

**Media Anthropology Network  
European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA)  
E-Seminar Series**

**<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>**

**E-Seminar 37**

**“Names U ma puce: multilingual texting in Senegal”**

**by**

**Kristin Vold Lexander  
University of Oslo**

**Discussant: Ken Banks  
Founder, Kiwanja.net**

**17 -31 May 2011**

**Postill, John**    **[J.Postill@shu.ac.uk](mailto:J.Postill@shu.ac.uk)**

**Tues May 17 01:01:11 PDT 2011**

Dear All

Welcome to the 37th EASA Media Anthropology Network e-seminar which will be held right here, on this mailing list, from now until Tuesday 31 May.

Kristin Vold Lexander presents a working paper entitled "Names U ma puce: multilingual texting in Senegal" (abstract below). Kristin is a PhD Fellow in Linguistics at the Department of Culture Studies and Oriental Languages, University of Oslo. She has studied Wolof at the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO), Paris, Development studies at Oslo University College, and gained her MA within the University of Oslo Studies of Francophone Africa south of the Sahara. Her doctoral thesis centres on literacy practices via NICTs (New Information and Communication Technologies) among students in Dakar, Senegal.

<http://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/people/aca/kristile/index.html>

The discussant will be Ken Banks who specialises in mobile phone applications for development and conservation and is the founder of kiwanja.net. Ken has spent the last 18 years working on projects in Africa. His research resulted in the development of FrontlineSMS, an award-winning text messaging-based field communication system designed to empower grassroots non-profit organisations. Ken graduated from Sussex University (UK) with honours in Social Anthropology with Development Studies, and was awarded a Stanford University Reuters Digital Vision Fellowship in 2006, and named a Pop!Tech Social Innovation Fellow in 2008.

<http://www.kiwanja.net/kenbanks.htm>

If you haven't yet had the time to the paper, you still have time to do so via this link:

<http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>. As always, our discussant will post his comments later today and then the presenter will respond, after which the floor will be open for further questions and comments.

It's over to Ken now!

- John

### **Abstract**

Multilingualism is an important aspect of African urban life, also of the lives of students in Dakar. While the students usually write monolingual texts, mainly in French, their text messages involve the use of African languages too, in particular of the majority language Wolof, as well as Arabic and English, often mixed in one and the same message. With the rapid rise in the use of mobile phones, texting is becoming increasingly central as a means of communication for the students, and the social network with whom they text is growing. This working paper investigates texting as literacy practices (cf. Barton & Hamilton 1998), putting the accent on language choices: what role do they play in constructing these new practices? What are the motivations and the functions of the students' languages choices? The analysis is based on six months of fieldwork in Dakar, during which I collected 464 SMS and interviewed and observed the 15 students who had sent and received the messages. I will focus on the practices of three of the students: Baba Yaro, a Fula-speaker born outside Dakar who has come to the Senegalese capital to undertake his studies, Christine, a Joola-speaker born in Dakar, and the Wolof-speaker Ousmane, from the suburb. I argue that in order to manage relationships and express different aspects of their identity, the students both exploit and challenge dominating language attitudes in their texting.

### **Reference**

Barton, David and Mary Hamilton 1998: *Local Literacies. Reading and writing in one community.* London, Routledge.

Ken Banks

ken.banks@kiwanja.net

Tue May 17 10:11:54 PDT 2011

Hi Kristin, all

It's great to be on this list, and fun to be able to get stuck into these kinds of papers and issues every once in a while.

So, firstly, many thanks to Kristin for a very informative paper, and one which is of particular interest to me not only as a practitioner focused on helping non-profit organisations deploy socially-beneficial mobile technologies in the field, but also as a student of Linguistic Anthropology which I studied many years ago. We're witnessing a growing body of anthropological research on mobile, but as with wider academia much of it remains largely of interest - and relevance - to other academics. I know from my own experience that wider study of some of the practical challenges faced by people trying to deploy mobile phones at project level is much needed and welcome, and questions around language and technical literacy are common. Hopefully this paper will be of some benefit in helping people understand some of the complexities and strategies deployed by end users in at least the first of these areas.

