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Evolution and Transformation of the French Language in Côte d'Ivoire by Sanogo Adama

## **Evolution and Transformation of the French Language in Côte d'Ivoire**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The main objective of this paper is to examine a new emergent French known as Popular Ivorian French, or Dago French or Nouchi in Côte d'Ivoire. The paper also investigates the nature of basic errors made by Ivorian students and how these errors are blended into a new type of linguistic entity prevalent in almost all linguistic discourse. This situation has contributed to the progressive emergence of an unofficial and unconventional French language devoid of academic rigor, grammatical structures and lexical pressures. The study was based on graded State and competitive examinations both written and oral. For the written exam, errors from 250 graded papers of General Technical Degree 2008 (BTS) were analyzed. The same procedure was applied to the oral exam for 100 candidates who participated in the oral tests. After statistical analysis of errors made by candidates, results show that there is linguistic interference between the French language spoken in France and Ivorian dialects, resulting in semantic, lexical and grammatical structures that hinder the understanding and distort the French language taught in schools and universities in Côte d'Ivoire. Results also show that the birth of Ivorian French has attained such a high degree of communicative frequency in Côte d'Ivoire that it is often used in administrations, in schools, on television and in other public places.

**Keywords:** Dago, Musa, Nouchi, sociolinguistics, language competence.

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1975, the Ivorian State stopped the construction of schools and colleges. Teachers and students were confronted with the problems of overcrowded classrooms and declining teaching quality, the rejection of several students, and thousands of dropouts. The degradation of the level of education and other associated difficulties facilitated the gradual emergence of unconventional,



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unofficial French, devoid of academic rigor, grammatical, lexical or temporal considerations (Hattiger, 1983). The birth of this Ivorian French known under various names: Ivorian Popular French (IPF), Dago French, French of Musa, or Nouchi has today taken on such a high proportion that, even in unexpected areas such as government schools, colleges and universities, this type of French is prevalent (Lafage, 1979; 1991; 2002; Hattiger, 1983; Kouadio N. J., 1992; Brou-Diallo, 2007).

The term 'Francophony' has never received common acceptance by various users of the French language: some see it as smacks of colonialism, in other words, a participation of France, too hegemonic. The former president of the French republic, President Mitterrand (1982), criticized the French for being "a little too possessive "of their language, forgetting that their grandeur and strength depend on mutual ownership (...) with hundreds of other people" (Champion, 1974).

To find the natural route toward a compromised language the "Ivorian French" or "Dago French" has become a link between "those at high level from above" and "those at low level from below" (Brou-Diallo, 2007).

The creations of various stages (morpho-syntax, lexical, grammatical ....) is a necessity to adapt the French language from France to the natural environment, especially the Ivorian case. However, it is necessary to identify the reasons more or less insidious of this new linguistic form: is it a form of competition, complementarity or a desire for an alternative? And finally, why this new form of speaking? Its social reasons, these questions will be addressed by this investigation (Kouadio, 1999).

According to Champion (1974) "we are witnessing a high degree of distortion constituting a serious threat to the French language, to the extent that it seems to affect the same level of understanding among people who consider themselves French. This phenomenon is more serious than simply considering the language as that of "Little Negroes' because it is, in actual fact, neither a new language nor an

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annex to the parent language, as it does not encode the same message". French is indeed not a static language; it has gone through many changes over the years in France, in the same way as the Ivorian French. Such linguistic diversity and instability, is indicative of the universality of French as a cultural vehicle. In the Ivorian French, regarding lexicology, contributions from outside need to be processed and digested slowly, implying a period of adaptation, hence its instability.

This form of speaking is not an exception. The movement of language is general. Some influx (derivation, borrowing, neology, categorization), other reflux (archaic, obsolete, anachronistic) are beyond individual speaker's attitudes that are only partial reflection; to be receptive is something peculiar to all languages. A common language could probably be satisfied with a very limited vocabulary but it extends its resources by appropriating the expressive units from special and marginal languages. Thus, the extension of the Francophony can lead us paradoxically to the mental and linguistic structures approach of the young African and respect these structures through despised civilizations because they are not well known (Boutin, 2003).

