

# BOOK REVIEW

**Cécile Van Den Avenne. *De la bouche même des indigènes. Échanges linguistiques en Afrique coloniale.*** Paris: Vendémiaire, 2017. 271 pp. Map. Bibliography. Notes. €22. Paper. ISBN: 978-2-36358-251-5.

Cécile Van Den Avenne has written an excellent book on the nature and outcome of linguistic exchange in French colonial Africa that will be of broad interest to historians as well as to students of empire. Casting a sociolinguist's eye on language and its representation in diverse sources from colonial archives to Senegalese film, she documents the ways in which agents of the French colonial apparatus communicated with Africans from the end of the eighteenth century up to the 1950s. Letters were exchanged in Arabic, especially during the early years of contact; multilingual West African interpreters served as intermediaries; and "foreigner talk" was often employed by the French with Bambara, Wolof, or Dioula-speaking interlocutors, thereby providing a non-standard model of French that Africans were then faulted for adopting for their own use.

The most important languages deployed in colonial interactions were the Mande languages, including Bambara, which were spoken across a wide swath of West Africa as languages of commerce, particularly in the slave trade on the Senegambian coast; Arabic, the language of Islam; and French, the language of European military conquest and colonialism. African languages played an important role in the early days of European exploration. Van Den Avenne cites, among others, Mungo Park's (b. 1771) knowledge of Mandingo and Louis-Gustave Binger's (b. 1856) knowledge of Bambara, speculating that their bilingual backgrounds (Scots and Alsatian, respectively) may have played a role in their willingness to acquire an African language. This is an intriguing hypothesis that has the added effect of highlighting European multilingualism at a time when the myth of monolingualism was gaining a foothold as a correlate of nationalism in Europe, a myth that the author debunks. Accounts of language use by European explorers reveal some striking communicative practices, including long negotiations under the palaver tree and chains of translation such as that described by Joseph Eysséric in 1900: "The head of the porters, Daoua, speaking Bambara and Baoulé, would translate the phrases to our cook, Kouakou, who would relay

them to us in broken French (*français-nègre*)” (46, my translation). Accounts such as this provide important insights into the mediated nature of linguistic exchange between French and Africans.

The French language appears in many forms and with many epithets. In French West Africa’s army, French officers and multilingual *tirailleurs sénégalais* from throughout the territory used alternate forms of French along with Bambara as lingua francas. Due to the paucity of French instruction in the army, a pidgin French known as *français tirailleur* emerged and became a source of amusement, as well as an object of ridicule inflected with racism. In a parallel development, several Bambara usage manuals were published by French officers, and they too provided evidence of a language imperfectly learned, this time by the French. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century missionaries produced grammars of African languages for French readers, inadequately describing them in terms of European languages and providing literal translations that suggested deficiencies in the African languages under discussion. Scientific linguistic work of this sort further established language as a site of racism toward Africans. Van Den Avenne shows how the French contributed to the “broken” form of their language known as *petit-nègre*, Africans were disparaged and infantilized in French colonial novels, and their language was distorted to amuse French readers. She also describes a “French West African French” (*français aofien*) spoken—or more often written—by metropolitan French expatriates living in West Africa or by an educated African elite, which incorporated African loanwords for local concepts. The French in colonial Africa also come into focus through local accounts such as that of Blaise Diagne, the first Senegalese and black African elected to the French Chamber of Deputies. He recounts his primary school days on “my old rock of Gorée,” where he and his young Senegalese classmates, all children no older than ten, were engaged to write letters for illiterate Breton-speaking colonial infantry and artillery soldiers to send back to their families in France.

Van Den Avenne suggests at the end of this illuminating study that the antidote to France’s current inability to think of multiculturalism and multilingualism as anything other than a threat to national integrity lies in an examination of colonialism and its relationship to the present. Her sociolinguistic perspective is effective yet light-handed, making this study accessible to anyone interested in French colonialism in Africa.

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