

Interpreting the Administration: Burkina Faso's Courts in Translation

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«Je sais que je suis en train de sauver quelqu'un,
je suis en train de sauver des innocents.
Quand tu interprètes là,
tu es en train de sauver un innocent qui ne comprend
pas quelque chose»

Court interpreter,
Bobo-Dioulasso, March 2015



Instruction on all levels of education continues in French only, contributing to the formation of an educational elite and the marginalization of African varieties of French and African languages.

Background

Plurilingualism in Burkina Faso continues to be regulated through post-colonial state institutions. French is codified as the only official language admitted for use in education, in politics, and in court. It is a requirement, which had been imported with the French justice system during colonization – it was one of the main mechanisms to discipline and control the local population. After independence in 1960, the new Burkinabè administration appropriated the French justice system and its bureaucratic apparatus for local use. Today, participating in the courtroom space is still highly prescribed and choreographed; one requirement is the mandatory use of French, a language only an educational elite can speak. This language ideology re-enforces differences between judges and defendants in the courtroom. An interpreter is employed to translate from French into Jula, the language of the public space in Bobo-Dioulasso, where this research is being carried out.

«ń nún, ń jigi,
kunlakolontágama ká
fisa o bée yé.»

Help me, my head, to put down my load, it is better to carry nothing on one's head.
It is better not to carry anything on your head than to load or unload for you.
«You do not have to look for problems where there are none.» Jula proverb

Objectives

The courtroom is seen as a chamber play, the main actors are the judges, the interpreter, and defendants. Looking at the historicity and mechanics of bureaucratization will produce knowledge on how language norms have become institutionalized and how they are perpetuated today. What role the interpreter is accorded or carves out for himself in the courtroom can show how his work undermines or legitimizes existing linguistic and societal inequalities between courtroom actors. How judges as experienced courtroom participants interact with the inexperienced, disciplined defendants in the choreography of the courtroom play can bring to the fore how power relations and hierarchizations are maintained.

Research Questions

Why are language norms and linguistic formalizations of court interaction maintained in this context?
What bureaucratic rules or templates do judges employ to manage and stage a trial?

Methods

- Observation
- Informal talks, interviews, focus group discussions
- Transcription and back-translation of audio recorded trials by Jula expert
- Archival research

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Duration

2015–2019

Funding

FAG, Freiwillige
Akademische Gesellschaft

Link

<https://zasb.unibas.ch/research/phd-projects/natalie-tarr/>