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African students at the French Department of the University of Szeged, Hungary: An unlikely encounter of varieties and cultures

Abstract

This paper focuses on the experiences of African students and their instructors at the French Department of the University of Szeged in Hungary, from a linguistic anthropological perspective. The study is based on twelve semi-structured interviews, six with African students and six with their instructors. The findings suggest a general tolerance towards non-standard varieties of French at the level of pronunciation, while, on the other hand, a rather normative attitude can be observed when assessing written production. While the students seem to recognize the importance of European standard French (français hexagonal) in an academic context, they embrace their own non-dominant variety in everyday situations, and believe that the concept of French should not be limited to a single, high variety. These opinions reinforce the trends reported in international research, underlining the gap between official regulations and everyday reality.

1. Introduction

The "French Studies" bachelor's program and the "French Language, Literature and Civilization" master's program at the University of Szeged, Hungary welcome a relatively large number of foreign students, the majority of whom are Africans. These African students come on the one hand from North African countries such as Algeria and Morocco, and on the other from sub-Saharan countries, especially the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cameroon, Guinea and Togo. From the outset, the instructors have experienced that these African students speak French more fluently than most Hungarian students, but the varieties of French they speak are different from the standard French used by the instructors. This raises the problem of the contrast between a monocentric and a pluricentric view of the different non-standard varieties of French. In Hungary, as in France, the teaching of French is officially based on a monocentric view: students are expected to acquire linguistic skills that reflect standard French, especially in the areas of grammar and vocabulary, and to a lesser extent pronunciation. On the other hand, instructors at the Department of French Studies at the University of Szeged have to cope with a multitude of non-dominant varieties used by African students.

The aim of this contribution is to examine the lived experiences of African students and their instructors in the Department of French Studies at the University of Szeged, from an anthropological linguistics perspective. The investigations are based on a set of semi-structured interviews with African students and their instructors. Our aim is to investigate the participants' perceptions of the cultural and linguistic differences between African students and their instructors, as well as the communication and educational difficulties they face throughout the training courses. Furthermore, we also investigate participants' attitudes to variation in French in general, illustrating the relevance of considering linguistic variation in the case of pluricentric languages in the classroom.

The article is organized as follows. After a brief description of the status of the French language in Africa in Section 2, Section 3 raises some issues relating to the role played by French in the political life and educational system of French-speaking African countries. Section 4 is devoted to the methodology of our investigations, carried out within the framework of Schreier's Qualitative Content Analysis (2013). Finally, Section 5 presents and evaluates the results of the investigations.

2. French-speaking Africa

To understand the situation and the linguistic background of these African students, we need to briefly summarize the history of the French-speaking world in Africa, and give a general overview of the current situation.

French presence in Africa dates back to the 17th century. Two French-speaking countries, France and Belgium, took part in the division of Africa among the countries of Western Europe. A process of decolonization began in 1945, and by 1960 all French and Belgian colonies had regained their independence. These countries are located in two major geopolitical regions:

Northern and sub-Saharan Africa. To this day, these former colonies share a common history of diplomacy and education.

According to the Observatoire de la Langue FranÇaise (OIF 2022) estimates, there are 321 million French speakers in the world; 255 million use French on a daily basis, of whom 14.6% live in the north of the African continent, and 47.4% in sub-Saharan Africa. The number of French speakers in Africa is gradually increasing, especially in the sub-Saharan zone. The average age of the French-speaking population in these regions is very low: most of these speakers are only 15-24 years old.

All French speakers are bi- or multilingual, but the majority speak French as a second language only. Contact with other languages and other factors have led to the diversification of the varieties of French spoken in Africa, as well as the emergence of mixed or hybrid languages, such as Francarabe in the north of the continent, Franlof in Senegal, Fransango in the Central African Republic and Camfranglais in Cameroon (Queféllec 2007).

