

LANGUAGES AND MEANS OF COMMUNICATION IN GOREE HOUSE OF SLAVES DURING THE SLAVERY PERIOD

Jean Christophe FAYE
Cheikh Anta Diop University, Senegal
jeanbbchrist@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper is devoted to the study of Languages and means of communication in the houses of slavery and more particularly in Goree Island house of slaves. These houses, which were some meeting places, gathered different individuals from different countries who did not belong to the same ethnic group and did not have the same cultures, languages, religions or customs. Thus to live and / or survive, communication became essential between the slave masters from different countries, the slaves captured from different regions and countries. However, several types of language were used during that period to communicate. There were also different languages (local and foreign) which were used during that period of slavery to communicate and that slavery had linguistic consequences both in the departure and arrival countries. Thus, to better deal with this topic we will endeavor to explore the archives, the tangible and intangible remains of the spaces of dehumanization that make up the house of Goree. Some fields of surveys as well as semiotic analyzes of the symbols of the island house will be part of this study. That being so, through this paper, we aim at highlighting the different languages and means used to communicate during that period. In addition, this article will help understanding the very status of local languages and the linguistic consequences which ensue from the contact between these languages and the foreign ones.

Keywords: Communication, house, language, slavery, speaker

LES LANGUES ET LES MOYENS DE COMMUNICATIONS DANS LA MAISON DES ESCLAVES DE GOREE PENDANT LA PERIODE DE L'ESCLAVAGE

Résumé: Cet article est consacré à l'étude des langues et moyens de communication dans les maisons d'esclavage et plus particulièrement dans la maison des esclaves de l'île de Gorée. Ces maisons, qui étaient des lieux de rencontre, rassemblaient différents individus de différents pays qui n'appartenaient pas à la même ethnie et n'avaient pas les mêmes cultures, langues, religions ou coutumes. Ainsi pour vivre et/ou survivre, la communication devint indispensable entre les maîtres esclavagistes venant de différents pays, les esclaves capturés de différentes régions et pays. Cependant, plusieurs types de langages ont été employés pendant cette période pour communiquer. Il y avait aussi différentes langues (locales et étrangères) qui étaient employées durant cette période d'esclavage pour communiquer et cet esclavage avait des conséquences linguistiques tant dans les pays de départ que d'arrivée. Ainsi, pour mieux aborder ce sujet nous nous attacherons à explorer les archives, les vestiges matériels et immatériels des espaces de déshumanisation qui composent la maison de Gorée. Des enquêtes de terrains ainsi que des analyses sémiotiques des symboles de la maison insulaire feront partie de cette étude. Ceci étant, à travers cet article, nous visons mettre en évidence les différentes langues et les moyens de communication utilisés à cette époque. Par ailleurs, cet article permettra de comprendre le statut réel des langues locales et les conséquences linguistiques qui découlent du contact entre ces langues et les langues étrangères.

Mots-clés : Communication, maison, langue, esclavage, locuteur

Introduction

Goree is an island located in the bay of Dakar and is one of the nineteen districts of the capital of Senegal. Located in the center of the harbor formed by the southern coast of the Cape Verde peninsula, Goree has long been a safe haven for anchoring ships. Thus, it is a symbolic and historical place in the history of slavery in Africa. Goree Island is made up of basalt stones, sand and laterite, located three kilometers off Dakar, on the west coast of Africa. It is 900 meters long, from north to south, and 300 meters wide. First nicknamed "*Birr*" in Wolof by its inhabitants, which means "belly" in English, because of its shape, the island was also called "*Ilha de Palmas*" by its Portuguese occupants, then "*Goede Reede*" by the Dutch West India Company that took possession of it in 1627. The current name of the island: "Goree" is the French version of the Dutch expression. It was a place that gathered different individuals from different territories. Thus, in order to live and / or survive, communication and mutual understanding become essential. Slavery is a time when many people came into contact. These individuals, not coming from the same countries, localities etc. and not having the same languages, would find it extremely difficult to be understood or to communicate. Thus, to better understand the scope of such a subject, we asked ourselves a certain number of questions which revolve around the following points: How did they manage to express their thoughts, their ideas and their needs or to make themselves understood? In other words, what languages or means did they use to communicate? And what linguistic consequences have there been in the countries of departure and in the countries of arrival? Though, during the period of slavery, several means some of which the interpretation were used to communicate in Goree house of slaves. There were also different languages (local and foreign) that were used in this island and their contact caused many linguistic consequences both in the departure and arrival countries. It is in this perspective that this theme was chosen to provide information on the languages and means of communication in the Goree slave house. Furthermore, we would like to show through this study the role and importance of languages and means of communication and talk about the different types of languages and means used in this house during the period of slavery. In addition, we will discuss about the linguistic consequences of slavery in the departure and arrival countries. So, to better deal with this subject, we will first deal with the theoretical and conceptual framework. Afterwards, we will talk about the languages and means of communication that were used in Goree during the period of slavery and their linguistic consequences in departure and arrival countries.