Text messaging is an incredible (and relatively recent) phenomenon, and one which allows enormous flexibility in language choice and use. The fact that messages are limited to 160 characters encourages innovative behaviour, something which Kristin's paper draws out well. Having lived and worked in many countries, and having witnessed "code switching" in verbal communication, it was fascinating to read how this plays out in SMS, something I had not previously witnessed. What does seem to play out are the similarities between users choosing to use different languages, i.e. their choice of 'alternative' language may be the same regardless of whether they were speaking or

texting it. Having a Finnish wife, I know that on the rare occasion she chooses to swear, for example, she tends to do it in Finnish.

Comparing the texting habits of the three target users gave an interesting flavour of different texting strategies, but in the interests of getting a discussion going I'd like to take the opportunity to submit a few follow-on questions on areas not covered in so much detail, although to be fair most of these are likely beyond Kristin's original remit or focus area. Nevertheless:

What do you think the role of SMS and mobile could be in the preservation of minority of endangered languages in Senegal?

Does the behaviour identified play out in other social media arenas for the three subjects - on Facebook, for example - or is it exclusive to mobile and SMS?

How would users cope if their phone didn't support local character sets?

During the early stages of a new friendship, what would the default language be for an SMS, before the participants knew each other?

Are there savings in the number of characters needed in an SMS by using a traditional language over, say, French? Or does it come at a 'cost'?

As with concerns in the UK/US with children's written skills being eroded by slang and "text speak", are there similar concerns in Senegal?

How much of the observed behaviour is made up, or learned? I'm curious as to the evolution of some of the behaviours highlighted

What behaviour patterns emerge when "illiterate" phone owners try to message others, if they do try at all?

Were emoticons (smiley faces, etc) ever used as part of messaging, rather than abbreviations? And if so, do they follow our own uses of them, or are there variations?

I hope at least some of the questions are relevant, and of interest to others on the list. As John knows, I come at this from a non-academic viewpoint, and know that other practitioner colleagues would also benefit from answers. I'll leave others on the list draw comparisons with other studies, or other conclusions drawn from comparable research carried out in other areas or countries.

I look forward to following - and hopefully contributing to - the discussion that follows.

Thanks.

Ken

Ken Banks  
Founder, [kiwanja.net](http://kiwanja.net) and FrontlineSMS  
Tech Awards Laureate 2009  
National Geographic Emerging Explorer 2010

"Where technology meets anthropology, conservation and development"

Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/kiwanja>

Many thanks for those comments, Ken. It's over to Kristin now for a response, after which we'll open the floor for further contributions

John

Dear all, dear Ken and John,

Thanks to John for inviting me and thanks to Ken for his interesting comments and questions, giving me the opportunity to give a broader presentation of multilingual texting in Senegal. As he indicated, I will not be able to answer all of the questions, as I have not investigated all the aspects evoked. But these questions can inspire further examination of texting and further discussions here – so thanks for that.

1. What do you think the role of SMS and mobile could be in the preservation of minority of endangered languages in Senegal?

I have not studied this point, unfortunately, but it sure is an interesting question.

2. Does the behaviour identified play out in other social media arenas for the three subjects - on Facebook, for example - or is it exclusive to mobile and SMS?

Yes, absolutely, this texting is part of a bigger group of multilingual electronic literacy practices. We find use of Wolof on Facebook (Ousmane, who now lives in Indonesia, posts on his wall in four languages), in emails, that I also collected (Christine and Baba Yaro provided emails where Wolof was being used together with French), in instant messaging conversations (collected from other informants), in chatting, in discussion forums and in comments to online newspaper articles, etc. It is not just "SMS-language", the characteristics are found in most informal electronic communication.

3. How would users cope if their phone didn't support local character sets?

When writing in Pulaar, similar letters are used (b for ɓ, d for ɗ as you can see in the paper), or, sometimes, numbers represent these characters (6 for ɓ).

4. During the early stages of a new friendship, what would the default language be for an SMS, before the participants knew each other?

It would probably be French mixed with Wolof for a student in Dakar. It is likely to depend on age and socio-economic, and to a certain extent ethnic, factors, so it will differ from one social group to another (for the parents of the students, it would be French, for instance, and for young Seereer, it could be French and Wolof mixed with Seereer).

