

“And Ain’t I a Woman?” Senegalese Women Immigrants, Language Use, Acquisition, and Cultural Maintenance in an African Hair-Braiding Shop

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1. Introduction

When one disaggregates data on immigration to the United States, an asymmetrical distributional pattern is revealed (U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, 2004). Specifically, persons born in the continent of Africa are underrepresented amongst the country’s immigrant. Less than 10% of all immigrants are female immigrants from Senegal – a linguistically complex country in which a non-native language, French, is the national language. Thus, immigrants to American society from Senegal whether male or female, must engage in third language acquisition as a part of their socialization and acculturation process. As a result of the scarcity of Senegalese immigrants, few studies have been conducted which seek to identify the processes involved in language use and identity maintenance among African immigrants in general, and female immigrants in particular.

This study was designed to fill this void. Executed within the context of a hair braiding salon in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, this study was designed to answer several questions: To what degree does the business serve as a community of practice that motivates the acquisition of English by the shop owner? Can a hair-braiding shop serve as an instrument for the merging of Senegalese and American culture? and How do the Senegalese women in the study balance and maintain their Senegalese identity and what role does language play in this process? Before addressing these questions, it is necessary to review research on language learning and immigrant women.

2. Language Learning and Immigrant Women

While language learning is a primary task for many immigrants who come to America, the processes involved may differ by race and ethnicity, gender, age, and educational level (Pavlenko 2001; Kouritzin 2000; Cameron 1992). The reason is a simple one. The learning of a new language requires exposure to others speaking the l language, continual repetition, training in vocabulary and the rules of syntax. Through formal and informal mechanisms, the immigrant will, over time, shift from telegraphic speech to the ability to fully use and manipulate the language. However, factors such as gender, race, age, and other variables can limit opportunities for observational learning and imitation. For example, female immigrants may, because of cultural factors, have less contact outside of the home. Traditional SLA theorists may contribute these phenomena to a lack of motivation, affective filtering, or socialization (Krashen 1981; Ochs 1993). Such trends will, of course, hamper language learning. Similarly, both male and female immigrants may form kinship and friendship networks with persons from their same country of origin (Boyd, 1992; Goldstein, 2001). These behaviors inevitably, lengthen the time required for language acquisition.

Even within their own countries, women immigrants are characterized by a gender imbalance that may affect their opportunities to learn and use language. First, throughout the globe, more women than men are illiterate. In modern day Senegal, for example, 72.3% of women are illiterate relative to

52.7% of men (United Nations, 2004). In other countries, the gender differential is even greater. Thus, high rates of illiteracy serve as a barrier to second language acquisition when women immigrate to America. Second, the familial duties of immigrant women may limit their access to English-speaking persons by restricting them to the home environment where their primary language is spoken (Kouritzin 2000; McKay 1993; Goldstein, 1995). For example, data from the Population Reference Base indicate that women from Western Africa, where Senegal is located, have a fertility rate of 5.9 children each, relative to 1.8 for the United States and 2.9 for the world as a whole. Third, even when immigrant women work outside of the home, they are more likely to be employed in low literacy jobs (Ng, 1981). Bonny Norton Pierce (2000) utilizing research from a study of Canadian women, confirmed that immigrant women are more likely to be employed in jobs which do not provide an opportunity for second language acquisition and/or skills enforcement. However, her research also found that another variable was operative. Specifically, Pierce found that immigrant women might not be highly motivated to learn and speak a second language. Additionally, she asserts that immigrant woman must be invested in language learning. Pavlenko (2001) expanded this view by introducing the conception that different clusters of immigrants, whether male or female, receive a differentiated stream of benefits that they seek to maximize. The degree to which a second language is learned will then depend upon the relative size of the benefits which will accrue to the individual from learning the language. This study examines the impact of gender as it correlates with bilingualism and second language acquisition. Additionally, it raises critical issues in regard to the positioning of immigrant women within the context of American society.

Kouritzin (2000), utilizing qualitative research from case studies of 19 non-English speaking female immigrants, found that not only do external factors such as too few English-language classes, children, and overly-difficult language classes hinder language learning among female immigrants but resistance to learn English on the part of the female is also operative. While familial duties can be best completed in the primary language, interfacing with America's social systems requires English. When the pressure to learn English is combined with the overall difficulties of an immigrant woman's gender-based roles, traditional culture-based role-playing may diminish the importance of English in the lives of these women. Bonny Norton Pierce (1995) also confirms this trend in her research on Canadian women.

