopolitical conditions and strategies. This is well illustrated by the statement of a principal of a Senegalese high school: “Our teachers, when they return to school after a break, encourage students to learn Russian. They often talk about Russia, sharing information about the country and its politics. Students usually respond enthusiastically and want to learn Russian, directly associating it with Vladimir Putin.” [Respondent 4, 16 January 2025]. Even more telling was the statement of a sixteen-year-old high school student from Dakar: “Our Russian teacher often tells us that language is the key to understanding the world. When he came back from a course in Moscow, he talked a lot about Russia, its culture, history, but also about how strong a country Russia is today under Putin’s rule. He said Russia is an example of independence and strength. For me, Russian is not just a language but a way of thinking. My classmates feel that too. Sometimes we even say among ourselves that it would be good to study in Russia someday. I feel that by learning Russian, we become part of something bigger.” [Respondent 5, 18 February 2025]. Such narratives indicate that Russian is not perceived solely as a tool for acquiring professional qualifications but is part of a broader political project. Teaching Russian in Senegal is connected with a message about Russia’s role and its politics, giving it an ideological dimension. However, the contemporary approach to teaching Russian as a foreign language clearly contrasts with the earlier cultural policy of Senegal, shaped during the time of Léopold Sédar Senghor, who aimed to preserve Africa’s cultural autonomy and avoided direct ideological influences from outside, despite his undeniable openness to Russian education on the continent. Today’s spread of the Russian language, therefore, points to deeper transformations occurring in the cultural and linguistic landscape of Senegal.

All these aspects consistently fit into the broader political strategy pursued by the Russian Federation, one of whose priorities is educational expansion on the international stage. According to the official position, the “promotion” of Russian education abroad constitutes a significant element of Russia’s long-term policy. In this regard, academic cooperation – especially in recruiting international students to Russian universities – is expected to bring tangible benefits to Russia, both in the short and long term. The goal of this process is not merely to generate revenue from educating foreigners but also to shape a positive image of Russia internationally. Influences in the higher education sector are particularly important, where there is an observed intensification

of cooperation between Russia and leading African universities⁴⁸. In this context, Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar (UCAD) remains a key institution, training specialists in Russian studies.

9. Russian language and Slavic studies at UCAD in Dakar: An academic perspective

Teaching Russian at the academic level is primarily conducted within the Department of Slavic Languages and Civilisations at UCAD. Initially, this department operated as part of the Department of Germanic Languages and Civilisations within the Faculty of Literature and Humanities at UCAD, established in the early 2000s. It is now an independent university unit dedicated to Slavic language studies. So far, the Department of Slavic Languages and Civilisations at UCAD has had four heads: Professor Demba Gadiagua, Professor Cheikh Sougoufara, Dr. Sidy Khoya Fall, and Professor Ousseynou Tall (the current head). Since its inception, the department has employed a total of 10 academic teachers and 4 permanent secretaries (from 2000 to the present). Additionally, within the Faculty of Science, Education Technology, and Teacher Training at UCAD (FASTEF, formerly the Higher Teacher Training School), there is a pedagogical unit responsible for training Russian language teachers for Senegalese secondary schools. The head of this unit is currently Ms. Maniétou Ndiaye [field materials: Fall, 25 January 2025]. Thanks to this structure, the number of graduates qualified to teach Russian at various educational levels is steadily increasing.

Slavic studies in Senegal are dominated by Russian studies. Other Slavic languages, such as Polish, Ukrainian, and Bulgarian, serve only as supplements within this education. The potential for teaching Russian is enhanced by institutional and financial support from Russia. Russian academic institutions regularly support the Department of Slavic Languages and Civilisations at UCAD by providing teaching materials, facilitating further education in Russia, and cooperating with lecturers and professors from

⁴⁸ M. Shpak, *Rossija – Afrika: dostizhenija i perspektivy sotrudnichestva v sfere obrazovanija* [Россия – Африка: достижения и перспективы сотрудничества в сфере образования], Rossijskij sovet po mezhdunarodnym delam (RSMD), 2023, <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/columns/africa/rossiya-afrika-dostizheniya-i-perspektivy-sotrudnichestva-v-sfere-obrazovaniya/> [15.03.2025].