5. Are there savings in the number of characters needed in an SMS by using a traditional language over, say, French? Or does it come at a 'cost'?

Usually it comes at a 'cost', as Wolof and Pulaar hardly ever are abbreviated, while French and English often are. But there are some examples of use of Wolof that seem to be motivated by economic concerns (ba instead of jusqu'à or until in a French-English-Wolof message, for instance). Since space is a limiting factor in text-messages, there has to be rather strong motivations for the use of Wolof and Pulaar.

6. As with concerns in the UK/US with children's written skills being eroded by slang and "text speak", are there similar concerns in Senegal?

Yes, and even by the texters themselves.

7. How much of the observed behaviour is made up, or learned? I'm curious as to the evolution of some of the behaviours highlighted.

Some is learnt, we find some of the same patterns in different francophone parts of the world. Young Senegalese chat with French-speakers in other countries and orthographic and lexical innovations are exchanged. There are some "local specialties" too, like g ta 90.3, meaning 'I miss you', that appears several places in the corpus. The Senegalese French expression J'ai ta nostalgie is abbreviated and nostalgie is replaced with 90.3, the frequency of the radio station named Nostalgie.

8. What behaviour patterns emerge when "illiterate" phone owners try to message others, if they do try at all?

This is also a very interesting question that I have not studied. But students say they try to write "simple" when they communicate with people with little schooling. And it seems like Wolof and Pulaar often are preferred in these messages.

9. Were emoticons (smiley faces, etc) ever used as part of messaging, rather than abbreviations? And if so, do they follow our own uses of them, or are there variations?

There are very few emoticons in the corpus and when they appear, they do not have a communicational function, it is more of an ornament. In instant messaging, however, emoticons are frequently used, in a similar ornamental way – often to represent characters. It seems like code-switching sometimes has the role usually played by emoticons. mbeulé! ('stick out one's tongue') appears in a French-Wolof text-message and could perhaps might as well have been replaced by :P or :-P - and yes, swear words are written in Wolof!

I am looking forward to discussing these and other questions!

Best,  
Kristin

Postill, John      J.Postill@shu.ac.uk

Wed May 18 04:26:50 PDT 2011

Many thanks Kristin - I'm sure many of us on the list have other questions and comments, so the floor is now open. To contribute, please write directly to medianthro at easaonline.org (with cc. to me so I can spot any undelivered posts) keeping your posts brief and on-topic.

John

Christmas, Salina

salina.christmas.09@ucl.ac.uk

Sat May 21 12:58:16 PDT 2011

Dear Ms Vold Lexander,

Thank you for such an interesting paper. It's been some time since I did linguistics. I am very pleased to see this topic discussed in a Media Anthro forum. Your paper illustrates clearly the implications of language instrumentalism (Wee, 2003), in this case, the use of Wolof and French as the language of economy, and thus, social mobility, among your informants.

My question, which relates to what I am studying, digital anthropology:

What exactly are default language or languages of the "predictive text" deployed by the mobile handset? Sorry if I missed it in your paper.

I am following up from Ms Vidali's comments in an earlier email response. If Wolof and French are the default languages employed in the predictive text, then arguably we can say that the two languages are also the "language of technology".

If so, then these languages will have some similarities with English, the language of the world wide web. Before you get to write in php, javascript and so on, you must have a good command of English. I have always been intrigued by the way techies from developing regions adopt a language they might not identify with culturally, except that it is the language they have to use for work.

I also agree with Ms Vidali that it is also "about what the keypad can do". Digital technology, in this case, the SMS, does facilitate "code-switching".

There are, of course, many theories on code-switching. To understand your paper, though, I had to look up Wardhaugh's 'textbook' definition (1986) of "situational" and "metaphorical" code-switching. I've been out of it for ages, so it's quite tricky to keep up with linguistics. Wardhaugh says the former happens "when the language used change according to the situations in which the conversants find themselves". The latter happens "when the choice of code adds a distinct flavor to what is said about the topic". I suppose an example of this is one of the unforgettable conversations between a Puerto Rican informant and Phillippe Bourgois in that famous work of his, "In search of respect (1995):

"Even my mother thought you was gay, but that was because she was talking to you over the phone... One day she asked me, Quien es este blanquito que simper llama aqui? Es pato o also asi?"

