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Mauritania: French in Mauritania

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Abstract: The use and status of the French language in Mauritania evolved considerably during the twentieth century. The peak was in the 1960s and 1970s, when Mauritania became independent and French was granted official language status. In 1991, thirty years after independence, French lost this status, with Arabic becoming the only official language in this multilingual Muslim country, where only part of the population has a variety of Arabic as their mother tongue. French nonetheless continues to play an important role in public life and, for some, in private life as well. Its presence can be seen in particular in education, in the media and in borrowings by Mauritanian languages. Conversely, one notes the influence of local languages and realities on the French spoken in Mauritania.

Keywords: French, Mauritania, sociolinguistics, language policy, arabization

1. Sociolinguistic Situation

1.1 French

Despite growing competition from English in recent years, French remains the most widely taught Indo-European language in Mauritania, and the foreign language with the most speakers. Its official status, which has varied over time, is currently only that of a foreign language in Mauritania. In practice, however, it is still quite often used as the language of communication between different communities, whether indigenous, immigrant or foreign.

There is also a very small native French speaking community. The speakers are mainly found in the country's two largest cities, Nouakchott, the capital, and Nouadhibou, the major economic centre in the north-west, with some additional growth in the south, especially in the South-East. In the Soninke community, where emigration was very significant after the 1960s, the return journey brought back to Mauritania a number of young people who had grown up in the French suburbs.

It is difficult to give a precise figure of the number of French speakers, and even more difficult to determine what criteria are used to count the speakers of a language. According to figures from the International Organization of La Francophonie (*Organisation internationale de la Francophonie* – OIF), Mauritania had 429,000 French speakers in 2010 and 604,000 in 2018. In March 2019, the Mauritanian website *Ndarinfo* used the percentage published by the OIF report in the headline: ‘Only 13% of Mauritians speak French’.¹ Although not verifiable, this percentage takes on meaning when compared to other figures taken from the same report by the Observatoire de la langue française. The percentage is indeed much lower than for the three Maghreb countries: 35% in Morocco, 32% in Algeria and 52% in Tunisia (OIF 2019, 32).

Apart from factors linked to emigration, the use and mastery (written and/or only oral) of French vary greatly within the native population. They depend to a great extent on the type and duration of schooling (which will be studied in more detail in section 3.3). Some of these factors are not specific to Mauritania. Indeed, the use of French depends on several factors such as gender, social class, lifestyle, as well as housing, activity and age. With regard to gender, girls are generally less educated than boys (at primary, secondary and university levels). With regard to social class, it should be noted that the upper strata of society are more

¹ “Seuls 13% des Mauritaniens parlent français” (Ndarinfo).

and better educated than the lower strata, both among the traditional upper classes (especially the literate ones) and among the new upper classes, the majority of which have emerged from the previous ones, but also from a few self-made men. Regarding the way of life and the habitat, it is clear that the nomadic population (a very large proportion until the 1970s) has always had less contact with the French language than the sedentary population, but their numbers are now much reduced. On the other hand, there is still a contrast between the small conurbations (villages and smaller towns) and the large conurbations, which are more economically dynamic and more open to foreigners. Concerning activities, it can be observed that certain professions and commercial activities entailing contact with the public or a varied clientele favour exchanges in French, even if they are reduced to the indispensable minimum, while others, such as legal activities carried out within the legislative framework of Islam, favour exchanges in Arabic. As for age, here again the use of French remains generally linked to schooling, but it does not directly follow the quantitative progress of schooling, only that of schooling in French, which reached its peak in the years following independence; it is therefore among men aged 65 and over that one finds the highest proportion of fluent French speakers.

All these factors are important, but there is another factor that appears to be more specific to Mauritania, even if it also appears elsewhere *mutatis mutandis*: that of the ethnic (or ethno-cultural) origins. Generally speaking, the use of French and its appeal are much lower among Mauritians whose mother tongue is Arabic (the Moors or Bidan < language *bīḍān* ‘...’), than among those whose mother tongue is Pulaar, Soninke, Wolof or Bambara (generally referred to in Mauritania as *Negro-Africains* or *Negro-Mauritaniens* in French – from *Kwâr* among Arabic speakers).

The vision of Mauritania as a “bridge between white and black Africa” was the (optimistic) vision of the first Mauritanian President Moktar Ould Daddah. It corresponds at least to the reality of a country that combines sociolinguistic features specific to the Maghreb countries with other features characteristic of the countries of the South Sahel.

1.2 Afroasiatic Languages²

As Berber is almost no longer spoken in Mauritania, the Afro-Asiatic languages are essentially limited to Arabic.

Arabic Language(s) – As in all Arabic-speaking countries, there are several varieties of Arabic. However, as far as non-standard Arabic is concerned, Hassaniya (< Ar. Ḥassāniyya ‘meaning, (lit.) meaning’) is the only dialectal variety attested within the Mauritanian borders.

Hassaniyya is the mother tongue of Moors. Formed, at least in part, on the basis of the language spoken by the Bānū Ḥassān, its history is originally linked to that of the Maʿqil Arabs. While the nomadic tribes of the Bānu Hilāl and Bānu Sulaym settled mainly in Algeria and Tunisia, the Maʿqil Arabs continued their migration to Morocco. At the end of the thirteenth century, some of them began to leave the Moroccan south and penetrate further south. It is to the Bānū Ḥassān fraction that the Arabization of the Western Sahara is attributed. This Arabization, from around Guelmim to the Senegal River, and from the Atlantic Ocean to the Northwest of Mali, was slow and took several centuries to replace the Berber language in use in the region, but it led to a remarkable unification of the language used locally by the Arabic-speaking population (on the history of Hassaniyya, see Taine-Cheikh 2018a).