French has an official or co-official status in 21 African countries. In some countries, notably the four former French colonies and protectorates in North-Africa, it lost official language status after the end of colonial rule, and functions as the language of education, with varying statuses: foreign language, second language or "privileged language" (Haidar et al. 2016: 60). In other countries, such as Mali, the loss of official language status is more recent, linked to regime changes in recent years. All in all, French is used in one way or another in 36 African countries (OIF 2022). According to OLF surveys, it is used primarily in a professional context, and to a lesser extent at home.

3. The social and political challenges of French in Africa

Despite the steady expansion of French in Africa in recent decades, sentiment towards the language remains generally ambiguous: it is considered both the language of subjugation and that of enormous prestige. Colonial history, which is an inseparable part of modern African culture and politics, has left an essentially negative mark on the perception of French, which remains, in a contradictory way, the key to social and professional advancement (Tumbwe 2012; N'Zapali-Te-Komongo 2019). However, this paradoxical situation cannot be traced back to a single cause: it is the product of a policy that promotes monocentric practices at all levels of daily life.

3.1 French and vernacular languages in education

To begin with, we can see that there is no real balance between French and vernacular languages in education (Akissi Boutin & Gadet 2012). In fact, the use of the vernacular in schools is often frowned upon and even sanctioned in some cases. A recent seminal study (N'Zapali-Te-Komongo 2019) reports the results of a survey conducted in the Central African Republic, where French is co-official with Sangö, an indigenous language spoken by 98% of the population. Despite the fact that each of the two languages is used in the social as well as the professional sphere, the Central African government still wants to keep them separate, with important consequences for educational decision-making.

The results of N'Zapali-Te-Komongo's research reflect the political attitude: educators forbid the use of Sangö in class, and they tend to speak sophisticated, high-level French, whereas most high-school students have no access to this register of the language. As a result, young people are often reluctant to converse in French, for fear of making "mistakes" in syntax and pronunciation. At the same time, non-standard accents and grammatical errors are rejected, and high-school students speaking French with a strong accent are often subject to bullying. In a recent nationwide report, the same author concludes that essentially monolingual teaching in the Central African Republic hinders students' academic progress, which will generate problems on the job market too (N'Zapali-Te-Komongo 2022).

The situation outlined above is not confined to a single country. We can see that the monocentric trend in education in French-speaking Africa is a general phenomenon that has repercussions on all areas of daily life, despite the strong tropicalization of French in these regions (Quéfellec 2007). For example, in Algeria, where compulsory schooling was introduced in 1962, standard varieties of French and Arabic predominate all levels of education, and school curricula largely ignore the existence of local varieties and creoles, so typical throughout French-speaking Africa (Abbes-Kara 2010). Even in higher education, the regional accents of French are often the subject of disapproval.

Similarly, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, the promotion of French to official language status in 1961 pushed the more than 220 vernaculars into an inferior position (Tumbwe 2012). The codification of French as an official language is therefore proving to be counter-productive: while this political decision originally had a unifying purpose, the people of the DRC continue to regard French as a "foreign" language that is difficult to learn, and speakers with a standard accent are often described in pejorative terms. However, French continues to be a primary tool for professional success and a part of everyday life (ibid.).

3.2 French in Africa: a pluricentric language pushed towards monocentrism?

Inherent to definitions of pluricentricity (see Pöll 2005: 19, quoted by Kembeu 2023: 6; Muhr 2016: 16) is the idea of the possibility of several main centres of linguistic standardization, with multiple varieties of the same language at different levels of standardization. In contrast, the monocentric perspective is limited to a single variety of the language, which it recognizes as the norm and which is therefore elevated to the level of the standard, representing the dominant variety (Muhr 2012). This preference for the exogenous standard is transferred, through the transmission of social values with the language, to colonized countries, where sub-standard usage also becomes rejected and despised, despite the fact that the vast majority speak a local variety (Muhr 2012).