What your paper tells me is that the code-switching done by your informants are not just socially driven; it's technologically driven too. There is an overlap there with digital anthropology, for sure.

Salina

Mireia Fernandez

mfernandezar@uoc.edu

Mon May 23 03:27:20 PDT 2011

Dear Kristin and dear all,

Thank you for the paper. It goes through a very interesting issue.

It assesses the combined use of different and mixed languages in text messaging for different purposes: coordination & microcoordination and (2) emphatic uses.

In this sense, it enlarges the focus of papers like this from Siri Lamoureaux: "Imagined connectivity, poetic text-messaging and appropriation in Sudan"

([http://in3.uoc.edu/opencms\\_portalin3/export/sites/default/PDF/communication-technologies-in-latin-america-and-africa/Chapter\\_08\\_Lamoureaux.pdf](http://in3.uoc.edu/opencms_portalin3/export/sites/default/PDF/communication-technologies-in-latin-america-and-africa/Chapter_08_Lamoureaux.pdf))

After reading last contributions, I would like to add two more ideas to the discussion.

(a) Wolof language seems to be more orthographically-respected

You mention that Wolof orthography is more respected than French orthography. In this case, do you think that the orthodox orthography is kept because Wolof is less used in SMS (compared to French)? Or it is because Wolof is more oral, as you explain in the text? Or, maybe, is there a combination of the two motivations?

(b) Creative spelling: always by purpose?

It would be nice if you could develop the willingness of "spelling transformation".

It is clear that in some occasions, -as when mixing French and Wolof in one word, there is a desire of transformation; a creative way of spelling words (while creating new ones!).

In other cases, however, it does not seem possible to determine if this "creative spelling" is made on purpose or if it is a simple mistake.

It would be very interesting to know how the receiver of the SMS reacts to those words/texts that are perceived as being wrong (acceptation, rejection, etc.). Do you think this reaction may depend on the sender?

Hope these issues would be of interest of others in the list.

Thank you very much in advance,

Mireia

Dr. Mireia Fernández-Ardèvol

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Ken Banks

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Tue May 24 05:46:22 PDT 2011

Hi Kristin

Thanks for taking the time to respond to my questions! Very interesting to dig a little deeper into some of the issues, and maybe those you didn't manage to address could be topics of future papers. ;o)

I continue to follow the discussion, and will dive in as the subject touches on areas of interest and relevance in my work.

Ken

Dear Kristin, Ken, John and all,

Thanks for a fascinating topic of research and paper, Kristin. My questions are linguistically ethnographic, and also relate to the open, free, wiki World University and School, which I'm developing.

Did you observe any instances of what you would consider people teaching or learning from each other in these languages, or when they were creating hybrid uses of their languages? Given your argument that "I argue that in order to manage relationships and express different aspects of their identity, the students both exploit and challenge dominant language attitudes in their texting," could you see your informants extending their 'exploitation and challenge' of dominant language attitudes, through wiki-developing on their own their own schools (like all of us did with Wikipedia, which is the encyclopedia idea)?

In a related vein, I added both your paper to the bud of World University and School's Languages' page: <http://worlduniversity.wikia.com/wiki/Languages> , as well as added the 'Joola' language to it. Fula and Wolof were already listed on WUaS Languages' page. People in Dakar, Senegal, or anyone, can begin a new language or school simply by using this SUBJECT TEMPLATE: [http://worlduniversity.wikia.com/wiki/SUBJECT\\_TEMPLATE](http://worlduniversity.wikia.com/wiki/SUBJECT_TEMPLATE) , for example.