Russian universities. An example of intensified infrastructural efforts is the opening in November 2024 of a multimedia library (Mediatheque Innopraktika Лекторий иннопрактики) dedicated to the Department of Slavic Languages and Civilisations at UCAD, established by the Russian Innopraktika Foundation. Students learning Russian have access to attractive government scholarships (both short- and long-term), enabling them to continue their studies in Russia. For Senegal, the number of scholarships offered to study in Russia has increased significantly in recent years. From the beginning of the 21st century until 2017, the number of scholarships provided to Senegal by Russia did not exceed twenty per year. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and Russia's isolation in Europe, this number has sharply increased. In 2024, Russia granted Senegal as many as 100 scholarships [field materials: Tall, 25 January 2025]. The steadily developing educational infrastructure is supported by a qualified academic staff, some of whom received their Russian studies education in the USSR and Russia.

It is also worth emphasising that the current Russian glottodidactic policy increasingly influences the linguistic profile of Senegal, where “multilingualism is the norm”⁴⁹. The presence of the Russian language in the Senegalese educational system is thus largely anchored in the so-called Russian “export of education” to Africa. Unlike Wolof (the language of everyday communication) or French (a legacy of the colonial history), the development of the Russian language is closely linked to the political activity of the Russian Federation. Its evolving position in the Senegalese educational system does not stem from demographic factors but from ongoing diplomatic efforts.

10. Teaching Polish as a foreign language in Senegal. Students' motivations and perceptions

Teaching Polish as a foreign language in Senegal takes place exclusively at the Department of Slavic Languages and Civilisations at UCAD in Dakar. It is part of the Slavic studies program, which in practice focuses mainly on Russian

⁴⁹ A. Ouane, Ch. Glanz, *Why and how Africa should invest in African languages and multilingual education. An evidence- and practice-based policy advocacy brief*, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, Hamburg 2010, s. 24, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000188642> [15.03.2025].

studies. For this reason, the Department of Slavic Languages and Civilisations at UCAD is colloquially referred to as the Russian Language Department. This situation means that Polish is subordinated to the teaching of Russian, and Polish studies do not function as a separate field of study. Among the students themselves, Polish is usually regarded as less important within the entire course of study. As one student points out: “I study Polish mainly out of curiosity because most of the classes focus on the Russian language and Russian culture. If there were more Polish classes in our studies, maybe more students would take it seriously.” [Respondent 6, 19 February 2025]. Another student expresses similar observations: “I like the Polish classes, but I feel we treat it as an add-on to our Russian studies. Most students focus on Russian because it is required in almost all exams and will be more useful in future work. Probably, if there were concrete career prospects related to Polish in Senegal, more people would pay more attention to it.” [Respondent 15, 19 March 2025]. However, among students, there are also more individual motivations that go beyond the study program. “I started learning Polish because I am interested in the history of Eastern Europe. That’s why I like learning Polish. Russian is my main subject, but I treat Polish as an additional tool to understand the region.” [Respondent 17, 21 March 2025]. For some students, the choice to learn Polish has a pragmatic dimension: “I found out that Poland offers scholarships for students from Africa, although fewer than Russia. But I thought that if I learned basic Polish, I would increase my chances of going to Europe to study.” [Respondent 9, 21 February 2025]. There are also purely linguistic and cultural motivations: “I was surprised how different Polish is from Russian, even though both are Slavic languages. I liked learning the language and getting to know Polish culture. It’s something new and exotic for me. Maybe someday I’ll visit Kraków or Warsaw.” [Respondent 18, 21 March 2025].