Mauritians whose mother tongue is Hassaniyya make up 70 to 80% of the country's total population, i.e. around 3 out of 4 million (in 2018, cf. WB 2019). These data are approximate (demographic surveys have not included ethnic or linguistic figures since the partial SEDES

² The vowel length is noted by an overline (ˉ) for Arabic and by two dots (:) for Black African languages and French. In Ḥassāniyya <e> denotes the mid aperture vowels [æ] and [e], and <y> the semi-vowel /j/.

survey of 1958), but they do count all mother-tongue Hassan speakers, regardless of their social status and the colour of their skin. Among Hassaniyya speakers (i.e. Moors as a whole), a distinction is generally made between the so-called white and black Moors. It is not uncommon to reserve the ethnoterm *Moors* for white Moors only and for the others – perhaps as numerous – to be called Sudan (< *Sūdân* ‘meaning, (lit.) meaning’) or Haratin (< Ar. *ḥrātīn* ‘meaning, (lit.) meaning’) of these various designations, which are based, among other things, on questions of skin colour, see Taine-Cheikh 1989/2020a). The classification of the Haratin or former slaves is an important social and political issue on which opinions differ, but from a linguistic point of view there is no doubt that Hassaniyya Arabic is the mother tongue of all Moors.

For a long time, Hassaniyya was only used as a lingua franca in towns and villages where the Moors made up the majority of the population. It was common for a non-Arabic-speaking civil servant to acquire some use of it after a few years spent in Atar, Moudjeria, Akjoujt, or Néma. However, apart from families from mixed marriages, only certain Fulani groups (Karakoro valley in the south-central part of the country and the Senegal delta) had an excellent command of Hassaniyya without belonging to the Moorish community. The situation has changed, especially in the big cities, with the progress of the officialization of Arabic. From the end of the twentieth century, Hassaniyya conquered some of the ground left by the French and made a notable breakthrough, not only in the streets among young people (especially around a ball), but also in shops and offices. According to Dia (2007), Hassaniyya has thus become, at least in the capital Nouakchott, a kind of lingua franca, although this new status does not necessarily go hand in hand with a positive attitude on the part of the new ‘speakers’.

Finally, the attitude of Mauritians towards Hassaniyya is difficult to separate from their attitude towards standard Arabic, as both are generally linked to, or at least influenced by, belonging to the community. The practice and mastery of standard Arabic (Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic) has varied over time, as will be seen in sections 2 and 3, but it is important to note that this does not concern the Moors, whether in the past (when there were people literate in Classical Arabic among the black African elites), or in the present, when the teaching of Arabic concerns everyone. Moreover, even if the fact of being a Hassanophone undoubtedly facilitates the learning of standard Arabic, the benefit is very unequal for the Moors themselves, because Hassaniyya and literary Arabic remain two very different varieties.

Berber Language – Assuming that Berber is still spoken by a few thousand people of varying ages and only in the South-West of the country (see Dubié 1940, Ould Cheikh 2008), fluent speakers are extremely rare and there have been no monolingual speakers for several decades. Although circumstances have pushed thousands of Malian Touaregs to cross the border (particularly in 2012), the only variety of Berber that is specifically Mauritanian is Zenaga (Basset 1909, Nicolas 1953, Taine-Cheikh 2008/2020b). There are a number of toponyms of Berber origin on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean where the Imraguen fishermen are settled (*imrâgən*) but they do not have a specific language and have not been Berber-speaking for several centuries (Taine-Cheikh 2013).

There are certainly many lexical borrowings in Hassaniyya from Zenaga (especially in certain lexical fields such as plants), but it is sometimes difficult to specify the source language and the target language, whether in the lexical field (Taine-Cheikh 2018b) or in the morphosyntactic field where parallel innovations are perhaps more frequent than real borrowings (Taine-Cheikh 2020c, 254f.). All in all, neither the influence of the Berber substratum nor the effects of contact should be overestimated: Zenaga remains a Berber language and Hassaniyya an Arabic language. While the Moors are highly probably of mixed

origins (hence the name Arab-Berber, massively rejected by the interested parties themselves), the languages are not.

1.3 Niger-Congo Languages

Mauritanians with a non-Arabic mother tongue all speak languages that are present outside Mauritania, particularly in the neighbouring countries of Senegal and Mali. The two designations, Negro-Africans and Negro-Mauritanians, are therefore objectively equivalent, but they refer to two different historical (and ideological) periods. In one case, the emphasis is placed on belonging to Black Africa (which is now referred to more as *sub-Saharan Africa*) as opposed to North Africa (Arab or Arab-Berber). In the other case, there is a grouping of all black Mauritanian people, with a more or less explicit desire to integrate the haratin, as opposed to Moors who are considered white – a kind of melanization of politics similar to the melanization of religion described by Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh (2004, 125), i.e. a way of looking at society from a racial perspective. Since all Haratin are native Arabic speakers (although they may be very marginally bilingual in some parts of the South), the term *Black Africans* will be used henceforth.

Black Africans in Mauritania, who make up between 20 and 30% of the population (i.e. about one million people), speak four different languages. These are classified among the vast grouping of the Niger-Congo phylum, but they belong to two distinct families: the Senegambian or (North-West) Atlantic languages (Pulaar, Wolof) on the one hand, and the Mande languages (Soninke, Bambara) on the other.

Pulaar – The Haal-Pulaaren ‘(lit.) those who speak Pulaar’ are by far the largest group of Black Mauritanians: 15 to 20% of the total population (about 700,000 people). Among them, one can traditionally distinguish between the sedentary farmers of Fouta Toro, in the Senegal valley (formerly called *Toucouleurs*), and the nomadic cattle breeders (the Fulani) who are much less numerous. However, they have the same surnames (e.g. Ba, Bal, Diallo, Kane, Sarr, Wane) and speak the same language.

Pulaar and *Fulani* are not the only names for this language. Spanning from the Atlantic Ocean in Nigeria and Cameroon, it is also called *Fulani* or *Fulfulde*. Of all the North-West Atlantic languages, it is the one with the greatest geographical extension, far beyond Senegambia. Although its classification has been the subject of discussion in the past, there is no longer any doubt that it belongs to the Senegambian or North-West Atlantic group.

Pulaar differs in many dialects, distinguished in particular by intonation (prosody), borrowings from neighbouring languages and differences in lexical meaning. The grouping of dialects into two sets, proposed by some authors, is based essentially on the form of the morpheme used for the formation of the infinitive: *-de* for the western group and *-go* for the eastern group (Lacroix 1968, 1068). In Mauritania, Haal-pulaaren are particularly numerous in Gorgol, Brakna and Guidimakha. In the region of Kaedi, in Gorgol, where they make up half the population, Pulaar is used as a lingua franca, particularly among the Soninkés, who are also very numerous (around 25%).