World University and School is like Wikipedia (now in 281 languages)with MIT Open Course Ware (as an academic standard for eventual free, online, degree granting - Bachelors, MD, Law and Ph.D.), where people can teach and learn from each other, freely and openly ([http://worlduniversity.wikia.com/wiki/World\\_University](http://worlduniversity.wikia.com/wiki/World_University)). I hope WUaS will be in all 3,000-8,000 languages, and even become the basis for a universal translator, building on Google Translate (<http://translate.google.com/>) and Sugar Labs Translation System (<http://translate.sugarlabs.org/>), for example. I also hope WUaS will become a resource for illiterate peoples, as mobile video becomes ubiquitous, and people can teach to and learn from each other orally using video.

Each language at World University and School will become its own wiki-school over time, simply by starting with the some of the main university and school pages in English, translating some main sections, and inviting people in that language to teach and learn with each other (again, think Wikipedia's 281 languages). It's especially through this process that your research, Kristin, and WUaS might complement each other.

Your paper is fascinating and germane vis-a-vis WUaS because it examines exactly how people in Africa are communicating with each other in their languages, across languages, and creatively, using mobile technologies and texting.

I'm curious, too, how World University and School might dovetail with your research, or facilitate it, in the future, as WUaS grows, as an online, wiki university.

Thank you for a fascinating paper.

All the best,

Scott  
San Francisco Bay Area

<http://scottmacleod.com>  
[http://worlduniversity.wikia.com/wiki/World\\_University](http://worlduniversity.wikia.com/wiki/World_University)

Kristin Vold Lexander k.v.lexander@ikos.uio.no

Tue May 31 14:00:01 PDT 2011

Dear Scott,

Thanks for sharing your project! I am looking forward to see how WUaS develop in African languages. To your questions: No, I did not observe direct teaching or learning (apart from one instance of French verlan used in instant messaging – the interlocutor asked what it meant and it was explained). But texters would copy messages they had received and modify them to send them to others, or just send them as they were. So a “focussing” (Le Page &Tabouret-Keller, Acts of Identity 1985) is taking place in texting. In the article by Ana Deumert and Oscar S. Masinyana from 2008 (English Worldwide, full ref in the paper), a newspaper article is quoted, where a Congolese claims that illiterates learn key words to text, because SMS is cheaper than phone calls.

The Senegalese informants’ use of Internet has changed since my fieldwork, they now use Facebook a lot, and that might have influenced other Internet activity. As far as I could observe, none of the research participants were engaged in Wikis in 2007.

By the way, Ana Deumert will present research on the isiXhosa version of Wikipedia at the International Symposium on Bilingualism 8 (in Oslo June 15-18), you can find the abstract here:

<https://www.conftool.com/isb8/index.php?page=browseSessions&search=deumert>

Best of luck with the project and thanks for your interest,

Kristin

Vidali, Debra [debra.vidali @emory.edu]

Sent: 20 May 2011 18:25

This is a wonderfully rich paper! It opens up so many issues. I love the screen shots of the texts and the 3 contrasting case studies. Here, quickly are a few reactions and suggestions.

Re the issue of “language choice” --- Studies of multilingualism tend to treat code choice as an active or intentional choice, one that (indexically) signals a particular social meaning that is intended by the speaker/writer.

There is a counter trend in the literature that asks whether language “choice” is always intentional, and always about conveying a set and intended social meaning. The word “choice” itself carries the baggage of conscious intentionality. So as that comes under question, so does the selection of the word “choice” itself. I engage this argument in an early piece [Spitulnik, Debra 1998a The Language of the City: Town Bemba as Urban Hybridity. Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 8(1):30–59.] Also, I write there about hybridity as the norm, in many m-l urban African settings, i.e. the switching taken as a whole signals urbanity and cosmopolitanism, but less might be attributed to specific line by line switches. Also see Swigart - you cite an earlier piece but could also look at her 2000 “Limits of Legitimacy” article in JLA)

Now, the whole idea of “choice” seems to be further complicated with texting, since texters may be making another level of decisions around not just their multilingual repertoires and their social meanings, but about what the keypad can do! So with that in mind, I got to wondering if you can say more about (1) whether and how certain phrases are easier to type in one lg or another and (2) how predictive (T9) text works (or not) with multilingual texters. Do they simply turn it off, or stick with one dominant lg in the lg options tool? Also, how does the keypad affect the possible forms of what

you document as unconventional spelling? There's a potentially very fruitful McLuhan line of investigation here, re: tech determinism, or materiality of the medium shaping form/content relations.

