

Strategies of Status Manipulation in the Wolof Greeting Summary

The Wolof are very focused as a society on different social inequality levels. This is quite evident in their linguistic interactions with one another. Anytime a person engages in what the authors call a focused interaction (which is most of the time), a proper greeting must take place. It does not matter the location of the two people or how many others are surrounding them. If a new person joins a group of people talking they must greet each member of the group individually. If there are many people to greet at once, the higher ranked people are greeted first.

All greetings have two roles: the initiator and respondent. The initiator is the lower-class person and the respondent is the more noble, higher ranked person. Each greeting follows a similar structure that involves asking about family and giving the same answer even if it is not true. For example, people often ask about someone's health and even if they are ill, they say they are well. The initiator does more of the talking and physical activity in the conversation as well. There are other linguistic differences between the initiator and the respondent. The initiator responds in a high voice and will speak more quickly while the respondent tends to not speak as much and speak quietly.

The relative ranking of someone, whether they are higher or lower than someone else and should initiate a conversation is up to individuals (mostly). This makes it easy for many greetings to either be delayed because neither party wants to admit to being the lower status person or to the two people not answering each other's questions. A reason why someone would want to take the role of the lower status individual, is that it is expected that the higher-class individual gives the lower class one a gift at the end of the conversation. The author noticed people trying to assume the lower-class role much more than trying to assume the higher-class role. There are several strategies people use to "self-lower" which include initiating the conversation, and answering questions with questions. It is harder to "self-elevate" because someone else has to start the conversation and by doing so they are assuming a lower role.

There are some special circumstances when it comes to greetings as well. Some people have joking relationships, which can occur between people who know each other well and who make jokes in their greetings. The joking relationship serves as a way of showing equality between speakers. If people want to semi-protest their role, they will sometimes mix parts from the two different roles. For example, the author's assistant wanted to show that he has gained some achievement but is still in a lower caste so he takes the initiator role but use the intonation of a respondent.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

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

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.