1. Theoretical framework

The work submitted for our analysis is based on two main theories, which are: the theory of enunciation by Emile Benveniste (1970) and the pragmatics. As for the first, Benveniste lets us know that in the enunciation, one considers successively the act itself, the situations in which it takes place, the instruments of accomplishment. The individual act of using the language first introduces the enunciator as a parameter under the necessary conditions for the utterance. Before enunciation, the language is only the possibility of language. After the utterance, the language is

affected in an instance of speech, which emanates from an enunciator, a sound form that reaches a listener and elicits another utterance in return. As an individual achievement, enunciation can be defined, in relation to language, as a process of appropriation. The enunciator appropriates the formal apparatus of the language and declares his/her position as an enunciator by specific cues, on the one hand, and by means of accessory procedures, on the other. But immediately, as soon as he declares him/ herself a speaker and assumes the language, he/she sets up the other in front of him/her, whatever the degree of presence he/she attributes to this other (Benveniste, 1970). Any statement is, explicit or implicit, an address; it postulates an address. Finally, in enunciation, language is used to express a certain relationship to the world. The very condition of this mobilization and appropriation of the language is, for the enunciator, the need to refer through discourse, and, for the other, the possibility to identically co-refer in the pragmatic consensus which makes each speaker a co-speaker. The reference is an integral part of the utterance. Beside this theory, we can evoke the second theory of our study which is the pragmatics. Pragmatics is defined as a branch of linguistics which is concerned with elements of language whose meaning can only be understood by knowing the context of their uses. It is thus interested on the one hand, in the phenomena of contextual dependencies which have their references determined by parameters linked to the context of utterance. In addition, it studies the use of language in communication and in knowledge. Largely dependent on cognitivism, extended pragmatics considers inferential mechanisms in knowledge, the construction of concepts, the non-literal use of language, intentionality in argumentation, etc. It also deals with the influence and consequences of language on context (how to change the world by saying something / how to act on the world by saying something) and the influence and consequences of language on context (to what extent what is said depends on the circumstances in which it is said).

2. Research Methodology

We have done research in the documentation centers. We have organized some interviews with the curator of the slave house of Goree and his assistant who gave us much information related to the slave house and to slavery in Africa in general and in Senegal in particular. In addition, we have visited some museums such as the Goree Museum, the Museum of Black Civilizations, Theodore Moundo Museum, etc. In these places we have found symbols that date back centuries. We have also carried out research in the Fundamental Institute of Black Africa (IFAN). Furthermore, we did every effort to explore the archives, the tangible and intangible remains of the spaces of dehumanization that make up the slave house of Goree. Some field surveys as well as semiotic analyzes of the symbols of the island house universe were used in this study. This has allowed us to have a lot of information and to develop our corpus. After the treatment of the corpus, we have moved on to data presentation and analysis and we have achieved the following results:

3. Data presentation

The collection of data has helped us to have a clear presentation, analysis and interpretation of our corpus data. This article provides new and authentic data drawn from a variety of documents, interviews, etc. that enable us to implement a new analytical approach of languages and means of communication in Goree island. So, the data of this paper are composed of first-hand and second-hand data. The former are made up of some authentic documents, speeches and interviews from where some information about languages is taken and analyzed in order to bring some contribution to the field of our study. The second-hand data consist of some insights analyses and research findings. These sets of collected and processed data provide an overview of languages and means of communication during the period of slavery. The data are made up of sentences, paragraphs, speeches, etc. adapted, elaborated and analyzed in the current paper. The data analysis is based on various approaches, techniques and or theories of scholars or schools such as the functionalism, the pragmatics, etc.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Means of Communication

There were many types of language that were used in Goree house of slaves during the period of slavery. Among them one can cite the language of situation, the interpretation, etc.

-Language in Situation

It is the language that accompanies action, "here and now". It is often accompanied by gestures, mimicry, signs, which reinforce and complete the spoken words. It is a language that was used a lot during that time because the human beings who were in this house of slaves came from various universes. They could not speak the same languages. So, according to the persons we interviewed, when some of the slave masters wanted to talk to slaves, they used to use their languages accompanied by actions. Others would often use gestures or mimicries to be understood, for the slaves could not speak their (foreign) languages. In addition, some slaves would resort to gestures to discuss with other slaves or to talk to their masters when they wanted to satisfy their needs.