Finally, I also wondered about the status of "ready made" phrases, such as clichés, greetings, the "happy new year" "in English, etc. These have a very distinct status in the repertoires of multilingual speakers, and they deserve a close look. The literature on codeswitching can help you out here, esp. the studies that analyze the types of constituents that are switched, e.g. noun phrases, clichés, whole sentences, quoted speech, etc. Ana Ceilia Zentella's work could help on that note.

And one last thing – Laura Ahearn's book on love letters and literacy in Nepal (*Invitations to Love*) is a great source of inspiration re: the way young people write love letters, and often use cliché phrases in them, in various lgs.

thanks for sharing this Kristin!

Best wishes with the work!

Debra

Dr. Debra Vidali (formerly Dr. Debra Spitulnik)  
Department of Anthropology  
Emory University  
Atlanta, GA 30322 USA  
<mailto:debra.vidali@emory.edu>

Kristin Vold Lexander k.v.lexander@ikos.uio.no Sat May 21 14:39:47 PDT 2011

Thank you, Debra, for your useful suggestions and interesting questions. Answers and reactions are inserted in your text:

Re the issue of "language choice" --- Studies of multilingualism tend to treat code choice as an active or intentional choice, one that (indexically) signals a particular social meaning that is intended by the speaker/writer. There is a counter trend in the literature that asks whether language "choice" is always intentional, and always about conveying a set and intended social meaning. The word "choice" itself carries the baggage of conscious intentionality. So as that comes under question, so does the selection of the word "choice" itself. I engage this argument in an early piece [Spitulnik, Debra 1998a *The Language of the City: Town Bemba as Urban Hybridity*. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 8(1):30–59.] Also, I write there about hybridity as the norm, in many m-l urban African settings, i.e. the switching taken as a whole signals urbanity and cosmopolitanism, but less might be attributed to specific line by line switches. Also see Swigart - you cite an earlier piece but could also look at her 2000 "Limits of Legitimacy" article in JLA)

- About "language choices": often the Senegalese texters themselves claim that their choice is not conscious, and as the examples in the text indicate, the corpus shows that different languages can convey more or less the same social meaning. Whether a greeting is written in French, in Wolof or in French+Wolof+English is not necessarily important for its meaning, for how it is read. Use of "correct French" (without abbreviations and unconventional spelling) or "pure Wolof", however, stand out, and the choice of one of these codes (by a young person in Dakar) is probably intentional. Wolof-French switching is indeed the norm for spoken language in Dakar – similar to Town Bemba (thanks for bringing your interesting article to my attention!). In texting among students, mixing French and

Wolof is one of several possible unmarked “choices”, to use Carol Myers-Scotton’s (1993, *Social Motivations for Code-Switching*) concept. In the corpus, there are some messages where the switching clearly does not have a local meaning, but represents a mixed Wolof-French code. It is interesting that in the SMS messages, French is the dominant language of this “mixed code”, while in speech, Wolof is the matrix language (making up the grammatical frame from which short or long switches into French are made) of the mixed code. I agree that Myers-Scotton’s markedness model is not nuanced enough to explain all kinds of language use, analyses that take Peter Auer’s conversational approach as point of departure give more insight into motivations for code-switching, but markedness is still useful as a reference, I think.

Now, the whole idea of “choice” seems to be further complicated with texting, since texters may be making another level of decisions around not just their multilingual repertoires and their social meanings, but about what the keypad can do! So with that in mind, I got to wondering if you can say more about (1) whether and how certain phrases are easier to type in one lg or another and (2) how predictive (T9) text works (or not) with multilingual texters. Do they simply turn it off, or stick with one dominant lg in the lg options tool? Also, how does the keypad affect the possible forms of what you document as unconventional spelling? There’s a potentially very fruitful McLuhan line of investigation here, re: tech determinism, or materiality of the medium shaping form/content relations.