In a qualitative study of gender and language, Morrow (1997) found that the experiences of immigrant women are often wrought with frustration and hardship. Utilizing language to preserve their ethnic identities becomes one mechanism that supports them in the coping process.

Sutton and Chaney (1987) provide a more comprehensive overview of the relationship between migration, language, economic achievement and the maintenance of cultural identity by reviewing the experiences of various cultural groups from the Caribbean. In the various readings, the authors demonstrate the role of traditional institutions such as religion, family networks, work and employment, and other forces in language acquisition and in adjusting to a new culture. These articles suggest that even when language acquisition has occurred, close contact with traditional cultural systems may be necessary in order to maintain balance. Given this profile, based upon the literature reviewed several trends regarding Senegalese women and language acquisition were addressed by using qualitative research methodologies. The section below describes the approaches that were used to complete this study.

3. Research Design and Methodology: *Data Collection*

This qualitative study was conducted over a ten-week period. The primary source of data collection was six hours of weekly observation at the Fatou African Hair-braiding Shop. In addition to data collection using extensive field notes, the main participant of the study was shadowed outside of the hair shop setting. Thus, interactions that occurred on the street, at the market, or at home were analyzed to gain greater insight into the individual's use of English and her concept of culture and identity. Second, the subjects for the study were interviewed in order to gain detailed information regarding the circumstances of their migration to the United States and the cultural stressors that may have impacted their learning of English and cultural identity. Two formal interviews and many

informal interviews allowed the personal voice of the participants to be fully examined. The non-English-speaking women were interviewed using a translator. The interviews were later transcribed. Finally, observation was used to identify changes in English fluency among the women and to identify efforts to maintain Senegalese culture.

The interviews and observation were reviewed and coded in order to analyze the reoccurring trends that arose in the study. Moreover, a number of approaches were used in order to further triangulate the outlined research questions. As mentioned, targeted secondary data was collected and content-analyzed in order to uncover background information about Senegalese migrants in general.

Participants/Context

The central participant in this study is Marie. Marie is a twenty-two year old Senegalese immigrant. Marie has been in the United States for three years. She has lived in various cities throughout the United States including New York, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Baltimore, Maryland. Out of three siblings, she is the only one who accompanied her mother to this country. Her older sister remained in Senegal to take care of her home and the rest of the family. Last year, Marie married a man from Senegal. She does not have any children. Prior to coming to the United States, Marie studied English in high school. Marie studied in college for one year.

Another participant in this study is Marie's mother whom I refer to as Selah. Selah is forty-seven years old. She came to this country five years ago to be with her husband who left Senegal a year prior. Marie's mother speaks very little English. She also travels frequently to Baltimore and New York City. Selah owns the hair-braiding shop but mostly allows her daughter to run it.

Marie's Aunt Fatima is an additional participant in the study. Fatima is an extremely tall woman in stature. She has been in this country for three months. Fatima began braiding hair professionally upon her arrival to the United States. Fatima speaks Wolof and French.

The Fatou hair-braiding shop is located in the heart of a low income urban African American community. All of the customers represented in the following data are African American women from the community.

4. Data Analysis

Fatou Hair braiding Shop: A Community of Practice

In his study of assimilation differences among Africans in America, NII-Amoo- Dodoo (1997) discovered that in contrast to 13.1% and 14.6% of African American and Caribbean immigrants, 58% of Africans migrating to the United States hold college degrees. Although endowed with high levels of schooling, many African immigrants have little or no English fluency (Dodoo, 1997). This factor drastically impacts their employment rates. Therefore, many Africans are forced to create their own employment niches as taxi drivers, restaurant owners, hair braiders, etc. Hair-braiding for Marie provides an economic and linguistic advantage. As the shop manager, she may choose to assert her English identity through the daily interactions needed to successfully run the business. This setting itself comprises a unique component that differs from past studies such as Kainola's (1982) study of immigrant women in Canada. Likewise, the setting differs from Norton's (2000) study on immigrant women in Canada which focuses on women as workers and not as owners and managers. The setting that this study provides is a framework for the women to engage in entrepreneurial negotiations. Tannen (1994) examined women in power positions and the "glass ceiling" that these women faced as a result of pronounced femininity. Still she did not explore women who have created their own positions of power. Thus, instead of focusing on power relations that occur between the English dominant boss and a subordinate immigrant worker, interactions must be analyzed from a different perspective. Marie, as the most dominant English speaker, has a different customer interaction than her mother and Fatima. To explore this it is necessary to look at Marie's daily interaction with customers. The following are two different excerpts from field notes:

