

Strategies of Status Manipulation in the Wolof Greeting

The Wolof are members of a hierarchical society comprised of castes. Social interactions, including greetings, are dictated by this hierarchy. Greetings present an opportunity for individuals to challenge their position in Wolof society. However, individuals must always abide by guidelines which define what is a socially acceptable greeting.

It is customary for the Wolof to open every social encounter with a greeting. In fact, two individuals who can see each other must engage in a greeting. There are certain rules that regulate when a greeting must occur between individuals on roads, plazas, or in the fields. More importantly, the lower ranking person should greet the higher ranking individual. Since a greeting is mandatory, it forces both parties to define their status in relation to each other.

There are multiple different questions and statements that typically occur during a Wolof greeting. These exchanges occur in two stages of the interaction: the Salutation, and the Questions and Praising God. Each Exchange has two Turns; the Initiator will speak first, and then the Respondent will reply. The Initiator maintains control of the conversation and is more physically active than the Respondent. That is, the initiator will approach the conversation first, and thus be the first to speak. The Initiator is the individual of lower rank because the Initiator must perform for the Respondent, who is of higher status.

As a result of the status differentiation between the Initiator and Respondent, a greeting requires that the two individuals define their unequal relative rank. However, it is possible that the two greeting parties do not agree about their relative positions to each other.

Wolof customs expect high ranking individuals to provide aid for the lower ranking people. These customs create a financial incentive to be the lower role in the greeting. Seizing the Initiator role can prove challenging if the other individual also hopes to be the Initiator because this might require disrupting the conversation, which is perceived as being rude. Likewise, if two individuals engaged in the greeting wish to be the Respondent, this will lead to an awkward encounter if both individuals avoid initiating the conversation. The greeting must occur, and at its extreme Self-Elevation of both parties can lead to confrontation.

There are some kin groups that are in a 'joking relationship' where the individuals from the two groups will greet each other by exchanging insults. A joking relationship implies equality between the two individuals greeting each other. However, since a joking relationship only occurs between certain pairs of kin groups, equality is usually obtained by speakers taking turns being the lower status role in the conversation. In both of these instances, equality is attained by a series of exchanges which counteracts the inequality implicit in the Wolof greeting.

Pitch, loudness, tempo, and quantity of speech constitute differences in speaking behaviors between those of high and low class. The low status "griot" is expected to speak loudly in a high pitch, with rapid verbose speech, and the high status noble is the antithesis of this speaking pattern. In a greeting, the lower ranking party might conform to the "griot" style of speaking even if he is noble. Partial Switching may also occur, wherein a speaker may be verbose but quiet to illustrate differences between his greeting role and societal status.

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21A.506 The Anthropology of Politics: Persuasion and Power
Spring 2019

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