(1) This is not something that I have considered, but something I should look more into, perhaps. Some phrases are probably easier to type in one language, but when I try out some of the most popular expressions on the keypad, I see that they are not very quick to type (namnala (SMS3), you have to wait for the second n, thi lo nék (SMS 8), h + i is a slow combination, too).

(2) These texters do not use T9. French is a very uneconomic language, and that might be one of the reasons for many of the unconventional spellings: bon8 for bonne nuit, s8 for suis, etc. (more examples in SMS)

(3). If we talk about tech determinism, we also have to take into account how the language is as a written language. Messages in French using T9 would be very long... But at the same time, Wolof is written with mute e’s and u’s – the main motivation seems to be to make oneself understood, not in the number of characters. There seem to be different strategies when writing different languages.

Finally, I also wondered about the status of “ready made” phrases, such as clichés, greetings, the “happy new year “in English, etc. These have a very distinct status in the repertoires of multilingual speakers, and they deserve a close look. The literature on codeswitching can help you out here, esp. the studies that analyze the types of constituents that are switched, e.g. noun phrases, clichés, whole sentences, quoted speech, etc. Ana Ceilia Zentella’s work could help on that note.

- Yes, that is true, and use of English is usually limited to such clichés (single words or expressions), often related to Afro-American English. They are often used to show that the writer is young and cool.

And one last thing – Laura Ahearn’s book on love letters and literacy in Nepal (*Invitations to Love*) is a great source of inspiration re: the way young people write love letters, and often use cliché phrases in them, in various lgs.

- Yes, it is a lovely book! Clearly, like Ahearn’s informants use ‘lav’ (from love) for “occidental” love, French is often used to refer to aspects of love that are not associated with traditional cultural

values in Senegal. Romantic SMS messages in the corpus have many similarities with the love letters collected by Ahearn.

Thank you very much for your interest and comments,  
Best,  
Kristin

Postill, John    J.Postill@shu.ac.uk

Sun May 29 15:30:01 PDT 2011

Dear All

A reminder that there is still time to post your comments and follow-ups on Kristin Vold Lexander's paper "Names U ma puce: multilingual texting in Senegal". The e-seminar ends this Tuesday night at 9 pm CET.

Best

John

Kathryn Graber    kegrab@umich.edu

Tue May 31 10:12:41 PDT 2011

Dear Kristin (et al.),

Thanks for sharing this fascinating material on multilingual texting in Senegal. I really enjoyed the paper - it's clear, data-rich, and well-organized, and the way you set up the 3 case studies is fabulous. Here are some quick reactions:

- I found especially fascinating the section on different types of literacy (activist/ideological, imposed, and popular), based on different motivations for language choice. I don't think I've ever seen this distinction, and I was unclear on whether it came from your analysis or from your research participants. How do the texters you've been working with talk about literacy (if not explicitly, implicitly)? Do they make a distinction between "imposed literacy" and activist writing? How do you see this ethnographically?

- The discussion of Wolof's uses for comedy, swearing, etc. reminded me of other work on Wolof and poetics (e.g. Irvine 1996). We have not used poetics as an analytical framework much yet in studies of CMC and 'new'/digital media, but there are a lot of examples of wonderful creativity in your paper, which might lend themselves well to that kind of analysis. Along the same lines, maybe the notion of 'code play' would be useful - ? Your texters seem to be playing with the "aspects of identity" you identify by playing with language and with expectations of code choice. An analytic of 'play' might also free you from some of the concerns re: intentionality discussed earlier in this e-seminar.

- I was curious to know more (maybe in future research) about how the patterns of code-switching/language mixing you're elucidating are wrapped up in larger intertextual practices. In response to Ken's opening questions, you mentioned that this texting is "part of a bigger group of multilingual electronic literacy practices." I think this probably goes beyond the mere use of multiple languages in these other fora to intertextual links with the texting practices you've studied. How do innovations in language mixing move from one domain/platform/genre to another? When the

students are citing phrases from other media, what are the social effects of this? (Like the "Hello Kitwe?" of Debra Spitulnik Vidali's "circulation" article... or love-letter cliches like those discussed earlier in this e-seminar... these aren't just interesting linguistic fun facts to note; they have social consequences.) Do certain things get restated in one language or another because of ideologies of reported speech that require it? If so, what understanding of persons - Wolof-speaking or Wolof-writing, for example - are tied to those languages? See Agha on the "social persona" wrapped up in linguistic choices, for example. Maybe these are questions for another project, but it seems like you've already got such a great research base with the texting material, and like you might have already collected some material in other types of electronic communication - ? It's especially clear in your responses to queries in this e-seminar on orthography. I think you could have a lot to say about how linguistic practices in one media platform articulate with those in other platforms.