4. Methodology and participants

Our investigations were conducted from a linguistic ethnographic perspective. The data come from twelve interviews conducted online and face-to-face with six instructors and six African students. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a qualitative data analysis software called MAXQDA. For data analysis Margrit Schreier's method of Qualitative Content Analysis was adopted, which "proceeds by assigning successive parts of the material into categories derived from a coding frame." (Schreier 2013: 170)

The initial phase of the analysis was characterized by an inductive, data-driven approach. The results were organized into four distinct codes, comprising a total of 26 sub-codes, with a total of 75 coded segments.

Then, in the deductive, concept-focused phase, the identified results were classified according to the four codes delineated in the inductive phase, encompassing a range of 26 sub-codes.

Throughout this phase, 376 segments were coded. As far as our coding framework is concerned, the "parent codes" are as follows: students' nationality and language background, linguistic differences, relationships and attitudes, and training. In this study, we will deal with the first three codes.

We conducted interviews with six instructors and six foreign students from the French Studies Department of the University of Szeged. Five of the instructors had Hungarian as their first language, while one instructor's first language was French.

As for their areas of specialization, two instructors were linguists, two were specialized in literature, one was a professor of didactics and one was a French language instructor. All interviews with the instructors took place face-to-face. The language of five interviews was Hungarian, and one was conducted in English.

As for the students interviewed, two came from Algeria, one from Cameroon, one from the Democratic Republic of Congo, one from Mali and one from Togo. The gender distribution of the students interviewed was even: three men and three women.

Five students were pursuing bachelor's degrees, while one was enrolled in the master's program. All student interviews were conducted online. The language of the interviews was French.

5. Data analysis

5.1 Nationality and language background

The respondents' comments confirm the general observation that the role of French in Africa varies considerably from country to country. For example, one of the Algerian students and the student from the Democratic Republic of Congo use French as their first language (L1). It should be noted, however, that the students interviewed sometimes confuse concepts such as *first language*, *second language* or *official language*. In their answers, they also mention all the other languages they speak.

> Congolese student: Well, I'd say that French in the Democratic Republic of Congo is the official language first of all, and for me it's my mother tongue, too. But for the vernacular, there's a dialect we use in Congo, Lingala, but it's close, because Lingala integrates French vocabulary into its vocabulary. But French is the official language and the mother tongue.[1]

> Algerian student 1: I'd say it's more like a mother tongue, because I'm bilingual, even trilingual. I speak the Algerian dialect, a variety of

[1] The original French and Hungarian interview excerpts have been translated into English by the authors.

> Arabic. I also speak academic Arabic, and I also speak Berber, which is one of Algeria's official languages.

In Algeria, French tends to be acquired either at home or at school, the situation varying from family to family. The other Algerian student says she learned French at school, and considers Kabyle her first language: "In fact, my mother tongue is Kabyle". Nevertheless, for both Algerian students, the French language continues to be widely used among friends and in educational establishments.

> Interviewer: And in what situations do you use French?
>
> Algerian student 1: To talk to my parents for example, to study, to read books, newspapers... I'd say in everyday life.
>
> Algerian student 2: I speak French in my private life, at school, with my friends, and I use French a lot, a lot. And also with friends who are here in Szeged.

The Cameroonian student points out that French is the language of education and communication in her country, and is learned at school.

> Cameroonian student: In our country, French is a language of communication that the state uses to communicate, and also a language of education, because... at school we study in French, but we have our dialects, which are our mother tongues, in quotation marks, because these are the languages we speak before learning French at school.

According to the Togolese student, French is mainly acquired through schooling in his country, and is widely used in administrative contexts, as well as in everyday conversations.

> Togolese student: So, the French language is used at school everywhere, because we actually study in French. And within the country, the French language is also used as a lingua franca because we have many dialects that we use in the country, and if someone doesn't understand the dialect spoken by the others, they are obliged to communicate in a common language, which is French. That's it, and as far as administration is concerned [...] it's all done in French.