Customer ((middle aged African American woman)): How much for box braids
 Marie :((stands up and walks to the wall .There are a line of extensions on the wall.
 Marie pokes through them with her finger)) We have this Customer: [That size is good
 Marie: 150
 Customer: Are you open on Fridays
 Marie: Yes ((walking back to her stool))
 Customer: Can I come in at 10:00
 (Field note 8/29/02)
 Customer: How much for cornrows straight back
 Marie: with extensions
 Customer: Yeah
 Marie: 85.
 Customer: ((The girl with the long hair turns to walk out)).
 Marie: Take a Card” (Field note 9/10/02)

These data demonstrate that Marie’s interaction with her customers is limited solely to style and price negotiation. In the first excerpt the conversation is initiated by the customer. The customer leads the conversation by beginning with an interrogative and pursuing the inquiry until the next turn. Even in the telephone call there was no introduction such as “Hello, how are you”. Thus, Marie’s access to mutual engagement was very limited (Wenger, 1998). Yet, even though Marie is not mutually engaged through shared history or relationships that span beyond the business arena, she is experiencing a trade- off of engagement that allows her to negotiate power and define herself as the shop’s owner and lead stylist. This section reveals that, although Marie has a limited opportunity to practice English, she is also positioning herself as an entrepreneur by making suggestions and giving customers advice.

The phone rings. Marie reaches to her side to pick up the phone. “Yes, what’s wrong? It’s coming out? No don’t take it out. You come here; I’ll fix it for you. No, o.k. Then Thursday.”

In this capacity, Marie may participate in joint enterprise which is the exchange of money for services, she benefits from her customers and they benefit from her. On the other hand, Marie’s opportunities to use English contrasts with Fatima and Selah. The following are excerpts of Marie’s aunt Fatima interacting with customers:

((Fatima is sitting in the door closest to the entrance an older woman with a long black wig walks in with her child. She looks at Fatima))
 Customer: I wanted to get my daughter’s her braided with no extensions
 Fatima: you pay 60
 Customer: But she’s not getting extensions it’s her own hair
 Fatima: you wait for my niece
 (The woman sits down Marie returns to the room)

(Marie is working on a customer’s hair. A new customer, a young black male walks)
 Customer: How much for cornrows?
 Marie: 50
 Customer: When can I get it done?
 Marie: Now (speaks something in Wolof to Fatima. Fatima waves the male over to take a seat)

In both interactions Fatima referred the client to Marie for negotiation. Although Selah is technically the shop owner, her limited ability to speak English shifts the responsibility over to Marie. Marie is invested as an English speaker. Without her English she and her mother would not have a successful business. The question that arises is how can Marie extend her English language practice in

the hair salon? As the only English speaker in the shop Marie is forced to interact with her customers and negotiate prices for the other stylists. This analysis suggests that Marie serves as a cultural ambassador or broker.

Marie as the Cultural Broker

As the primary price negotiator and the most fluent English speaker in the shop Marie serves as the shop's "cultural broker" (Bourdieu, 1977). She is faced with remaining current regarding the latest American hair-braiding styles (which often differ greatly from traditional African designs). She must make the business connections for the shop by ordering products, negotiating shipping, maintaining the business and making sure that the customers are satisfied. Customer relations play an integral role in Marie's daily life and particularly, customer relations motivate Marie's interest in English. Undoubtedly, Marie's role as broker is also integral to the construction of her social identity (Ochs, 1993).

