

## Variation in Senegalese and Gambian Wolof

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Wolof is an Atlantic language spoken mainly in Senegal and the Gambia. These two countries have been politically divided since early colonial times. The arbitrary national border that carves The Gambia around the Gambia River, running from the Atlantic coast right through the middle of Senegal has had some linguistic repercussions. Wolof quickly became the lingua franca of Senegal, with over 80% of the population speaking it as an L1 or L2 (McLaughlin 2008) while Wolof became a minority language in The Gambia with less than 20% of the population speaking it, along with the lingua franca Mandinka. Furthermore, the official language of Senegal is French and the official language of The Gambia is English. It is easy to imagine that the varieties of Wolof spoken in each country would be distinctive. According to Ethnologue: “Senegal Wolof intelligible with Gambia Wolof but with significant enough differences to require adaptation of materials. Needs further investigation.” Few studies have focused at all on the latter variety, or compared the two since 1939 (Ward 1939).

A pilot study conducted with Wolof speakers in 2010 suggested differences in the production of word-final stops in the two varieties. The inventory of stops Wolof has been described (Ka 1988) as phonologically distinguishing singleton, geminate, and prenasalized stops. After the pilot study, it seemed that word-final stops were the first place to investigate dialectal differences. Gambian Wolof seemed to have a vowel-like release where Senegalese Wolof had geminates.

A more systematic study conducted in 2011 with ten Wolof speakers (five Gambian, five Senegalese) residing in Columbus, OH attempted to determine what the acoustic cues for distinguishing “geminates” from “singletons” are in both varieties of Wolof and how they differ between varieties. Each participant translated a list of thirty words embedded in three different carrier phrases. A regression analysis of word final stops (singletons, geminates, and prenasalized) in Wolof revealed significant differences in the production of word-final geminates and word-final prenasalized stops between the two varieties. Gambian Wolof demonstrated the interesting feature that nearly all of its geminates and prenasalized stops featured some kind of voiced release, whereas for Senegalese Wolof, this was true only of the voiced geminates. In the Senegalese variety, geminates and prenasalized stops were variably produced with voiced or aspirated releases. The singletons in both varieties were largely unreleased. The salient marker of singletons, then, seems to be their unreleased quality. Both varieties seem to have released vs. unreleased distinction. But the near categorical voiced release of geminates and prenasalized stops in the Gambian variety distinguishes it from the Senegalese variety and calls into question the phonological nature of stops of the two varieties, their syllable structure and their “geminate” inventory. This work presents some preliminary results for further study about the differences between the two varieties and their relation to national and linguistic borders and the influence of language contact in both varieties.