For our part, it should be noted that the universality of French is precisely the difference between the spoken French in Africa and the French from France, both in terms of phonetics and vocabulary as well as grammatical structures since the examination of sociological and historical factors are not to be excluded (Boutin, 2002;2003). Indeed, a language is not a closed circuit and moreover, the value of a language depends on the values of those who use it because it is not the language that is intelligent, but those who use it.

Rather than seeing the French language as an element that can replace the linguistic world of a continent, it has to be adapted to a dual audience. It should be used in both directions but not necessarily contradictory:



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- It must be an elitist language: “an academic French”, a language for the elites, capable of expressing arts and science, representing beauty. It is fair to expect our educated people as well as our scientists and technicians to make French, through works of arts, a prospective instrument.
- It must also be “a mass language” that is say” a popular French”. In this case, its first duty to be accessible “to the greatest number of people” which implies a greater effort to assimilate, as in the case of standard French in Côte d'Ivoire.

The most urgent problem is the vocabulary. It seems that the Ivorian French does not have sufficient resources in terms of vocabulary to express all the new concepts, and the remedy lies in the mass production of new local words and the Ivorian French seems to move in that direction. The complementarity between the standard French and the Ivorian French seems obvious, even though the Ivorian French has the capacity to enlarge its lexicon more rapidly. However, it is, to a lesser degree, the pronunciation which constitutes another factor (Champion, 1974; Lafage, 2002).

The creation of an unconscious syntax and vocabulary of the new French should not be interpreted solely as representing the linguistic behavior of a community incapable of mastering the syntax and vocabulary of a standard French (Makouta-Mboukou, 1977; Knutsen, 2007).

On the whole, the desire to “name” remains a linguistic and socio-political act by which Africans, recreate the world of their own, a world which they know well and control. Through this act, the gap between the literates and illiterates is considerably reduced.

**THE ROLE AND CHARACTERISTICS OF IVORIAN FRENCH**

Language and society can hardly be conceived without one and another. Indeed, all reflexion involving French teaching should be based on the fundamental principle that civilization and language are inseparable. Thus, teaching French to



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Ivorian children amounts to teaching them the French culture. In this case, there is no competition between Ivorian French and academic French. However, there is a situation which seems to retain little attention; it is the fact that French is used as a means by which one can access knowledge specifically as “a training language”. The learner accesses knowledge or know-how through French.

This is the role assigned to the academic French in many countries in Africa where for example teaching mathematics at the secondary level and/ or tertiary level is done in French rather than in the native language of the student.

According to Martinet (1960). “Every language corresponds to a particular organization of data acquired from experience.” Indeed, language is an instrument of communication between men; it is an institution deriving from life in society. The ways of seeing and feeling of a community affect their language and conversely language interposes itself between speakers and the world, resulting in the way of conceiving the latter.

The lexical movement occurs within a human activity whose conditions have deeply been modified by technological advances or by presence of many new words borrowed from foreign languages. Words do not evoke things but the awareness that men have about things.

The solution proposed by Senghor (1982) was that “cultural mixture does not necessary mean that one culture dominates another but rather a full integration of positive values of African and western civilization into a single culture with specific way of speaking adapted to African realities and personality”.

The French language today does not only belong to France but to all those who claim to speak it and in return, enrich it from their respective realities. For Canu (1980): “French as an official language is becoming a second class language for all the citizens of a nation: it means that all citizens should be able to comprehend French and also to be understood, which appears to be utopic.”



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However, French is spoken correctly by only 2% of the Ivorian population. In view of this new approach to the French language, we agree with Lafage (1979) who thinks that “French as an official language is neither spoken nor understood by all the Ivorian population, very few Ivoirians can claim to have French as their mother tongue”.

From our analysis, one can claim that the Ivorian French is the surest solution for speakers to break language barrier because whatever the case, all Ivoirians do not speak Dioula nor Bété nor Baoulé. The Dago French or Ivorian French or Ivorian popular French is a sort of “national linguistic compromise”. Such a compromise has become a social necessity for communication among individuals.

The speakers of Ivorian French are the creators of the language. It is a closed language and if one does not possess the key to its particular lexicon, one can get lost even if, one seems to understand the meaning of certain words through deduction or intuition. It is practically difficult, if not impossible, for a non francophone Ivorian interlocutor to provide a lexical item from standard French corresponding exactly to the Ivorian French lexical item. Therefore, it is necessary to keep the original lexical item or use circumlocutions that abound in the language (Lafage, 1996). Over 90% of the population can identify themselves in this language, the advantage of not having grammatical constraints.