"On the day of my last observation Marie had four customers. I paid \$160, other customers paid \$40, \$35, and \$60 respectively (Field note 10/22/02)." In sum, on that day Marie made \$295. With a minimum wage job that pays \$5 an hour, six hours of work would have allowed Marie to earn only \$30. Even when Marie splits her money three ways, she makes more working at her own shop while using a trade that comes from her country. These findings, therefore, question many of the previous workplace studies which reveal immigrant women in low income jobs that provide little opportunity for controlling economic productivity. Most importantly, this trade is a cultural tradition that has been passed down from mother to daughter for centuries. The current immigrant studies on power (Mcgroaty 1996; Martin-Jones 1989; McKay&Wong 1996) reflect the participants' standpoint as participating from the peripheral. Marie, her own boss, is able to position herself from a powerful vantage point. For example, Marie never writes down her appointments. When questioned about this practice, Marie simply answered, "I always remember." Although this practice may seem trivial, it demonstrates Marie's sense of control as her own boss.

In the process of acquiring data for this study, Marie and the researcher developed a friendship. Marie expressed the sentiment that she did not have any American friends and therefore had little opportunity to speak English outside of work. "In the community, people renegotiate their mutual friendships and forms of participation. They reach their goals, they fall short. Friendships start, friendships are broken" (Wenger, 1998, pg.94). Is it possible for Marie to create an equilibrium that encompasses a stable community of practice? Is it possible for her to participate in more involved interactions that produce extended friendships with English dominant speakers? Having expounded on the plethora of issues that affect Marie's English use, it is necessary to delve further into the English acquisition that is occurring on behalf of Selah and Fatima, Marie's mother and aunt.

Generation Discontinuities in English Acquisition

As previously mentioned, Senegalese women immigrants arrive in this country already fluent in two or more languages. With Wolof as their first language and French as the official language of Senegal, Senegalese women have personal knowledge of the dynamics and varied context of language, speech, and identities. Many of the hair braiders that arrive in this country have already had exposure to the English language. This section will explore the varied use of language between Marie, Selah, and Fatima. For Marie, English was used out of necessity, but for Fatima, English was used out of choice. For example, the following excerpt occurred between Marie and Fatima:

The telephone rings "Vonsua, C'va", Marie answers. "Hold on", Marie holds the out to Fatima. "Fatima, telephone", Marie calls. Fatima stands up smiling "Hello, Hello...What?" Fatima gets on the phone and sits down. She then switches back to Wolof.

This was the first time Fatima had been observed using English. This field note is dated October 1, 2001. When this speech act occurred, the researcher had been in the field for a month. This was a

similar situation with Marie's mother Selah. Throughout the duration of the study, Selah spoke English randomly as follows:

“Did your mother used to work on 125th Street in Harlem?” I ask Marie. Before Marie can answer, her mother shakes her head “yes, yes”. “Does your mother still live in Philadelphia?” I asked looking at both Marie and Selah. “Yes,” Marie's mother again begins answering.

Although on both occasions Selah and Fatima answered with a simple “yes” or “no”, this indicates that there is some level of English comprehension on behalf of both of the women. In Fatima's case, she may have understood the meaning according to context. However, Selah demonstrated through body movement and responses that she understood what was occurring.

Linguistic Resistance

Why don't these women choose to speak English? Morrow (1997), Kouritzin, (2000), Wong, (1991) would conclude that these women have not been provided with opportunity for equal access. Moreover, they found that older immigrant groups demonstrate resistance to learning English, because if they give up their language, they perceive themselves, in many ways, as giving up their culture. These feelings are manifested as attitudes of ambivalence. Fatima and Selah's attitudes of ambivalence impact their English acquisition. Thus, Marie is relied upon as a translator. This trend is revealed in the interactions below:

A woman walks into the room, holding a paper bag. “Do you want any products today?” she asks looking at Marie. Marie translates this to her mother. Marie's mother looks from where she is sitting on the couch to the bag; she hesitates and says something in Wolof. Marie looks at the woman. “Come back tomorrow, today it's slow”. The woman answers “Well I won't be able to come back until next month.” Marie translates this to her mother. Her mother moves her eyes around as if contemplating. “Come back”, she says in a thick accent.