Thanks!  
Kate

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Kristin Vold Lexander    k.v.lexander @ikos.uio.no    Tue May 31 14:00:31 PDT 2011

Dear Kathryn,

Thanks for your comments, questions and suggestions! Here are some thoughts/answers:

The distinction between the three types of literacy comes from my analysis of the sociolinguistic situation in Senegal, yes. It is based also on earlier fieldwork, among women in rural Senegal who had attended literacy classes in Wolof, but expressed a desire to read and write in French. The texters do not make the distinction between activist and imposed writing, at least not explicitly.

However, one of the research participants, Ndeya, was explicit about her own activist writing, during the period when she was a devoted member of the Muslim brotherhood of the Mourids. She wrote a poem, in "pure" Wolof, inspired by Mourid norms of language use, saying "I did not want to use anything coming from the Whites". She also reads religious books in Wolof. Her Mourid friends write

religious poetry in Wolof, inspired by the religious leader Cheikh Bethiou Thione's discourses on bad French influence on Wolof and a return to the "sources of Wolof". Thialguey, a Pulaar-speaking informant, and Baba Yaro are also explicit about their more or less ideological motivations for learning to read and write in Pulaar, and their motivations for using it.

Christine, when talking about literacy classes, claims that the African languages are powerless in official settings, while Rama, Ousmane's girlfriend, did at first not even remember that she had attended university classes in Wolof. When remembering she said: "Oh, yeah, we learnt to transcribe it".

Code play definitely could be a useful notion here, that is true. When it comes to intertextual practices, I can mention one email in the corpus. It is an old joke, that probably exists in many languages, with a teacher asking questions to a pupil while the headmaster observes. The questions asked by the teacher have two possible answers, one perverse and one innocent. The headmaster, thinks of the perverse answers, of course, while the pupil comes up with the innocent ones. In this particular email, the joke is told in English, but all the perverse answers are translated into Pulaar, or inserted in Pulaar, in some versions of the joke these words are not written out, and finally, a comment in Pulaar, is inserted. The joke is "pulaarized" to be more personal and funnier. When it comes to reported speech, I do not have many examples in the corpus, but there is one example: in the messages written by Tallal's girlfriend, only one is in Wolof, and in that message, she quotes her mother. The choice of Wolof could be motivated by the language that the mother most probably used, or it could be chosen because the content is not romantic.

Names U is found in different spelling in both text messages and instant messaging, and while the answer to "namm naa la" usually is "maa la raw", the reconstruction "rawess you" is found in the corpus, as a reply to "names". Also, the slogan "dor dorat " (beat them once, beat them twice) written on walls around the city – with references to football teams - is used in text messages and in blogs, on facebook, etc. Now even one of the wrestlers (Senegal's national sport) uses that as his name. So text messages indeed participate in the circulation of popular expressions.

Best,

Kristin

Postill, John J.Postill@shu.ac.uk

Tue May 31 14:48:17 PDT 2011

Dear All

We have now come to the end of the discussion around Kristin Vold Lexander's working paper on multilingual texting in Senegal. For those of you who've just joined us, there is a PDF of the paper here: <http://www.media-anthropology.net/index.php/e-seminars>

As is our custom, there will also be a PDF transcript of this session up on our site shortly.

Many thanks for Kristin for sharing her paper with us and responding to comments and questions, to Ken Banks for the kick-off and to all of other participants! The e-seminar series will resume after the summer break with its 38th session.

Meanwhile you may want to contribute comments and bibliographic references to our Media and Social Change blog where you will find a range of posts from Network participants - with more posts to come soon, see <http://mediasocialchange.net/>

John

**E-seminar closed**