It is not a distinguished language but still unintelligible to other non Ivorian speakers because the particularities of this language concern the lexicon as it is the case with all other languages. The peculiarities of Ivorian French lexical, from neologisms perspective, generally reflect, at the same time, diver socio-cultural realities. So, one of the stumbling blocks for the intelligibility of transmitted messages is using idioms for an interlocutor non Ivorian francophone (Lafage, 2002).

Faik and Faik-Nzuji (1979) provide an interesting and personal interpretation of language. “Language does not only allow users to communicate among



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themselves but it also reveals a certain way of perceiving the outside world and of being oneself". We can agree on this definition by emphasizing the purely national character of this language, that is another way of "being oneself". Indeed, outside the country, only Ivoirians living abroad use it as a means of immersing in the national mood. Finally, another approach much easier and safer is to retain only the neologisms created within this group and which are sufficiently well established. The verbal creation repeatedly used by some speakers which are solidly established in certain discourse can be considered as the "real neologism".

In Côte d'Ivoire speaking French impeccably is an exterior sign of social promotion. It is learned by necessity. The more Ivorian children progress in schools, the better they express themselves in French, and the wider, the gap between speakers become. For people seeking knowledge, French is not regarded as a mere academic exercise; it is rather an opening tract, most favorably, to a universe of knowledge to the detriment of mother tongues.

### **METHODOLOGY**

Graded state examination and competitive examination papers in Abidjan and other big cities in the country (e.g. Bouake, Daloa, Man and San Pedro) were collected between February 2008 and November 2009. We focused on graded papers because of the originality of expression both in contents and form.

#### **Types of data**

The data is obtained from the review of annotations made by markers of various State examinations papers. Thus, a thorough analysis of content is made by highlighting content and different meaning of phrases and expressions of Ivorian speakers.

The graded state examination and competitive examination papers with annotations and markers' remarks were critically reviewed.



### **Methods of investigation**

With the approval of the examinations and competitive examination Board to have access to High school diploma and 'BTS' examination papers, we were able to have deep insight into the reality of French language usage..

French teachers were selected in large number of correctional facilities to identify and record all kinds of mistakes previously corrected by other markers (spelling, syntax and grammar). This is the first stage of selection.

The second stage of correction, more and more elaborate, is the harmonization process in the presence of markers, thus completing correction (2<sup>nd</sup> correction). Finally, the collection phase is the final work of the principal harmonizer, that is, the supervisor of the academic unit which is French. Different types of errors were detected from this approach.

In view of the data obtained from the original papers examined against freedom of expression of ideas, we can notice that from lexical viewpoint, the vocabulary come from all walks of life (mother tongues, second languages, derivations, truncate) resulting in open etymology, a mixed language (French/African languages)

### **Importance and scope**

The language, now used by every one that is the "Ivorian French" is spoken by students in schools, people in office, employees, journalists and even teachers and managers. The lexicon of Popular Ivorian French (PIF) is relatively poor without limitation.

According to Hattiger (1983), "some words may undergo changes of meaning quite pleasant involuntarily from speakers. The word "*conjecture*" used by the





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radio to refer to severe economic downturn experienced by the Ivory Coast could only be “severe economic situation” meaning “the lack of money”.

This shows that when a term is launched, it is likely to be successful at all levels of social life. For example:

This is a good accelerator your “kankankan” = a good aphrodisiac

The Ivorian popular French therefore is composed of various loan words, with borrowings from unidentified sources (Kouadio, 1999).

Example: this is a “floko”= this is a lie or a joke

Excuse me, try “kètèkètè” to will help me= Excuse me or I ask you to do all you can or to do your best to help me.

### **Semantic aspect**

Concerning the Ivorian Popular French, meaning is quite different, a term may be coined and whose meaning is far from being closer to a concept already known.