-Interpretation

Interpretation is the act of rendering a speech from one language to another. This form of language was used extensively during the period of slavery. The use of this language is justified by the fact that there was no mutual understanding between the different individuals living in the house of slavery, in particular between the masters and the slaves. Thus, many individuals served as interpreters during that period. Among these individuals, we can cite the "signares" who played a very important role in communication between masters and slaves. The word "signare" comes from the Portuguese "senhora", which means "lady". This common name designated women who, because of their cohabitation with white leaders, had an economic role and a high social rank. The first women to unite with Europeans were

mainly "curb chains", that is, they came from the community of freed black Catholics, or from the community of domestic captives. Gradually, however, the most senior colonists began to choose the most beautiful of the island's inhabitants. Their knowledge of the country, language, and traditions enabled them to help their husbands in their business endeavors. It was because of this knowledge of the country's languages that they served as interpreters in this slave house of Goree. Their economic weight became more and more important. So they got a kind of function in the local business, independent of their husbands, which allowed them to assert themselves economically in the life of the island in the long term. Alongside these "signares", we can also note the case of "missionaries" who served as interpreters. These missionaries had come in Africa for Evangelism. Thus, to better exercise their mission, these Westerners began to learn the local languages and to teach their languages to the natives. Some of these natives, having learned these foreign languages, facilitated the communication during this period by serving as interpreters. The "Arabs" also played a role in communication during that period. With the arrival of Nasir Al Dine, the Arabs settled in Africa for the Islamization of the African peoples. Having converted a good number of people especially in Senegal, these Arabs taught them the Arabic language. So, as it was the case with the missionaries, some people converted to Islam, who learned the Arabic language, served as interpreters. The "Portuguese", from their installation in the territory, understood earlier the importance of interpretation. That is why they took some slaves and brought them to Portugal so that they could be trained in the Portuguese language. These Africans, after learning the Portuguese language, were brought back to serve as interpreters and facilitate communication between masters and slaves or slave traders. Among these Africans, we can cite Bumi Jelem Njay. We can also note the case of white or mestizo intermediaries established in the country and who were in contact with the African authorities, from whom they obtained slaves. This is the case, as Guy Thilmans (2010) puts it, of lançados (Petite côte, Gambia, Rivière du Sud), tangomaos (Sierra Leone), pombeiros (Angola)... There were also intermediaries who were purely African

3.2 Languages

-Local Languages

Senegal is a West African country in which several local languages are spoken. Some of these languages are spoken in Goree Island during the slavery period. Among these languages we can list:

-Seereer

Seereer is a language which belongs to the West Atlantic branch of the Niger-Congo, according to the classification of African languages by Greenberg (1963). It is a language that is composed of two branches: the Sin-Gandum branch which is composed of seven dialects and the Cangin branch that has five dialects. Sauvageot (1965), quoted by Souleymane Faye in "*Morphologie du nom Seereer*" (1985), makes the observation that the differences between the dialects are principally in the phonetics and lexicon, but there are also differences in the morphology and syntax to a lesser

extent. All dialects are mutually intelligible. Linguistically speaking, this language is spoken in the large traditional regions of Sine Saloum which is the present regions of Fatick, Kaolack Diourbel and Thies. The Seereer Siin, also called Sin-Gandum, is spoken in Fatick region and in some parts of Thies and Kaolack regions. As for Cangin, it is spoken in Thies region. Writing, speaking or studying this Seereer language, is not an easy task for non-speakers due to the complexity of its pronunciation, its phonological system and its functioning. This language is among the first languages spoken in Goree Island during the slavery period. Some of Seereer people would settle in Senegalese coasts and islands for they were living on fishing. In other words, some of the “signares” who played a very important role in communication between masters and slaves were Seereer speakers. The first women to unite with the Europeans were mainly “curb chains”, that is, they came from the community of freed black Catholics, or from the community of domestic captives. In addition, the slaves caught from Seereer areas spoke this language in the island.

-Wolof

Wolof is a language belonging to the west branch of Niger Congo family. It is spoken in many regions in Senegal and in the countries around Senegal. During the slavery period, some Wolof speakers were living alongside the coasts. Some of them were living in Goree Island, like Seereer people, for they were fishermen. According to some people we met, the first settlers of Goree Island were Wolof people and even the first name of this island was a Wolof name (*Biir*); which meant in English “belly” because of its geographical form. Wolof slaves were also captured from other regions in Senegal and brought in Goree Island. So, according to Maillat (2018: 20), Wolof people did not accept slavery and they were most of the time at the head of any revolt that would happen. Most of them were “ceddo” and came from Cayor area. They were carefully guarded for fear that they escaped or got in contact with the other slaves and talked to them into running away.