Once again, this excerpt reveals that Marie's mother has the ability to understand English. However, she uses Marie as a translator. The Balch Institute on Ethnic Studies, Exhibit of African Immigrants explains this occurrence by arguing that younger generations have the ability to adapt more quickly to a new society. The younger generations are often called upon to help parents understand American culture and language. Considering this explanation, one must reflect on language motivation. Spolsky (2000) would relate Selah and Fatima's linguistic resistance to the fear of *anomie*, or succumbing to an American identity. Do Fatima and Selah feel threatened or simply uninterested? Kerswill (1996) verifies that older adult groups face more difficulties when acquiring a new language. Tabouret-Keller (1986) also addresses parental dependence on children for linguistic survival. I also view this as correlating with religious devotion on behalf of the older women. All three women are in fact Muslim, however Marie was not witnessed actively partaking in the act of prayer or Salat. The following data reveal displays of religion for Fatima and Selah.

Fatima takes the mat in her hands. She fixes the scarf wrapped around her neck so that it completely covers her hair. She says something in Wolof to Marie. “Should I leave”, I ask noticing that she's about to pray. “No she was just asking which way was east”, Marie responds.

Marie's mother comes out of the bathroom with a straw mat and Fatima's scarf wrapped around her shoulders. She covers her hair, I see her stand up, kneel, and put her head to the floor. She stops and sits quietly for a moment.

In contrast this is an excerpt taken from an interview with Marie regarding religion.

S: Marie I noticed sometimes when I'm here your mom and your aunt are praying. Do you do that to?

M: Yes in the morning, but not five times a day. What about you, what's your religion?

S: Well I was raised a Christian but I'm non-denominational.

M: Where I'm from we believe in Allah and the prophet Mohammed.

S: How come you don't cover your hair?

M: Not everybody does that in my country.

S: But your mother she prays five times everyday.

M: But she's very religious. The older women do that more.

This interview reveals many things. Primarily, Marie, as related to her religion, is devoted. However, she may not be as traditional as her mother. In some cases, her relaxed attitude toward the religion is symbolic of her positioning as an American woman and a Senegalese immigrant. Marie's English register also allows her to interact with fellow American Muslims which broadens her access to the language. For her mother and her aunt, English has no impact on their religious devotion because Arabic is the language of Islam. Fatima and Selah do not have the same motivation to learn because it is not a necessity for their survival. Although both women live in the United States, they have Marie and her younger more fluent family members to speak for them. Yet, they are most commonly surrounded by members of their own linguistic group. Thus, Marie is the nucleus of the Fatou hair braiding shop. Simultaneously, she has the task of mediating her identity as a Senegalese woman in America.

Identity Construction and Varied linguistic Registers

Marie's language use varies greatly from her mother. Marie, as the translator, the key communicator, and the delegate between the cultures, uses Wolof and English as a mediator for business and for pleasure. Most often Marie interacts with her friends and family in Wolof. I believe this served as a bonding vehicle and as a direct kinship tie to their far away home. This data is a comment that Marie's girlfriend made when speaking about Wolof:

"You were speaking Wolof weren't you?" I asked. "Oh, yes, it sounds like we're screaming at each other right, blah, blah, blah", she says. "Why does it sound so loud", I ask. "I don't know I guess because we're like sisters. "So you get excited", I respond. "Yeah, I don't know it's just like that," she answers. "My family and I are the same", I respond.

Speaking Wolof is the integral link to her family here and her family overseas. Any time the phone rings in her shop, Marie usually answers in Wolof. Most often it is a family member:

The phone rings. "C'va", Marie answers. Her eyes widen and she raises her voice. Her voice is now growing louder and the intonations in her speaking are flowing up and down. She begins to move her fingers and shoulders as if receiving exciting news. She hangs up the phone. "That was my sister."

The loneliness that distance creates cannot be defined by any one action. Yet, it can be expressed through a language that one relates to childhood and to home. Marie's language, Wolof, connects her to her past in Senegal and to her present life. One evening while eating dinner, Marie was referring to a story that she learned in her childhood. Yet, she could not find the words to properly translate the story.

Marie looks at her husband and speaks in Wolof, "You know after the lion takes that boy to the village, there is a lesson to the story, but I don't know how to explain it in English".

Marie's husband looks up, "the boy had to learn to live with himself before he could learn to love someone, something like that".