### **Grammatical aspect**

It should be noted that in the Popular Ivorian French, rules of grammar do hardly exist. Most nouns loose their articles completely. Hattiger (1963) sees it as a process of morphological reduction of the French system; the words used by young Ivorian in the use of the use”French” language are characteristically very special. These formal verbal features in the Ivorian French are:

- Following several verbal forms with a common subject, that is, before the first verbal phrase in series; there is non resumption of the pronoun subject;
- Lack of coordination or subordination items
- No resumption of verbal terms (tense, aspect, negation) possibly marking the first verb;



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- Possibility for each verb forms in series to be followed or not by complement.

### **Statistical study of the mistakes made in written exam**

Sample: 250 copies ('BTS'-General Technical Degree 2008)

Place: General Correction Centre for nationwide exams – all specialities

#### **Key**

- X1 : Truncated words,
- X2 : Grammatical construction,
- X3 : Phonetic and spelling constructions,
- X4 : Agreement and tense sequence,
- X5 : Deformation or oral phonetic perception,
- X6 : Inversion of the logical construction and gender confusion,
- X7 : Not mastering tenses in conjugation,
- X8 : Verbal roots confusion,
- X9 : Influence of mother tongue on French,
- X10 : Difficulty in the agreement of the imperative of 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> group verbs,
- X11 : Use of the subtract to indicate duration or improbable happening,
- X12 : Semantic (meaning) confusion,
- X13 : Absence of determiners in sentence constructions,
- X14 : Approximate lexis

### **Statistical study of the mistakes made in oral exam**

Sample: 100 copies that is 50 candidates for the first test and 50 for the 2<sup>nd</sup> test

The method of the oral exam consists in letting the candidate speak for about 15 minutes. The exercise aims at assessing his ability in expression and above all, his mastery of a given topic based on his training.

#### **Key**

- Y1 : Truncated words,
- Y2 : Grammatical construction,
- Y3 : Phonetic and spelling construction, deformation or oral phonetic perception,
- Y4 : Inversion of the logical construction and gender confusion,
- Y5 : Not mastering tenses in conjugation ,
- Y6 : Verbal root confusion,
- Y7 : Influence of mother tongue on French,



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X8 : Influence of foreign language on French,

Y9 : Approximate lexis

Y10: Use of the substrat to indicate duration or improbable happening,

Y11 : Words or expressions of single meaning (monosemic),

Y12 : Semantic slip,

Y13 : incorrect use of adverbs,

Y14 : Agreement and tense sequence

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Tables 1 and 2**

All in, the mistakes made by the candidates in both the oral and written exams have various and deep-rooted origins. In one hand, lack of sound knowledge in grammatical constructions is recurring and can be found in all the copies of the candidates in business and industrial fields. It is the same case for phonetic construction linked directly to the influence of the mother tongues on French, consequently, agreements and tense sequences are not fully mastered, hence the difficulties in the imperative of verbs of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> groups. It should be noted that there is also the persistence of the semantic confusion with visible incidence on the absence of determiners in sentence constructions. Also, incomplete knowledge in French is linked with approximate lexis of the candidates tested.

On the other hand, a great number of candidates have an approximate phonetic and spelling knowledge noticeable in the deformation of oral phonetic perception in the discourse. Moreover, one of the recurring mistakes is the poor mastery of grammatical constructions which is evidently caused by the influence of the mother tongues on spoken French hence, the confusion of verbal roots made by the candidates. The same case is observed in agreements and tense sequence which is a problem for students, since the influence of a foreign language on French disturbs them and causes an inversion of the logical construction of gender confusion.



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Finally, the inability of the candidates to master French is seen in their use of truncated words because of the influence of the youth community, hence, the semantic slips and ungrammatical use of adverbs. This is consequently linked to substrates usage of mother tongues to indicate duration or improbable happening. Limited vocabulary in oral expressions of the candidates results in words or expressions usage of single meaning (especially monosemy). Also, from the practice of oral expression, it appears that the especially the candidates have an approximate vocabulary which forces them to stop halfway in their 15-minute presentation before the allotted time. They prefer to wait and answer the questions asked by members of the panel.

According to Duponchel (1974), it is clear that the Ivorian speaker in everyday discourse borrows lexical items from local languages. Linguists should rather view this as linguistic interference between French and Ivorian dialects. An Ivorian speaker also speaks French with a heavy accent (effect of L1 language on L2). Moreover certain words and expressions taken from Ivorian languages are difficult to translate because they reflect the Ivorian realities. Concerning debates and conversational discourse, the level of study reflects the student's language level or way of conducting a debate which is not the case for Ivorian children who cannot even form correct sentences especially participating in a debate; this is obvious with debates organized for the youths on the national television. It is difficult to see a student sustain a conversation in French for one (1) minute without resorting to French spoken in the street, the popular Ivorian French or his own jargon.