Polish is mandatory for first- and second-year undergraduate students, with about 200 students studying it each year. The Polish language courses for Senegalese students are spread over two years and conclude with exams. Despite the compulsory nature of the course and the relatively large number of participants, Polish language learning does not go beyond a basic level of language competence. Moreover, all Senegalese students encounter the Polish language for the first time only during their university studies. The limited number of classes and the lack of clear career paths related to the Polish language in Senegal mean that students rarely choose to pursue advanced studies of Polish after completing the language courses.

The staff involved in teaching Polish in Senegal are few; since the establishment of the Department of Slavic Languages and Civilisations at Cheikh Anta Diop University (UCAD) in Dakar, only three lecturers have taught Polish. The first lecturer was Maria Ludowick Lo, originally from Legnica, a graduate of Russian studies in Poland and the USSR. It was in the USSR that she met her husband – a Senegalese who served for many years as the dean of the Faculty of Mathematics at UCAD. After her death in 2021, Polish language teaching was taken over by Anna Haris, who earned her degree in Polish studies at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Like Maria Ludowick Lo, she came to Dakar with her husband, a Senegalese citizen. After some time, she focused on work with the Polish Medical Mission, and her teaching duties were assumed by Dr. Mouhamed Fall – a local Russian studies specialist who has spent several scholarship periods in Poland and currently serves as a Polish language lecturer.

11. In the network of dominance: The grassroots dynamics of teaching Polish

Initially, Polish did not function as a separate language course but was taught within classes focused on comparative grammar issues in the context of Slavic languages, with particular emphasis on Russian studies. Its presence in the academic program was supplementary and mainly limited to structural and contrastive analysis in relation to Russian, which resulted both from the dominant position of Russian studies and the lack of dedicated courses devoted to teaching Polish as an independent discipline. Since the employment of Anna Haris and Mouhamed Fall, the perspective on teaching Polish has been expanded to include not only its grammatical aspects but also issues related to language culture. The introduction of new teaching methods and a broader view of Polish as a carrier of specific cultural and communicative values contributed to a gradual shift in the teaching approach. Consequently, Polish began to be treated not only as an object of comparative analysis within the context of Slavic languages but also as an important element in developing students' intercultural competences.

The biographies of Polish language teachers in Senegal indicate that initiatives related to the introduction of Polish into the UCAD curriculum largely stemmed from informal relationships and the openness of the leadership

of the Department of Russian Language. Key roles were played by, among others, Professor Cheikh Sougoufara, Dr. Sidy Khoya Fall, and the current head of the department, Professor Ousseynou Tall. For a long time, it was thanks to personal connections and the commitment of Polish lecturers that the Polish language could function as an integral part of Slavic studies in Dakar. Intercultural relationships – particularly mixed marriages between Polish women and Senegalese men – played an important role in creating the educational infrastructure for Polish language instruction. This model of language transmission fits into the broader context of grassroots processes of cultural adaptation and reception, which significantly shape the dynamics of foreign language teaching in Senegal. At this point, it is also worth noting the role of the Polish diaspora in these processes. According to current data, the Polish community in Senegal numbers around 60 people, most of whom reside in Dakar. Part of the diaspora consists of Polish women who settled in Senegal in the 1980s and 1990s, mainly as a result of marriages with Senegalese citizens who studied in Poland. Their ties to Poland are mostly sentimental, as their children often live in Poland or other EU countries. In addition, there are Polish clergy in Senegal from various Catholic congregations. Another group of about 20 people includes Poles and Polish-Senegalese families living in Senegal for professional reasons, often linked to international organisations. Moreover, as a result of scholarship exchanges in the 1970s and 1980s, the country is also home to graduates of Polish universities who speak the Polish language [field materials: Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Dakar, 02 February 2025]. There is also a Polish diaspora association that brings together and engages Poles living in West Africa. As one Polish woman living in Dakar recounts: “Sometimes the children of my Senegalese friends ask me about Poland because they hear my daughters speaking Polish. Occasionally, I show them a map, teach them a few simple words. But it’s more like a curiosity, not systematic teaching.” [Respondent 11, 25 February 2025]. Another Polish woman adds: “At my son’s preschool, they asked me to talk about Poland during culture week. I showed them pictures of Kraków, taught them a few Polish words. It was a nice experience, but more of a one-time event.” [Respondent 12, 22 February 2025]. Yet another notes: “Sometimes, when I talk to my children’s teachers, I mention that education in Poland is different or that we have different holidays. Some of them ask more questions because Poland is completely unfamiliar to them. But I don’t feel I have the space to share this knowledge regularly.” [Respondent 13, 22 February 2025].