5.2 Linguistic differences

This code covers sub-codes such as differences in pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, pragmatic differences, corrections and misunderstandings, errors and linguistic norms.

The easiest differences for participants to grasp are the pronunciation ones, although their perceptions of these differences are quite diverse and they may not necessarily be able to explain what those differences are. They do agree, however, that they are not discriminated against on the basis of the way they sound during their studies.

Students from the North of Africa noted no difference between their pronunciation and that of Hungarian or French instructors, but did find that Hungarian students had a noticeable foreign accent when speaking French. Sub-Saharan students, on the other hand, mostly confirm the existence of such differences, but do not evaluate them in the same way. The Cameroonian student sees her country's accent as different from that of Hungarian instructors. In her view, this difference stems from the "difficulty" Cameroonians have in pronouncing certain sound combinations. The same Cameroonian student also believes that Hungarian-accented French pronunciation is very similar to the Cameroonian accent.

> Cameroonian student: [...] So the word in French is "aéroport", but most of us in Cameroon say "a-réo-port" [...] Since vowels are those types of sounds that are difficult to pronounce together, they add consonants to make pronunciation easier.

> Cameroonian student: [...] the Cameroonian accent is not too far from the accent used by Hungarians to speak French. On the other hand, when it comes to the French themselves, there are a few difficulties because the turns of phrase are not the same, the accent is a little different, but a Cameroonian and a Hungarian get on very well when they speak French.

On the other hand, the Togolese student seems to regard his own pronunciation as neutral, and claims to have had difficulty understanding Hungarian-accented French.

> Togolese student: [...] So there's a bit of difficulty in articulating words. But that's with my Hungarian classmates. As for the instructors, at first I had a bit of difficulty, but it only took me a month or two to get used to their way of speaking.

Instructors are more aware of pronunciation differences, and admit to having initially encountered comprehension problems when communicating with students from sub-Saharan Africa.

> Instructor 2: The pronunciation of sub-Saharan students is very different from what we teach and from what the French produce. So it took us a while to get used to it...

As these difficulties are overcome over time, some instructors are even able to identify students' country of origin on the basis of their pronunciation. What is more, new subjects have been introduced into the undergraduate curriculum to make students – Hungarian and foreign ones alike – more aware of the regional varieties of French. Part of the syllabus of that course is devoted to French spoken in sub-Saharan Africa.

> Instructor 1: And in the first semester, when we study pronunciation, we really see that the students [...] say, "well, it's true, we really do speak like that". It's true, we don't pronounce the "r" at the end of the word. And indeed, we pronounce an "i" instead of a "u".

It should be noted, however, that these pronunciation specificities are not perceived by the instructors as imperfections requiring correction, but are seen as perfectly legitimate varieties of French, even though some instructors handle them by way of principled exposure to the dominant standard, as exemplified by the following quote.

> Instructor 4: [...] For me, the fact that they speak with an accent is not a problem. I understand them better and better and I don't correct them, but try to show through my own pronunciation what the standard language is.

As for morphological and syntactic differences, these are often perceived by students as manifestations of a lack of knowledge, of a poor command of French on their part. The student quoted below does not identify specific African French constructions, but characterizes her own variety as "bad French".

> Interviewer: What about grammar?
>
> Cameroonian student: Yes, at the level of grammar [...] I would rather talk about conjugation. Speaking French doesn't mean knowing how to conjugate verbs in all tenses [...] before I came to Szeged, I didn't

> always know when to use the sequence of tenses, even though I spoke French, so that's why it's important to study the language in depth.

The Malian student confesses to having felt a certain shock when he realized that the rules of French learned at school in Africa are sometimes opposed to those taught at European universities. By way of example, he mentions the morphological peculiarity concerning the grammatical number of the noun *ciseaux*. According to him, the norm disseminated by the African education system imposes the use of the singular to designate a pair of scissors.