These influences affecting meaning, vocabulary and grammatical structures of discourse highlights mistakes that hinder the understanding and distort the French language taught in schools and universities in Côte d'Ivoire (Dreyfus. 2006).

Whether at school, work or market places, some local languages are known by the majority of the population for commercial purposes. This is the case of Dioula which plays this role so much that in every discourse speakers do not hesitate to



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insert bits of words or phrases of it. Dioula idiophones are expressive lexicals with morphological structures in relation to noise movement or form of the action or the object they evoke. They create a vowel harmony which represents movements of short regular and repetition. Most of these idiophones are predominant in the discourse of Ivorian students.

Typical examples of these expressions are as follow:

- a) If it does not work it must be “mounou-mounou”= if it does not work out, drive him crazy!
- b) Younger sister, do not “kètèkètè”= do not hesitate, younger sister!
- c) The “baramogo” they” mourou mourou him in adjamtala”= Hi guys, they stabbed in Adjamé.

It is understood that the French language is open to other Ivorian languages such as Baoulé, Gouro, Bété, Senoufo, etc (Kouadio, 1977; Lafage and Furstenberg, 1982; Sangaré, 1984; Simard, 1994).

Previous studies have the tendency to denounce the Popular Ivorian French as ‘bad French’, ‘Nigger French’, unconventional and unacceptable but this study shows that it appears that Ivorian French bears strong marks of local languages, especially languages such as Dioula, Baoule and the Bété, as already mentioned. The presence of local languages items in the Ivorian French is also a very interesting linguistic phenomenon, in the sense that, it indicates attachment of people to their cultural roots and their determination to display their own identity in spite of western influence.

This new language may have its place in the Ivorian schools for the simple reason that the writings and speeches constitute both a mirror of our geography, our history, our civilization and an expression of our cultural personality, while borrowing without merger or assimilation but expanding while remaining true to itself. After all, the Francophony must be thought and lived in the form of dialogue and exchange.



### CONCLUSION

Current research will have to focus on the use of language and not on static analysis. Such an approach can provide different strategies for general teaching and French teaching particularly in the Ivory Coast.

“Francophony “should allow students to be in touch with Ivorian several French varieties, if we want them to diversify their expressions and adapt to different circumstances of life. Finally, to help moderately these young Ivorian is to help others, those from culturally privileged social classes to practice this dialectic situation, thus reducing the process of alienation, contributing to their liberation and self fulfillment.

The Ivorian government should improve its language teaching program and should also create a real reliable broadcasting service which can supervise the content of come artistic works that cast doubts in the minds of young learners such as “Maximum! or horses go”. Our future depends on this language compelling us to make our contribution to its efficient development.

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**Table 1:** Statistical analysis of the different mistakes made in the written exam

Different types of mistakes <b>X1</b>	Numbers <b>n1</b>	Frequencies <b>F1=n1/N (%)</b>
X1	32	02.22
X2	648	44.94
X3	264	18.31
X4	88	06.10
X5	36	02.50
X6	48	03.33
X7	40	02.77
X8	12	00.83
X9	113	07.84
X10	56	03.88
X11	16	01.11
X12	38	02.63
X13	32	02.22
X14	19	01.32
<b>Total</b>	<b>N= 1442</b>	<b>100</b>

**Table 2:** Statistical analysis of the different mistakes made in oral exam

Different types of mistakes <b>Y1</b>	Numbers <b>N1</b>	Frequencies <b>F1=n1/N (%)</b>
Y1	19	01.95
Y2	125	12.85
Y3	321	32.99
Y4	49	05.03
Y5	21	02.16
Y6	68	06.89
Y7	115	11.82
Y8	48	04.93
Y9	17	01.75
Y10	29	02.98
Y11	61	06.27
Y12	9	00.92
Y13	13	01.34
Y14	78	08.02
<b>Total</b>	<b>N= 1442</b>	<b>100</b>