

A genealogical perspective on relative clauses in three languages of Senegal

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Abstract

Literature on the syntax of relative clauses in Wolof and Pulaar implies that the majority of Northern Atlantic Niger-Congo speakers in Senegal use relative clauses with the syntactic structure identified by Torrence (2013). This study argues that the majority of Wolof varieties are better analyzed by an alternate relative clause derivation inspired by data from Sereer, a sister language of Wolof and Pulaar. The alternative rests on the assignment of the relative clause linker as a determiner, rather than a complementizer. The study reveals a divide in Wolof speakers that shifts the majority towards the alternative derivation.

Torrence and Ba (2017) identify the relative clause linker, a term from Creissels (2017), as an overt C head in the syntax. A final copy of the linker following the relative clause is assigned the position of a D head (optional in Wolof), which agrees with and is identical to the complementizer.

The variety of Wolof studied by Martinović (2017) prohibits a final copy of the linker. It is also lacking from the corpus of Wolof collected by Dione (2020) and annotated for universal dependencies. Wolof speakers from the Sine and Baol regions likewise rejected it, while only bilingual speakers of Pulaar and Wolof accepted it. Example 1 shows variations for the same relative clause, and the copy of the linker after the relative clause in Pulaar.

- (1) a. Sereer
[*Kaleera f-a ga'-uuma*] *a-magin-a.*
pot CL_f-DIST see-1SG.PERF.REL 3SG-be.large-PERF
'That cooking pot that I saw was big.'
- b. Wolof
[*Cin l-i ma gis-oon*] *rey na.*
pot CL₁-PROX 1SG see-PST be.large 3SG.PERF
'The cooking pot that I saw was big'
- c. Pulaar
[*Fayaande nde-da nji-noo-mi nde-da*] *maw-nde.*
pot CL_{nde}-DIST see-PST-1SG CL_{nde}-DIST big-CL_{nde}
'The cooking pot that I saw was big'

The wide range of deictic configurations on the linker in Sereer and Wolof are more similar to determiners across languages, rather than complementizers. Assigning the linker to the C position cannot account for a prohibition on the final determiner for definite relative clauses in Wolof and Sereer, where the lack of a determiner usually indicates indefiniteness.

One significant impact of this study is the regional and social delineation of a syntactic structure in Senegal. Such variation in syntactic structure provides an notable non-lexical example of borrowing. Another notable finding is the overlooked variation found in relative clauses and definite marking in Wolof, as is the influence on relative clauses by neighboring languages or other first languages.

The results in no way contradict the analyses of Torrence and Ba as viable for Pulaar and certain varieties of Wolof. They do suggest, however, that such a relative clause derivation does not necessarily hold for Sereer and other varieties of Wolof. The dissemination of these two syntactic structures within the Northern Atlantic language is a topic for future research.

References

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