Although the informal network of contacts between members of the Polish diaspora and Senegalese people supports the social diffusion of the Polish language, the scale of these interactions remains too limited to significantly influence the institutional status of Polish at UCAD. The Polish diaspora in Senegal is neither large enough nor sufficiently organised to play a role in systematically supporting Polish language education.

Despite this, UCAD in Dakar remains an important point on the global map of Polish studies, as it is the only university in West and Sub-Saharan Africa where regular and compulsory Polish language classes are conducted. The mandatory status of Polish for first- and second-year students in Russian studies ensures a steady “influx” of students, which supports the language’s continued presence in the curriculum. Even if the study of Polish is only a supplement to the Russian studies program, it still offers Senegalese students (including those from other African countries studying in Dakar) the opportunity to learn the language and – as they themselves state – also to discover “Polish culture”. Although Polish is part of the Russian studies curriculum, it is taught in a distinctly different manner. The teaching of Russian in Dakar focuses primarily on classical literature and the cultural legacy of Russia, deliberately avoiding references to contemporary events. Classes are dominated by narratives focused on the works of Pushkin and other great Russian writers, which means that students rarely have the opportunity to reflect on the current geopolitical situation. As Polish language instructor Anna Haris noted: “What I felt was missing in the department was an interest in the contemporary. There was a spirit of Pushkin and other great Russian poets and prose writers hovering over the place. But there was essentially no discussion of the present – it was clearly lacking what could be the most engaging for students: classes on culture, even political debates.” [Respondent 20, 23 March 2025]. This lack of open, more critical discussion about contemporary Russia stands in contrast to the approach used in Polish language classes. As Haris recalled, when she came to class on the day the war in Ukraine broke out, “out of more than 50 students in the group, only 2 or 3 were able to say what had happened between Russia and Ukraine.” [Respondent 20, 23 March 2025]. One of the peculiarities of Slavic studies at UCAD is thus its balancing of different, often opposing narratives, which are by nature emotionally charged and shaped by divergent political visions. The coexistence of these narratives within the same academic and didactic structure reveals the specificity of the African university as a space

operating at the intersection of various influences – colonial, postcolonial, African, and European. As a result, linguistic and cultural issues not only reflect these tensions but also become embedded in broader debates about identity, history, and contemporary international relations.

Moreover, the case of the Polish language in Senegal illustrates the phenomenon of asymmetrical language relations, in which Polish – despite its inclusion in the curriculum – operates in the shadow of Russian. This reflects global power structures and language policy strategies. The teaching of Polish in Senegal is not the result of a long-term cultural or diplomatic strategy, as is the case with Russian, but rather an outcome of specific structural and academic circumstances that determine its current place within Slavic studies. Additionally, the African context brings new meanings to this process. Polish functions as part of a symbolic network of dominance and marginality. Its presence at UCAD demonstrates that even in linguistically marginal contexts, spaces can emerge that allow for the persistence and adaptation of the language in culturally distinct – and at times socially unfavourable – conditions.

Conclusions

An analysis of Senegal's linguistic situation allows for conclusions that go beyond a simple description of local multilingualism. The country serves as an example of a space where the dynamic coexistence of local languages (such as Wolof), the former coloniser's language (French), and foreign languages (Russian and potentially other foreign tongues) reflects the complex interrelations between everyday communication, educational policy, and geopolitical strategies. Multilingualism in Senegal is thus not merely a sociolinguistic fact, but also a process of negotiating cultural and political influences.