> Malian student: [...] I just have one word... *le ciseau*, for example, [...] we say *le ciseau, un ciseau*, no problem with that. But still, it's a pair, for us [...] According to the explanations I received at school, in all the establishments I had gone to in Africa we always say *le ciseau*, but according to the explanation I received here, it's different, *les ciseaux.*

Most of the students interviewed said that it was during their university studies in Hungary that they became aware of the differences between spoken and written French. Even though they use French on a daily basis, it was a spoken French and a colloquial register that they used in every situation before. Despite the fact that French was the language of education in their country of origin, their university studies in Hungary were their first opportunity to be confronted with a hitherto little-known variety: written French and the rules for drafting written texts in accordance with the norm in metropolitan France.

> Algerian student 1: I learned a lot because the register is different... from spoken to written, it's really different.

The Algerian student's statement accurately reflects the opinion of the instructors. While they do not perceive any morphological or syntactic specificities in the oral production of African students, they do find that their written texts contain a very large number of oral features, which they consider to be a violation of the rules of French. This is the exact opposite of the pattern observed in the case of the Hungarian students, who frequently outperform their African peers (especially the Sub-Saharan ones) in terms of language awareness, but when it comes to colloquial fluency, they perform significantly more weakly, which can be regarded as an interesting result of the hugely different modes of language acquisition in the two populations of students. In the case of the African students, the high frequency of spelling and grammatical errors found in written production is attributed by some instructors to an absence of grammatical awareness, which they explain with the long tradition of orality which is characteristic of these African countries.

> Instructor 5: [...] What's really interesting is that compared to the Hungarian students, they speak much better, but their written results are much worse.
>
> Interviewer: I see. And why do you think that is?
>
> Instructor 5: I think they have a fundamentally oral culture. So for them, orality plays a more important role in education than it does for us.

However, despite the general tendency of students to accept corrections or criticism from their instructors, there is sometimes occasional hesitation, especially at the start of their studies. This occasional refusal to recognize the authority of a non-native instructor in matters of French grammar or vocabulary seems to be particularly common among sub-Saharan students, and can be related to questions of the ownership of the French language. As illustrated by the excerpt below, some sub-Saharan students tend to include themselves in the imagined community of what might be referred to as the owners of the French language, whereas they tend to exclude Hungarians from it.

> Congolese student (talking about other students from French-speaking countries): They think they're already better with the language, and sometimes they don't try hard enough to understand. They think, well, the Hungarians teach us... but they've learned a language that's ours.

Furthermore, some students also refer to pragmatic differences they have encountered during intercultural exchanges, which they see as potential sources of misunderstanding. A particularly interesting case concerns the Togolese student's account of greeting issues and the connotations attached to them:

> Togolese student: In Togo, in our language I can't say ça va to someone I owe respect. For us, [...] it's as if you were disrespecting the person. [...] when you ask me or someone who grew up in Togo Ça va?, they might think you're being rude to them, whereas in France, as in Hungary, Ça va? is a way of greeting the person.

5.3 Relationships and attitudes

In our analysis, the "relationships and attitudes" code includes a sub-code called "linguistic prescriptivism". We were interested to find out about the participants' opinion on the existence of a prescriptivist-monocentric attitude in the French-speaking world.

Implicitly, all informants confirm the existence of such an attitude, which they strongly approve of in written language, but they claim freedom and pluricentric variation in oral production. For one of the Algerian students, the model to follow for written texts is the Parisian norm, embodied by the Académie Française:

> Algerian student 1: For me, French has to keep its purity [...] as the Académie Française wants, [...] to speak, yes, there's a diversity of pronunciation, words etc., but to write it, I'm a purist.

Another student goes as far as questioning his own mastery of the French language, which he also considers his first language. According to his account, his way of speaking appears as a devalued, stigmatized variety.