Wolof – In Mauritania the Wolof are a very small minority whose historical cradle is in the Rosso region, at the mouth of the Senegal River. For several decades, before and after the country’s independence, Wolof extended somewhat beyond the borders of the Wolof mother tongue community. In addition to its role as a lingua franca in the Rosso region, it benefited from the important relations between Senegal and Mauritania, not only among Black Africans, but also among the Moors. Many of the Moors (especially in the south-western region) used to go to Senegal for health care, education and trade. The conflict that opposed the two countries in 1989 had, among other consequences, the repatriation of small Moorish traders who had settled permanently in the South and the lasting removal of Senegalese

immigrants, if not of Wolof origin, at least generally Wolof-speaking, often specialized in a few activities such as fishing and car mechanics.

Soninke – Soninke is a Mande language with almost 2,2 million speakers (Eberhard/Simons/Fenig 2020). Most speakers are in Mali (more than one million). The Mauritanian community is only the third largest (with 180,000 people), after that of Senegal (400,000). As in neighbouring countries, there was considerable emigration from this community to France throughout the twentieth century, although mostly temporary migrations of younger sons. Galtier (2010, 1) distinguishes between two main dialects, depending on how /f/ is pronounced: while it is pronounced [f] in the area at the intersection of the three countries Mali-Senegal-Mauritania, it passes to [h] further east, as well as in Kaedi, which is situated to the far west. The traditional territory of the Mauritanian Soninke people corresponds essentially to Guidimakha (Sélibaby region), with a small community in Kaedi (Gataga district), but it was more extensive and probably more northerly in the past. However, although the toponym *Chinguetti* comes from the Soninke compound *sín-gèdé* ‘the horse’s well, (lit.) of horse/well’, and *Birou*, the old name of Oualata, comes from *bii’ru* ‘hangars’ in the Soninke language (Diagana 1990, 13), these two towns in the northwest, founded in the thirteenth–fourteenth and eleventh centuries respectively, are not considered to be founded (and inhabited at the time) by Soninke. Historically, the Soninke are linked to the medieval Wagadou (or Ghana) Empire which lasted from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries and preceded the Mandingue Empire founded by Soundiata Keita. The capital of the Wagadou was Koumbi Saleh, of which only ruins remain, in south-eastern Mauritania. It is undoubtedly from the time of the Wagadou Empire that dates the formation of Azer. This variety of Soninke mixed with Berber, which seems to have been used as a commercial language, notably by the Berbers (Maşna) of Tichitt, Ouadane and Oualata, was described by Monteil (1939), at a time when Azer had already practically disappeared.

Bambara – Bambara, which is also a Mande language, is very little spoken in Mauritania. The Bambara (or their descendants who became Hassanophones) are only found in eastern Mauritania, especially in Kiffa. Their presence is not unrelated to the fact that the borders between Mali and Mauritania were changed in 1944.

2. Linguistic History

2.1 Establishment of French

The establishment of French is a consequence of colonization, which took place later and was more superficial in Mauritania than in the other countries of French West Africa (*Afrique de l’Ouest française* – AOF). Although French penetration officially began in 1902, the constitution of Mauritania as an administrative colony only dates back to 1920. However, even at that date and practically until the proclamation of independence in 1960, Mauritania continued to be administered from Saint-Louis and shared certain administrative services with Senegal.

The French language was initially taught in colonial school but the effects of this education remained very limited until the end of World War II (for details, see de Chassey 1972, 414–499, Ould Zein/Queffelec 1997, 15–36). This was due to the existence of well established traditional Arabic language education in all ethnic communities. Such education comprised different levels, from Koranic school, which concerned the majority of the population, to the mahadra (*mahāḍra*), which mainly concerned the upper (especially maraboutic) strata of Moorish society. While the Koranic school was intended for learning the alphabet and some verses of the Koran, some mahadras were true universities in the desert where students could stay and study for several years (see the biography of Shaikh Sidiyya, born around 1776, who

continued his intellectual training at a mahadra in a confraternity centre until the age of 51, Ould Cheikh 1997, 202). Neither colonization nor independence put an end to traditional teaching in Arabic.

The first school in French on the left bank of the Senegal River opened in Kaedi. In 1899, one year after its opening, it had 48 pupils. A second school opened in Boghé in 1912. Having become regional schools, they had very few pupils (189 pupils in 1927 and 220 pupils at the start of the 1939–1940 school year). Only the best pupils from the preparatory schools were admitted. However, the results of the preparatory schools were generally very poor, due to a lack of financial resources, qualified staff and public support. In 1939–40, there were still only 8 preparatory classes (with a total of 230 pupils, plus 21 in elementary school).

The Moors, because of their way of life and their attachment to traditional education, were particularly hostile to sending their children to colonial schools. The nobles preferred to send the children of craftsmen and haratin instead of their own. To weaken this resistance, a school devoted to the sons of chiefs was opened in Boutilimit. Intended exclusively for the sons of noble Moors, the medersa included several hours of Arabic per week in its programme – a particularity which did not exist in other schools. From five hours of Arabic and 22.5 hours of French in 1917, the programme in 1938 had one hour of Arabic for every two hours of French (i.e. 8 and 16 respectively). The number of pupils in the Boutilimit medersa remained very low, with only 350 pupils attending between 1914 and 1939 (two thirds of which were in the period 1930–1939). Two other medersas opened in Moorish country: Atar in 1930 and Kiffa in 1940. Throughout this period, the teaching of French to adults was not totally non-existent, but was even rarer than the teaching of French to children.

The decision at the end of the war to make education compulsory in French West Africa led to a steady increase in primary school enrolments from 1,500 in 1946 to 5,000 in 1955 and 11,200 in 1960.

It was also at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s that the first higher school was created in Rosso (which was to become a secondary school, the only one in Mauritania at independence) and that a start was made on the schooling of girls. While camp schools appeared to develop schooling among nomads, the colonial administration abolished the specificity of the medersas and reduced the teaching hours for Arabic. It also considered that the Arabic language should be reserved for Arabic speakers only and that extending it to all Muslims – which is to say all Mauritians – would favour the confessional character of the language.

2.2 Milestones of its Further Development

Neither internal autonomy (1958) nor independence (1960) radically changed the linguistic policy of francization, but a start was made on Arabization. The constitutions of 22 March 1959 and 20 March 1961 stipulate that the national language is Arabic and the official language is French. This means that French became the main language used both in education and administration. Arabic hours were increased in primary education (to 10 hours a week in preparatory classes and 8 hours a week in elementary and middle school), but they are not compulsory.