Particular attention should be paid to the presence of the Russian language in the educational sphere, which – as demonstrated – is not the result of grassroots social demand, but rather the outcome of an external strategy and the political expansion pursued by the Russian Federation. The institutional support for Russian, including educational programs, scholarships, and the active presence of Russian language instructors, fits into a broader trend of Russia consolidating its influence on the African continent. As a result, the teaching of Russian has become part of global geopolitical processes

adapted to local conditions and is no longer viewed solely through the lens of linguistic concerns. This stands in stark contrast to the marginal status of the Polish language, which – despite its limited presence – has never received institutional support comparable to that of Russian. The absence of permanent teaching structures and the lack of effective cultural diplomacy on the part of Poland have led to the marginalisation of Polish within Senegal’s educational landscape.

Thus, the presence and functioning of languages in academic and public spaces depend not only on their communicative value but largely on the political and institutional infrastructure supporting them. In this context, universities such as Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar play a crucial role as arenas of negotiation between various linguistic narratives and modes of political engagement. The asymmetric presence of Slavic languages in Senegalese university education reveals that the field of foreign language instruction serves as a tool for reproducing global hierarchies of influence, rather than as a neutral space for intercultural communication. From the perspective of multilingualism research, the case of Senegal makes a significant contribution to the development of linguistic African studies, highlighting the need for investigations into the role of foreign languages as instruments of foreign policy and as components of cultural identity negotiation. There is now a pressing need to shift the research focus – from classical analyses of language contact toward studies of language ideologies, strategies of institutional actors, and asymmetries in language access within educational spaces. More broadly, it can be argued that multilingualism in Senegal – although often celebrated as an expression of “cultural wealth and heritage” – is also a field marked by tensions, selective mechanisms, and intersecting forms of competition.

In this context, it is important to highlight the significant limitations of existing research on the presence of Slavic languages in Senegal. The available empirical data is fragmented and focuses primarily on the Russian language, leaving other Slavic languages – such as Polish – outside the mainstream of scholarly analysis. There is a lack of comprehensive comparative studies that consider different models of Slavic language presence in the region and their actual social reception. A major limitation lies in the political context itself, which significantly complicates research on Russian and other Slavic languages. In light of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the intense polarisation of international positions, the topic of the Russian language’s presence in the

educational systems of Sub-Saharan African countries has become highly politicised. External researchers – especially those who do not represent either Russian or Senegalese academic institutions – are often perceived as representatives of specific geopolitical interests, which may hinder access to data and the ability to build trust with respondents. This raises the issue of the researcher’s position as a not fully neutral actor, necessitating greater methodological and theoretical reflection.

In light of the above, future research should focus on several priority areas. First and foremost, it is essential to deepen ethnographic fieldwork conducted among students, teachers, and members of the diaspora. This approach allows for the reconstruction of individual motivations, language strategies, and attitudes toward Slavic languages that are present – albeit to varying degrees – in the educational systems of Senegal and other African countries. At the same time, there is a need for a systematic analysis of the language policies of Slavic states, taking into account both their formal strategies for establishing a presence in Sub-Saharan Africa and the actual impact of these efforts on educational institutions and political practices in host countries. An important but still insufficiently explored area is the ideological dimension of Slavic language teaching – not only from an institutional perspective, but also through analysis of textbooks, teaching materials, and the messages embedded in media discourse and official cultural narratives. Ultimately, the complexity of the phenomenon requires the creation of an interdisciplinary research framework that combines perspectives from linguistics, political anthropology, and postcolonial studies. Only such an approach can capture the full extent of the presence of Slavic languages in the region – not as neutral tools of communication, but rather as carriers of ideas, interests, and political strategies.

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