-Pulaar

Pulaar is a language which belongs to the Senegambia branch of the Niger-Congo language family. It is spoken by the Fula or Fulani people and related groups such as Tukolor in the Senegal River Valley, in Senegambia, Guinea, Sudan, Cameroon and almost in most African countries. It is a language which is related to Seereer and Wolof languages and it is characterized by some of the most extensive and morpho-phonologically elaborated noun class systems found in natural languages. This language was spoken in Goree Island during slavery by Pulaar slaves who were captured from Fouta Toro. Thus, as Maillat (2018: 20) said, they would rarely revolt but it was very difficult to guard them. They were shepherds and once in the West Indies, they were trusted with the herds.

-Bambara

Bambara is a language which is spoken by some communities in West African countries such as Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Guinea, Senegal, etc. Some of the slaves who were in the Island came from these countries and were speaking this language

(Bambara). There were also some Bambara slaves who came from Soudan. All in all, we can say that these local languages were frequently spoken in Goree Island during the slavery period. Most of the speakers of these languages were the slaves captured from different areas in Senegal or from other West African countries. In addition, there were the “signares” who could speak these languages (Seereer, Wolof) and some of whom served as interpreters. Apart from these languages, there were also some local languages such as Joola, Soninke, Manding spoken by slaves coming from the south of Senegal, Soudanese regions, Galam, etc. (Maillat, 2013). However, these local languages were not the only spoken ones in Goree Island during the slavery period. There were the foreign languages and mainly the slave masters’ languages.

-Foreign Languages

- *Portuguese*

Portuguese language was the first foreign language spoken in Goree Island during the slaving period. This language was firstly spoken there when the first Portuguese settled in Goree in 1444 (Thilmans, 2018). From that year on till 1627, Portuguese people occupied the Island and all documents were written in Portuguese. They gave to the island the name *Ilha de Palmas*.

- *Dutch*

Dutch was the second foreign language spoken in Goree during the slavery period. When Dutch people arrived in the Island in 1627, they were speaking their language and they translated all the documents they found there into Dutch and started using their language. Thus, as we said above, they baptized the Island *Goede Reede*. They settled there till 1664, a year during which the English man Robert Holmes came and took the Island (Thilmans, 2006). Some months later, Dutch people took again the site and kept on using their language till 1677.

- *English*

English language was spoken in Goree Island, for the first time, in 1664 when the Englishman Robert Holmes came and occupied it. But this just lasted some months because he was defeated by French people. The second time English was spoken in the Island was in 1693. But during that year, English was spoken over there for just five months. It was from 1758 that English people really settled in this Island until 1763, then from 1779 till 1784. In addition, in 1800 they came back in the place and every paper was written again in English. During that period, English was spoken there until 1804 and finally from 1804 till 1817.

- *French*

French was the last foreign language spoken in Goree Island during the slavery period. French people came and settled in the site in 1677, for the first time. So, from that day on, French language was spoken in the island and all the documents were written in French. They changed the island name from *Goede Reede* to *Gorée*, its current name. They (French people) stayed there until 1693. Afterwards they were defeated by English people and left for some months. Just after that, they

came back and settled again till 1758. French language was spoken in Goree till the abolishment of slavery. And even afterwards, French had been being spoken in the island, as a foreign language, till the day it was regarded as the official language of the country.

3.3 Linguistic Consequences

▪ *Departure Countries*

Slavery has lots of linguistic consequences in the departure countries mainly in the slave house in Goree. At first, we have pointed out that there is a change of some names. The Island name was "*Buur*" (Wolof name) and it was changed into *Ilha de Palmas*. This name was the one given by the Portuguese when they arrived in the Island. Thus, when Dutch people came in the place, they replaced the Portuguese name by *Goede Reede* (Dutch name). Finally, the French, at their arrival in the Island, changed the Dutch name and gave the current name, which is "*Gorée*" (French name). The contact between the different languages used in the slave house has brought about a linguistic interference between languages (local languages and foreign languages) in communication. This linguistic interference can be defined as the application of linguistic characteristics from one language to another. It is a natural phenomenon in the teaching and learning of another language. So, from then on, some of our local languages have been using foreign words in their daily speech. In other words, there are many borrowed words from foreign languages in our local languages. This slavery period has also caused the reduction of the number of speakers of our local languages in so far as the young people, who were supposed to develop and widen the number of speakers, were exported from the country to other countries or continents. However, this slavery period has increased the number of speakers and languages in Goree Island. In addition, this phenomenon has participated in the rising of new languages in our country.