The attraction of school is fostered by the development of the capital: the foundation stone of Nouakchott, where the administration is concentrated, was officially laid in 1958. In 1960, there were only 500 pupils passing the secondary school entrance examination, and in 1968 there were still only 40 baccalaureate holders, but within a few years the numbers spiked, in a particular context (Ould Cheikh 1998, 240f.).

School year	Students	Enrolment rates
1960–1961	11,279	5.3%

1965–1966	20,433	8.5%
1970–1971	31,945	12.18%
1976–1977	64,595	
1981–1982	93,730	26.06%
1986–1987	150,443	
1990–1991	166,036	
1994–1995	248,048	62.6%

Table 1: Trends in enrolment in basic education since 1960 (in Ould Cheikh 1998, 241).

Major changes have not only been due to the economic situation (development of Nouakchott in 1960–1962, Zouérat and Nouadhibou in the north in 1963–1966), the political situation (Sahara war), but above all to the climatic situation, with several waves of drought leading to a mass exodus to the cities during the 1970s. Schooling rates, much higher for boys than for girls, also vary greatly from region to region (14.23% for the pastoral and very landlocked Hodh El Charghi region compared with 57.47% for the mining region of Dakhlet Nouadhibou in 1980–1981).

However, the increase in enrolment rates took place without the financial and human resources to keep up. In order to meet the demand for schooling, which, on the part of Arabic speakers, was accompanied by a desire to take greater account of Arabic, new teachers often came from the traditional teaching background of the mahadras. The demands were both for education and the opportunities it could offer. Indeed, administrative jobs (and the competitions that gave access to them) were becoming increasingly attractive, after the massive sedentarization of nomads impoverished by drought.

From the first years of independence, Mauritanian society was marked by an opposition between the Moors demanding more Arabic and the Black Africans defending the dominant place of French (Taine-Cheikh 1994, 59). This opposition has given rise to several episodes of violence, generally triggered by changes in the school curriculum. For example, a manifesto signed by 19 senior Black African officials supports the protests of ethnic black students against a January 1966 decree making the teaching of Arabic in secondary school compulsory for all. The clashes between Moors and Black Africans left a lasting mark on the school population, but they did not stop the inexorable march of Arabization (always too slow in the eyes of the Arab-speaking majority and always denounced by the Black African minorities). In 1967, an entirely Arabized year, which practically resumed the Koranic school curriculum (literacy and religion), was added before the six-year primary cycle. In 1973, a second year of Arabic was added to the primary school and an Arabic stream was introduced in secondary school, with only four hours of French. This beginning of a predominantly Arabic stream made it possible to take in pupils coming directly from the mahadras, whose level in French was often very low.

In 1973, a reform took place in a climate of more or less unitary struggles against neo-colonialism, calling into question the links with the former colonizer (revision of the cooperation agreements, nationalization of the Mauretania iron mining company (*société des mines de fer de Mauritanie* – MIFERMA), creation of a national currency, the ouguiya, to replace the CFA franc, membership to the Arab League). The new radio programme schedule gives a predominant place to Arabic (55.60%) as compared to only 19.40% for French. The role of the St-Exupéry French Cultural Centre in Nouakchott, inaugurated in 1965, is rivalled by the activity of Arab cultural centres: to the Egyptian one (opened in 1961), very influential among the students of the mahadras, must be added the Libyan one which played a certain role in the training of typists (especially among women) and a few years later, the Iraqi, Syrian and Saudi centres.

The 1978–1979 reform further intensified Arabization, especially in education. In the so-called Arabic stream, imposed on all Arabic speakers, French classes were limited to 5 hours per week from the third year onwards. French remained the language of instruction in the so-called bilingual stream open to Black Africans, but in April 1979, the increasing weight given in examinations to Arabic and civics courses (still in Arabic) triggered a major protest movement.

After the military came to power in 1978, a major reform was put in place which aimed to replace the bilingual stream by streams in national languages where each child would be taught in his or her mother tongue (Arabic, Pulaar, Soninke and Wolof) and from primary school onwards would learn the language of another ethnic group which, for Black Africans, would necessarily be Arabic. In October 1982, 12 experimental classes were opened, but nothing was ready in 1985 to accommodate the pupils leaving these classes. On the whole, the 1980s were marked above all by a net decrease in the number of students in the French-speaking sector (in 1990–91, only 8.4% in primary school, compared with 20.8% in secondary school and less than 30% in Mauritanian higher education) and by the Arabization of certain vocational training courses leading to junior civil service jobs (nurses, secretaries, gendarmes, soldiers).

Language policy had direct and indirect effects on the tumultuous relations between communities. In 1986, Black African intellectuals who were members of the African Liberation Forces of Mauritania (*Forces de libération africaines de Mauritanie* – FLAM), a movement founded in 1983, published a document entitled Manifesto of the oppressed Black Mauritanian (*Manifeste du négro-mauritanien opprimé*), in which Arab-Berber power was denounced as racist. In 1987, the introduction of Arabic into the master's certificate exams was directly responsible for the abortive coup d'état organized by Black African military cadres.

It was not until 1999 that the various reforms were evaluated and an attempt was made to overcome the consequences of the massification of education, the bipartition of the school system and the retreat of French in favor of Arabic.

3. External Language Policy

3.1 Legislation

The status of Arabic and French has changed considerably since independence. While the 1961 constitution proclaims that the religion of the Mauritanian people is the Muslim religion (hence the name *Islamic Republic of Mauritania*), only French is declared as the official language of the new state. Arabic did not become an official language like French until 1968. Finally, Article 6 of the Ordinance of 20 July 1991 makes Arabic the only official language. This development is mirrored in the evolution of relations with neighbouring countries. Initially close to the Sahelian countries whose destiny it shared in French West Africa, independent Mauritania has gradually moved closer to the Maghreb countries (it has been part of the Arab Maghreb Union since its creation in 1989). It joined the Arab League or League of Arab States in 1973 and the International Organization of La Francophonie in 1980.

