The political border through space: The influence of border visibility on Wolof on the border of Senegal and The Gambia

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Political borders have spatial and temporal realities that have been shown to influence language in different ways across time and space (Auer 2005, Boberg 2000, Watt et al 2010). Although the border between Senegal and The Gambia was the invention of 19th century colonial powers, it has survived into African independence and still serves to delineate two independent nations. The areas surrounding the border on both sides in pre-colonial days were part of a single kingdom called Saloum. The colonial legacy can still be seen in the official language policies of the two countries (Senegal: French, The Gambia: English), but Wolof remains the most widely spoken language in this area. Nevertheless, differences between the national varieties of Wolof have been noted. For example, whereas Senegalese Wolof has a schwa, Gambian Wolof is described as lacking a central vowel and having instead split this category into /e/ or /u/ (Njie 1982). But to what degree is this true in the Saloum area that encompasses the political border?

During a nine-month period in 2013, I conducted sociolinguistic interviews with Wolof speakers in 4 communities abutting the border on both sides: 2 communities near a heavily-marked official border presence and 2 more remote villages near an unmarked border. Using acoustic measures of F2, this study investigates the degree to which Njie’s description of Gambian Wolof lacking /e/ is true in this border area. Preliminary results show the expected pattern of a greater standard variation for F2 within the schwa category on the Gambian side of the border, suggesting a split in this vowel for Gambian speakers. Young Gambian men show the most pronounced standard deviation (sd= 253). Older Gambian men in the rural communities, however, have the most compact F2 space of all speakers (sd=133), suggesting a different linguistic orientation towards the border.

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