▪ *Arrival Countries*

The arrival of the slaves in other continents during slavery has linguistic consequences in these continents and/or countries. First of all, we can mention the birth of some languages such as "*palenque*" in Colombia, which is a language of African slaves in the mountains overlooking the Caribbean, in the north of the country. Being a unique blend of Bantu and Spanish, this Creole language was born in San Basilio de Palenque, a village founded at the beginning of the 17th century on the heights of Cartagena, the main port of the slave trade during the colonial era of the vice-kingdom of New Granada. Spoken in the past by so-called "maroons" slaves, fugitives who found refuge in this enclave, "*palenque*" is officially still practiced today in a school in this town, registered in the intangible cultural heritage of humanity by Unesco in 2005. The conservation of the *Palanquero* language is due to the very origins of the village, where this community remained isolated from the rest of the country for centuries, remaining withdrawn until the 1930s of the 20th century. This isolation was first forced, due to the persecution of "maroon" slaves, one of the leaders, Benkos Bihoho, the founder of the village, was executed in 1621. In addition, there is the birth of "*Vernacular Black English*". For this language, two theories can be

put forward as to the explanation of its origin. The first states that this language was born out of poor learning of English by the slaves when they arrived in the New World. As for the second, this language comes from a mixture of English and West African languages. This gives rise to "Pidgin" (a language made up of several elements from several languages). This "*Vernacular Black English*" had its own grammar and its own linguistic functioning. As for grammar, it is marked by the non-use of the "s" in the third person singular and nouns in the plural. Its phonology is marked by the elision of many sounds, especially in the final position (eg: *hand ...*). The term "*ain't*" was mostly used in the negative form and you could have several negation operators in the same sentence. The birth of certain movements such as hip-hop, to denounce living and working conditions or to claim their identity can also be noticed. Furthermore, there is an increase in the number of speakers and languages in these countries of arrival.

Conclusion

Gorée is an island that was a meeting point for many people during slavery. These individuals, having come from different countries or different localities, used several types of language. Among these means of communication, we have interpretation. This form of communication was used extensively during this period of slavery. Thus, many individuals served as interpreters during this period. Among these individuals we have the "signares" who played a very important role in the communication between masters and slaves. Their knowledge of the country, language, and traditions enabled them to help their husbands in their business endeavors. It was because of this knowledge of the country's languages that they served as interpreters in this slave house in Gorée. Alongside these individuals, we can cite the missionaries who had come to Africa for Evangelization. Thus, to better exercise their mission, these Westerners began to learn the local languages and to teach their languages to the natives. Some of them, having learned these foreign languages, facilitated communication during this period. This is also the case with the Arabs who, with the arrival of Nasir Al Dine, settled in Africa as part of the Islamization of the African peoples. Having converted a good number of people especially in Senegal, these Arabs taught them the Arabic language and some of them used this language to facilitate communication. We realized that alongside these types of language, several languages both local and foreign were used in this house during this period of slavery. However, this contact had linguistic consequences such as interference (between languages), the fact of borrowing words, the increase and / or decrease of the number of speakers, the birth of new languages in the countries of departure and in the countries of arrival, the birth of certain movements such as hip hop, etc.

References

- Benveniste E. (1970). "L'appareil formel de l'énonciation" Persee
Greenberg, J. H. (1963). *Some universals of grammar with particular reference to the order of meaningful elements*, In J. H. Greenberg (Ed.), *Universals of language* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

- Faye Souleymane, (1985). *Morphologie du nom Seereer*, (Système nominal et alternance consonantique) Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar (CLAD) ; les Langues Nationales du Sénégal. N.S. 10
- Maillat Maurice, (2018), *Phoenix des Tropiques, Gorée la négrière*, Editions, Association des Amis du Musée Historique du Sénégal (Gorée)
- Maillat Maurice, (2013). *Les Garnisons de Gorée*, Editions du Musée Historique du Sénégal (Gorée) IFAN Ch. A. Diop
- Thilmans Guy, (2010). *Informations sur l'esclavage*, Editions du Musée Historique du Sénégal (Gorée) IFAN Ch. A. Diop
- Thilmans Guy, (2006). *Histoire militaire de Gorée*, Editions du Musée Historique du Sénégal (Gorée) IFAN Ch. A. Diop.