Arabic is still considered a national language, alongside Pulaar, Soninke and Wolof. It is not specified whether Arabic, the national language, is distinct from Arabic, the official language. One might think that Hassaniyya Arabic is the national language, but Hassaniyya is not cited as such and there is more likely a refusal to distinguish between the two varieties of Arabic (standard or literary and dialectal).

An article of law in the new Nationality Code (2010) specifies that no person can be naturalized as a Mauritanian unless he or she is fluent in one of the four national languages.

3.2 Languages used by Public Authorities

Some sectors of the administration have been Arabized for a long time. This is particularly the case of the justice system, the Arabization of which was facilitated by the creation in 1979 of a Higher Institute for Research and Islamic Studies (*Institut supérieur d'études et de recherches islamiques* – ISERI). Open exclusively to Arabic language graduates, often from the mahadras, it has trained moral teachers and mosque preachers, but also the magistrates necessary for the application of the Sharia, introduced by the military in 1978. Although private law (directly derived from Muslim law) was rapidly Arabized, the same cannot be said of public and international law, where French has remained at least partially in use.

In most administrations, French has been gradually marginalized. Arabization has been facilitated by the high proportion of Hassanophones among employees in the civil service, territorial administration and members of the Armed Forces (more than 90% according to Leclerc 2018, 13) although this does not mean that all these Hassanophones have good knowledge of standard spoken and written Arabic. Arabization took place much more easily in culture than in the financial and accounting sectors, but progress in computer technology in Arabic (from the 1990s onwards) is reducing this gap.

Long after the officialization of Arabic, French continued to play an important role. Even though French is no longer an official language, the Official Gazette (*Journal officiel*) continues to appear in both French and Arabic. All documents have a heading in both French and Arabic. Passports, identity cards, civil status papers and other administrative documents can be obtained in either language. Collective agreements must be written in both Arabic and French. With regard to public signage, only almost ten years after it became the sole official language did Arabic begin to be widely used alongside French on banners and city walls (Taine-Cheikh 2007, 46).

To describe the characteristic situation of the 1980s and 1990s, one could speak of a paradoxical francophony (“francophonie paradoxale”, Ould Zein 1995, 76), since French continued to play an important role, not only in private companies and businesses, but also in administrative and political life. Bilingualism nonetheless continued to decline, particularly in the political arena, where French is used less and less. However, the eviction of the language of the former coloniser continues to pose problems, especially for those (many of them Black Africans) who do not have a good command of Arabic as a working language. The discontent triggered by the decision taken by the Mauritanian Parliament in January 2020 to no longer translate debates into French, even though French was not banned as such, is representative of the recurrent problems caused by the desire to replace the use of French with that of one of the four national languages.

3.3 Languages used in Education

Since the discontinuation of schooling in the three national languages Pulaar, Soninke and Wolof, the languages of instruction are exclusively Arabic and French. Hassaniyya is not officially recognized, although Black Africans often complain about its use by Arabic teachers who are supposed to use standard Arabic.

The effort made in the 1990s (particularly at the instigation of the World Bank) to expand the public primary system (both in the most neglected regions and for under-educated girls) produced quantitative results, but to the detriment of quality and the other levels of education, both secondary and higher education, which nevertheless expanded quantitatively during those years. However, with the assistance of French Cooperation, special attention was paid to the teaching of a second language in secondary education, since the results obtained in French in the Arabic stream and in Arabic in the so-called bilingual stream were considered

particularly low. The events of 1989 had indeed revealed the depth of the gap between the Arabic-speaking and non-Arabic-speaking communities.

The opening, now authorized, of public schools tends to compensate for the increasingly reduced number of bilingual classes, but this is not enough to maintain a significant level of French speakers. In July 2002, a survey of the language level of students admitted to the University of Nouakchott revealed that 81.2 per cent of them had a beginner's level and were unable to follow courses in French. In order to meet the demand among civil servants and students, especially in the Moorish community, which the recent reforms have kept far away from the French-speaking world, French language courses are organized at the French Cultural Centre and, soon, at the French Alliance (*Alliance Française*) in Nouakchott. The latter, founded in 1994 by a Franco-Mauritanian Association, had only 100 students in 1997, but soon experienced significant development within the framework of the French Alliances. Today there are four branches in addition to Nouakchott: in Atar, Kaedi, Kiffa and Nouadhibou. It is there that French language diplomas are prepared, particularly professional diplomas relating to the use of Business French, which are much sought after in Mauritania in the context of vocational integration and training (OIF 2019, 161). For example, and according to its director Youssouf Athié (personal communication, 2/11/2020), the French Alliance in Nouadhibou, created in 1993, has on average 1,200 enrolments in various courses, from Literacy to B2 level (the equivalent of 300 hours of courses). Learners are mostly Arabic-speaking Mauritians (but with 1/10th foreigners, mainly Spanish and Chinese), with almost 40% women. The average age group is 15–30 years old, the main motivation is academic (to attend high school or to study abroad).

The 1999 reform (Taine-Cheikh 2004, 212–215) did not put an end to the domination of Arabic nor to Arab-French bilingualism. It did however reshuffle distribution by introducing a specialization of each language as the language of instruction, starting in primary school and dominating at the end of secondary school: literary subjects (literature, history, philosophy, religion, etc.) are taught in Arabic, while scientific and technical subjects are taught in French (calculus is taught in French from the 3rd year, and earth sciences from the 5th year). The reform extends the use of French in subjects that are still largely French-speaking, both in technical high schools and universities, but does not allow French to play a role in opening students up to the Western world in the fields of culture and the humanities.

This reform does not, however, apply to all schools in Mauritania, particularly the many public schools. A further exception is the Theodore Monod French High School in Nouakchott of the Agency for French Education Abroad (*Agence pour l'enseignement français à l'étranger* – AEFÉ) network, which has 1,010 pupils from kindergarten to the final year of secondary school, of whom only 311 are French.