> Malian student: [...] me personally, I'm starting to see that I haven't mastered French. Speaking French is different from really mastering it. The fact that we speak French every day doesn't mean I understand French. The French we speak to each other is really colloquial French, just street French.

This can probably be regarded as an indirect case of linguistic discrimination being at work, with the participant falling victim to what Muhr (2012:39) terms as "linguistic schizophrenia," downgrading their own variety as compared to the exogenous norm. At the same time, the above quote also serves to illustrate the observation that has been made earlier about the program raising awareness of the distinction between oral vs. written language use.

The instructors sometimes deepen this already quite serious problem by employing what Lippi-Green (2012) calls the economy argument of linguistic discrimination, when they refer to material advantages that speakers of the dominant standard enjoy at the cost of non-dominant speakers, as exemplified in the extract below.

> Instructor 5: I quite regularly give them the example that they want to get into a well-paying company and then they have to submit their CV, they have to write a cover letter, which obviously has its own form in

> French, as well as content, and if they make gross mistakes in writing, unfortunately, compared to the norm, then this can have direct consequences. So they simply won't be hired, or they'll be hired for a much lower position, for less pay, and then I can see that they're starting to get it.

Yet, most of the participants interviewed fervently embrace spoken language, in the name of diversity.

> Cameroonian student: I'm in favor of diversity in the use of the French language. I'm also in favor of there being a standard, but I'm not one hundred percent in favor of this standard being respected in its entirety, because if the standard is respected in its entirety, there will be people who feel they've been wronged.

> Togolese student: For me, I'm in favor of recognizing the diversity of the French language. I'm not totally in favor of the rules, because as far as standard French is concerned, we can still apply it to the written word, in the writing of books, so that we can keep this beauty of the language, keep this correct structure of the language in writing. But as far as spoken French is concerned, there should be diversity, freedom of expression... in every community this freedom... there should be no discrimination of the language spoken, in fact.

So, while the existence of varieties and the pluricentric character of the French language seem to be recognized by African students for oral communication, there is a particularly strict monocentric attitude, oriented towards the norm of metropolitan France, towards written production.

4. Conclusion

The main aim of our study has been to reveal the perceptions and experiences of African students and their instructors regarding the linguistic diversity of French at the Department of French Studies at the University of Szeged, Hungary. To achieve this goal, we conducted a series of interviews. On the theoretical side, we adopted a pluricentric perspective, as opposed to a monocentric or normativist attitude to French. By way of conclusion, we would like to highlight the following findings:

1. Firstly, we have found that instructors tolerate and accept non-standard varieties of French at the level of pronunciation.
2. On the other hand, they adopt a rather normative attitude when assessing

written production, in which case the European French standard continues to be the essential milestone of linguistic competence.

3. Although this reflects a fundamentally monocentric view, with standard French from metropolitan France at the centre, it should nevertheless be pointed out that instructors within the department have generally become much more open towards varieties of French that deviate more or less from the hexagonal standard of French over the years, which may indicate a positive shift towards a pluricentric attitude.
4. What is more, they have a deeper knowledge of the diversity of the French language than ever before.
5. As far as African students are concerned, the interviews revealed two main characteristics: on the one hand, sub-Saharan and North-African students face different challenges in their studies, which can partly be explained by cultural differences.
6. On the other hand, the students surveyed seem to be aware of the normativism that dominates the teaching of French at all levels of education. While they recognize the importance of a solid knowledge of European standard French for academic and professional advancement, they are quick to add that, in an everyday context, their regional variety is equally important, and that the concept of the French language should not be limited to a single, high variety. These opinions reinforce the trends reported in international research, which, as we have seen, underline the gap between official regulations and everyday reality.

Finally, let it be mentioned in conclusion that we hope the findings of the present investigation will serve as a diagnostic basis for the future evolution of the studied programs in an inclusive direction, perfecting them in such a way that fosters a larger and larger degree of openness towards the incorporation of pluricentric standards into (language) education.

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