Marie had trouble fully translating concepts outside of the business arena. Therefore, she is unable to translate many of her childhood experiences. Thus, Wolof becomes the link that is a focal tool for her Senegalese life. Hoffman (2001) explains the void that English acquisition can create, as a gap not fully closed. "But I begin to trust English to speak my childhood self as well, to say what has so long been hidden, to touch the tenderest spots" (pg. 274). Possibly, Marie's journey of self-transformation will eventually lead her to negotiate meaning as a multilingual/multicultural person. Negotiation of her identity will hopefully, be a painless process that allows Marie to determine her own identity. Marie's attainment of multiple registers represented multiple identity alternatives for her within the context of the shop as well as outside of the shop (Pavlenko, 2001).

5. Discussion

In contrast to Norton's (2000) study of immigrant women in Canada and the work of other researchers, including Norkunas (1980), Lowe (1998), this study explores language acquisition in an immigrant entrepreneur business. A primary criticism of Norton's study is that she views the immigrant women from a subordinate worker/boss perspective. Her studies focus on the trials that the women undergo to "acculturate into this society" and "fight for their right to speak". The discourse of the immigrant woman and language acquisition must focus more on the powerful contribution that these women lend to society, their prior knowledge, expertise and experiences. Studies of bilingualism and second language acquisition must move from a deficit model of analysis to a growth model.

This study tells the story of the complex transformation that Senegalese immigrant women undergo not only while working in hair-braiding shops, but in negotiating American culture in general. Thus, the success of the hair-braiding shop as a community of practice is contingent upon Marie's investment in English. The shop places her in a position of power. Although researchers such as (Davies & Harre 1998; Tabouret-Keller, 1997) identify and explore the dynamics of identity from a transformative position, they do not view them from the perspective that power positions can and are already established by certain immigrant groups. Furthermore, cultural maintenance occurs on a daily basis through language, trade and customers relations. This study demonstrates that the women have a very strong sense of their Senegalese identities. Yet, depending on generational patterns, they may negotiate a more pronounced American identity. This correlates to the findings of Spolsky (2000), Kouritzin (2000), McKay & Wong (1991). These analysts introduce theories of ambivalence, motivation and access on behalf of older generation immigrants. These theories are applied to explain their resistance to English acquisition.

6. Implications

This study also has implications for the field of second language acquisition. It reaffirms the notion that older immigrant groups are often resistant not only to language learning, but to the host cultures in general once they have migrated. This research also examines how language use in the context of the working environment is fluid, due to engagement, alignment and negotiation. Furthermore, as Marie's linguistic registers evolve, her identity will continue to transform.

The hair shop as an enclave for family meetings and extended family is crucial to the Senegalese woman. It provides a safe haven for generating income and networking with other women. Life in the shop is a challenge due to low customer interaction. Nonetheless, the women realize that by working together, they can be more successful. The vivid story that remains constant in this research is that language in practice is dependent upon a plethora of social, cultural, and even generational factors. Marie is striving to engage in linguistic and cultural negotiations in her shop. Through these efforts, she can redefine her position in this society. For Fatima and Selah, their devotion to their Senegalese past, present, and future are consistent patterns that maintain their Senegalese identity but place boundaries on their American transformation process.

7. Conclusion

The phrase “And ain’t I a Woman?” was introduced by a great African American orator and freedom fighter, Sojourner Truth. In asking the question “And ain’t I a woman?”, Sojourner was validating the past experiences of the generations of African American women who had been discounted for their struggles and contributions to American society. She is also questioning her identity as it relates to the broader social context. I use this quote as an analogy to draw attention to the long ignored experience of a growing American cultural group. The unique trade and cultural practices that occur within African hair-braiding shops may serve as a maintenance model for future immigrant groups. Marie’s linguistic and diverse cultural identity allowed her to successfully navigate into two worlds. As educators, we must seek ways to further assist immigrants to acquire English for the workplace and beyond. Additional questions that may be initiated from this exploration are 1) What are ways that we can motivate older generations of immigrant groups to expand their English repertoire? 2) How can we create entrepreneurial opportunities for the other immigrant groups who are rapidly populating this country? 3) Can customer relations between immigrants and non-immigrant groups be improved? 4) Are English language studies within the social context of work useful for future teachers? Additional research in this area will be used to explore these questions.

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