3.4 Languages used in the Media

Press – For a long time, there was very little written press. At the end of the 1980s (Roques 1989) practically the only paper was the *Chaab* '(lit.) people', a semi-official daily newspaper the first issue of which was published in 1975 and which has two versions (one in Arabic and one in French), the weekly *Mauritanie-Demain* '(lit.) Mauritania-Tomorrow' which is published in French, and a few scholarly publications. After the law on the liberalization of the written press in 1991 (Daddah 1994, 40), a number of titles appeared (Ould Zein/Quéffelec 1997, 48). All are monolingual (especially Black African publications, written in French), but some have two versions, the French version being more widely sold but not necessarily read by more readers. Some publications in Arabic allocate a small amount of space for written Hassaniyya, often for poetry or humorous local expressions. Online publications now tend to replace paper. These include 'Crossroads of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania' (*Carrefour de la République Islamique de Mauritanie* – CRIDEM) in French and

Al-Akhbar ‘(lit.) The News’ in Arabic. As regards sites publishing in Pulaar, Soninke and Wolof, these seem to favour the use of Latin script (in use in neighbouring countries) over the Arabic script which was officially adopted in the 1980s.

Radio – For decades, state radio, listened to even in remote camps, has played a very important role for Mauritians (on its development up to 1994, see Ould Zein/Queffélec (1997, 49). Some programmes were very popular, particularly those relating to traditional Moorish culture (music and poetry) or those aimed at Black African communities. The programme, which takes into account the official language policy, is regulated according to precise specifications. Outside the rural areas of the South-West, where radio stations broadcast more than 60% of their programmes in Pulaar, Soninke and Wolof, the air time of these three national languages is limited to one hour daily, while French is limited to two news editions (for a cumulative time of about twenty minutes): most of the time is therefore divided between modern Arabic and Hassaniyya (Leclerc 2018, 18). In addition to foreign radio stations, often listened to in French (*RFI, Africa N° 1*, French service of the *BBC*), there are also private Mauritanian radio stations with very diverse content. In some regions of the South, local French is used in private stations.

Television – State television, which came into being at the beginning of the 1990s, is also regulated according to precise specifications in which the national languages Pulaar, Soninke and Wolof have very little room. It broadcasts mainly in Arabic, but there are local private channels and foreign channels accessible by subscription (such as Canal France International). Egyptian films and series from the Arab world or Latin America (*novellas*) have found a very receptive audience in Mauritania. The French Institute of Mauritania, formerly the *Antoine de Saint-Exupéry French Cultural Centre*, provides a venue for meetings and cultural events in Nouakchott. It is equipped not only with an important media library, but also with a cinema where films in French are programmed.

4. Linguistic Characteristics

4.1 Pronunciation

It is all the more difficult to characterize Mauritanian French as it tends to vary, on the one hand, depending on the level of language mastery, and on the other hand, on the speaker’s mother tongue. Generally speaking, however, it is strikingly difficult for Mauritians to pronounce French.

In the different languages spoken in Mauritania (Hassaniyya, Pulaar, Soninke and Wolof) there is a phonological distinction between short and long vowels, and few phonological vowels. Wolof is the only system with four degrees of aperture (it distinguishes between /e/ and /ɛ/ one hand, /o/ and /ɔ/ on the other. Conversely, Hassaniyya, which has very few vowel distinctions, has [e] and [a] only as variants of a single phoneme /a/. Hassaniyya speakers who are not very proficient in French therefore tend to modify an adjacent consonant to better render the vowel, hence: *madame* [mad^ham] to avoid [medem], *gramme* (measure of weight) [gr^ham] or [gr^ha:m] to avoid [grem].

As far as vowels are concerned, however, the main difficulty lies in the pronunciation of /y/ which does not exist in any of the Mauritanian language systems. Speakers therefore tend to replace /y/ with /i/, or at least to differentiate them poorly, hence the almost general replacement of *pulluler* [pylyle] ‘to abound’ by *pilluler* [pilyle] ‘(lit.) to take the pill’. This may give rise to surprising statements, such as the following found in a student paper: *À Nouadhibou les hommes pillulent [= pullulent] plus que les femmes* ‘In Nouadhibou, men take the pill [= abound] more than women’.

Speakers of Hassaniyya also find it difficult to distinguish between *grammaire* [grammer]

‘grammar’ and *grand-mère* [grāmɛr] ‘grandmother’ due to the absence of nasalized vowels in Arabic. They are probably also the origin of the distortion of *rémunérer* [ʁemyneʁe] into [renymere] and *rémunération* [ʁemyneʁasjɔ̃] into [renymeratjɔ̃] the nasals *n* and *m* not generally being present in the same word (see the formation of passive forms starting with *m* in Taine-Cheikh 1983, 79–82). In contrast, the absence of /p/ in Hassaniyya only causes problems for some speakers, who replace it with /b/, as is the case with borrowings from French (see the pronunciations of *politics* and *pepper* in section 4.3.3 below).

Among Black Africans, it is rather the pronunciation of the fricatives /v/ and /ʃ/ which pose problems, but one also notes a difficulty in pronouncing certain double consonant attacks such as /st/ without adding an initial vowel, thus *station* [estatjɔ̃], or a tendency to add a final vowel to respect the most common syllabic type consonant + vowel (CV).

4.2 Morphosyntax

It is questionable whether the existence of phrases in reverse order such as *photo-roman* ‘photo-novel’ instead of *roman-photo*, and *point-rond* ‘dot-round’ instead of *rond-point* can be explained by the influence of the syntax of the mother tongues. The only language where the modifier precedes the modified element is Soninke, where phrase order is often the opposite of what is found in Pulaar. For example, compare *jaxa yimme* ‘the sheep’s head, (lit.) sheep head’ and *ka di* ‘in the house, (lit.) house in’ in Soninke and *hore njawudi* ‘the sheep’s head, (lit.) head sheep’ and *nder galle* ‘in the house, (lit.) in house’ in Pulaar. It would, however, be quite surprising if the Soninke language which until recently was not widely spoken in the capital, were the source of the above-mentioned phrases.

Among the particularities of local French, one notes non-academic verb use. Some pronominal verbs are used without a pronoun such as *cotiser* ‘to contribute, to pay a contribution’ instead of *se cotiser*, *désister* ‘to desist’ instead of *se désister*, *pousser* ‘to push, to drive’ instead of *se pousser*. Some normally transitive verbs are used intransitively such as *fêter* ‘to celebrate a feast, (lit.) to celebrate’ and *voyager* ‘to go on a trip, (lit.) to travel’. One also finds some unusual expressions such as *en état* ‘in a state of pregnancy, pregnant, (lit.) in state’, *faire la famille* ‘to marry, to start a family, (lit.) to make the family’, *rabâcher les oreilles* ‘to say the same thing over and over again, (lit.) to re-talk ears’, *être pour* ‘to belong to, (lit.) to be for’, *taper à pied* ‘to go on foot, to walk, (lit.) to type on foot’, *dans les temps* ‘in time, in the past, (lit.) in the times’, *hier nuit* ‘last night, (lit.) yesterday night’.

In addition, *trop* is used instead of *très* ‘much, very, (lit.) too much’; there are non-regular adverbial uses of prepositions: *depuis* (sometimes with a lengthening of the second syllable) ‘long time, long ago, (lit.) since’ instead of *il y a longtemps*, and *devant* ‘further forward, in the direction one is going, (lit.) in front of’ instead of *xx*, the syntagm *tout celui qui* ‘anyone, anyone who’ instead of *toute personne qui*, and the conjunctive locution *or que* ‘while, whereas, (lit.) now that’ instead of *alors que*.

Furthermore, there is often imprecise use of functionals and conjunctions in local French. Ould Zein/Queffélec (1997, 75, 96) points this out for prepositions: *avec* ‘with’ (e.g. *j’achète de la viande avec* [instead of *à, chez*] *un boucher...* ‘I buy meat with [instead of *at, from*] a butcher...’) and *dans* (e.g. *Je peux travailler dans* [instead of *pour*] *l’État* ‘I can work in [instead of *for*] the state’).

For their part, Lecointre/Nicolau (1995, 481f.), observed, among vocational training students, the poorly mastered use of connectors such as *alors que* ‘whereas’, *pourtant* ‘yet’, *c’est pourquoi* ‘that is why’, *à ce propos* ‘about it’, *en somme* ‘in short’, *ainsi* ‘thus’, *du moins* ‘at least’, *pourvu que* ‘provided that’. They explain that *par ailleurs* ‘moreover’ is never differentiated from *d’ailleurs* ‘elsewhere’, *en effet* ‘indeed’ is confused with *car* ‘for, because’ when it is not used for *de ce fait* ‘thereby’. *Tel... et* ‘such... and’ is used for *tant que* ‘as long as’, *à savoir* ‘namely’ for *par exemple* ‘for example’, *cependant* ‘however’ for

pendant ce temps ‘during this time’ and *si* ‘if’ for *à condition que* ‘provided that’. They give the following example as an illustration: *la garantie ne s’applique pas à condition que* [instead of *si*] *l’appareil a été modifié ou transformé* ‘the warranty does not apply provided that [instead of *if*] the device has been modified or transformed’.

4.3 Lexicon

4.3.1 Traces of national languages in French

Mauritanian French is mainly marked by the existence of numerous “diatopisms of origin” which ‘represent specific realities that are not exported or non-exportable, but which need to be named everywhere in the world when they are mentioned’.³ These lexemes of a particular type, imported into local French but originating in one or another of the Mauritanian national languages, were the subject of a broad survey in the work of Ould Zein/Queffélec (1997, 69–177). They are widely used in spoken language, and also present in writing, but their spelling is not always well established. They cover different semantic fields, some of which are particularly well represented. Following is an almost exhaustive inventory, grouped by theme and limiting the spellings given to one or two. The origin, given in brackets, takes account of meaning and form (hence the reference, in the case of Arabic, to dialectal or classical form). Sometimes an indirect origin is specified when the source language is borrowed from another language.

Social categories – The field of social categories is very rich in terms of Arab origin. In some cases, the dialectal meaning is the same as in Classical Arabic, e.g. *abd*, pl. *abid* ‘slave’ (< Hass. ‘*abd* and ‘*bīd*), *arab*, *arabe* ‘descendants of the Arab conquerors’ (< Hass. ‘*arab*), *cherif*, pl. *chorfa* ‘person considered a descendant of the prophet Mohammed’, and the adjective *cherifian* ‘relative to the Cherif’ (< Hass. ‘*šrīf*), *qabila* ‘tribe’ (< Ar. *qabīla*), *naçrani* pl. *naçara* ‘Christian, European, especially French’ (< Hass. *nəşrāni*). In other cases, the term is taken with a dialectal meaning and designates one of the particular categories of the Moorish society, e.g. *lahma* ‘common category of Moors whose job is to keep animals’ (< Hass. *lahme* ‘meat’), *zénagui*, pl. *aznaga* ‘common category of Moors whose job is to keep animals; tributary’ (< Hass. *āznāgi* pl. *āznāge*), *maâlem*, pl. *mallemin* ‘member of a common caste whose occupation is working with metals, leather, etc.’ (< Hass. *m’allem*), *tiyâb* ‘[literate] warriors’ (< Hass. *tiyyâb* ‘repented’), *zâwi*, *zaoui*, pl. *zwaya*, *zawaya* ‘member of the category of the literate in Arabic’ (< Hass. *zāwi*). The following three terms do not have a correspondent in Classical Arabic: *igawen*, *igaouen* ‘common caste whose members are singers, lauders, entertainers’ (< Hass. *iggāwən*), *imraguen* ‘common social group whose members make a living from fishing’ (< Hass. *imrâgən*), *nemadi* ‘member of a marginal social group that has hitherto lived from hunting and gathering’ (< Hass. *nmādi*). Apart from *almamy* ‘Fulani Muslim religious leader’ (< Ar. *imām*), the terms designating categories of Halpulaaren society are all terms of Pulaar origin (for more details see Wane 1969, 30f.): *rimbé* ‘free man’ (< Pul. *ribe* ‘those who are pure from all defilement’) and the designations of different types of free men such as *torobé*, pl. *torodo* ‘literate’ (< Pul. *torodo*), *sebbé* ‘the warriors’ (< Pul. *sebe*), and *dyawambé* ‘the courtiers and counsellors’ (< Pul. *djawambe*). The *soubalbé* (< Pul. *subalbe*) have fishing as a traditional activity. The *nyenbe* (< Pul. *njembe*) refer to the casted men of which the *laobé* (< Pul. *laobe*) who work with wood are part. The *mathioubé* (< Pul. *matjube*) are the serfs or slaves. Apart from *Wolof* (< Wol. *wɔlɔf*), only *gordiguène* ‘homosexual’ (< Wol. *gɔrdigen*) and *naar* (< Wol. *na:r*), which is the name given to the Moors by the Senegalese, are cited as borrowings from Wolof.

Activities and professions – The field of activities and professions is dominated by terms of Arab origin, including in the case of the *talibé* ‘pupil of a Koranic school’ (< Ar. *ṭālib*) which

³ “[...] représentent des réalités spécifiques non exportées ou non exportables, mais nécessitant une appellation partout dans le monde quand on en parle” (Reutner 2017, 37).

is only used among Black Africans, the Moors employing the term *télamid* ‘pupils, disciples of a marabout’ (< Hass. *tlāmīd* ‘pupils’). In addition to the domain of school, where one also finds *mahadra* ‘Koranic school, Muslim higher education establishment’ (< Hass. *maḥ²ḍra*), there are administration terms such as *hakem* ‘prefect’ (< Ar. *ḥākim*), *wali* (< Ar. *wāli*) and *wilaya* (< Ar. *wilāya*), the *wali* being the representative of the central power at the head of the *wilaya*. In older times, one spoke rather of *sorba* ‘delegation of notables sent to discuss an important matter’ (< Hass. *ṣurbe*) or of *ghazzi* ‘group of looters, troop of raiders’ (< Hass. *ḡazzi*) and of *razzia* ‘attack of a troop of looters...’ (< Ar. *ḡazwa*). Only *tieb-tieb* ‘barter, haggling’ (< Hass. *tʰebʰib*) and *tieb-tiaba* ‘people who indulge in bargaining’ (< Hass. *tʰebʰābe*) are not related to literary Arabic. Here again it is Wolof that the other two borrowings in this category come from: on the one hand *bana-bana* ‘street vendor who sells retail’ – the *bana* term has been adopted by some of Nouakchott's well-stocked shops’ (< Wol. *ba:nana:na*), hence ‘junk’, and on the other hand *navetanes* ‘football championship organized during the winter months’ (< Wol. *navetan*), also having the meaning ‘seasonal peanut farmers’.

Religion – As far as religion is concerned, terms found in French stemming from Classical Arabic are numerous: nearly twenty, not counting formulas such as *tabarakallah* (to ward off the evil eye) or words of the same root such as *tijani* and *tidjanism* in relation to *tijania* ‘religious brotherhood named after the founder Abdul-Abbas-Ahmed Ibn Mohammed-Al-mokhtar-Al-Tidjani (born in 1737)’. These include names of prayers (*aacer* and *dohr*), festivals (*aīd* and *maouloud*), pilgrimages (*hadj* and *omra*), religious functions (*cadi* and *muezzin*), laws and obligations (*sharia*, *diya*, *zakat*), prophetic words (*fatiha*, *hadith*), sermon (*khotba*), invocation (*wird*) and blessing (*baraka*). Only the *korité* ‘Muslim feast that marks the end of fasting in the month of Ramadan’ (< Wol. *korité*) and *tabaski* (< Wol. *tabaski* < Christian Latin *pascha* ‘Easter’) are distinguished by their origin.

Geographical terms – Among the geographical terms, two come from Pulaar. *Walo* (< Pul. *wa:lo*) refers to the floodplain of the Senegal River which is farmed during the dry season, while *diéri* (< Pul. *dje:ri*) refers to non-floodplain land. All the other terms come from Arabic and more specifically from Hassaniyya: *laklé* ‘active dune area’ (< Hass. *ʿakle*), *badiya* ‘countryside, bush’ (< Hass. *bādiyye*), *baten* ‘plateau or flank of a large dune’ (< Hass. *bātān*), *batha* ‘sandy dry river bed’ (< Hass. *bathā*), *dhar* ‘steep cliff on the edge of a plateau’ (< Hass. *ḍhar*), *goud* ‘long corridor between two fixed dunes’ (< Hass. *gewd*), *grara* ‘sandy farmable area’ (< Hass. *ḡrāra*), *guelb* ‘rocky crag’ (< Hass. *ḡalb*), *guelta* ‘pond, watering place of natural origin’ (< Hass. *ḡalte*), *irifi* ‘continental trade wind’ (< Hass. *irīvi*), *ogla* ‘shallow well’ (< Hass. *ʿagla*), *sebkha* ‘whitish salty depression, unsuitable for cultivation’ (< Hass. *sebxa*), *tamourt* ‘temporary pond occupying the shallows’ (< Hass. *tāmūrt*). The same applies to the category of habitat for *adebaye* ‘village of black Moors’ (< Hass. *edebāy* < Son. *dèbé* ‘village’), *bénia* ‘small tent used as an annex to the main tent’ (< Hass. *benye*), *tikit* ‘shelter, hut built of dry palms or branches’ (< Hass. *tikīt*), *ksar*, *kçar* ‘fortified city’ and especially ‘small settlement, village’ (< Hass. *kšar*).

Flora, fauna, cuisine – Concerning plants, animals and cuisine, Wolof has given a number of terms, including two fish names term (< Wol. *thiof* ‘grouper’ and *yaboy* ‘round sardinella’) and some plant names: *bissap* (< Wol. *bisap*) the leaves of which are used for making drinks, that of the *cram-cram* ‘thorny grass, *Cenchrus biflorus*’ (< Wol. *xa:mxa:m*) and that of the thorny gonak tree (< Wol. *gonake*). The influence of Wolof is particularly present in food-related terms such as *guedj* ‘dried fish’ (< Wol. *ḡeḍʒ*) present in particular in the recipe for *thiéboudène* (< Wol. *tjebudjen*), *mafë* ‘meat or fish cooked in a peanut butter sauce’ (< Wol. *ma:fë*) and *dibiterie* ‘shop where grilled meat is sold’ (< Wol. *dibi* ‘grilled meat’). Only the name of a variety of bean term (< Pul. *niébé*) and the name of a dish made of boiled *niébé* ‘leaves’ (< Pul. *hāko*) have passed from Pulaar. While Hassaniyya is the origin of an animal

name (*azouzal* ‘castrated dromedary serving as a mount’ < Hass. *ezūzāl*), it is above all the origin of a series of plant names: *ifernan* ‘non-spiny shrub’ (< Hass. *ivərnân*), *initi* ‘thorny grass *cram-cram*, *Cenchrus biflorus*’ (< Hass. *inīti*), *talha* (< Hass. *ṭalḥ*), and *tamat* (< Hass. *temāt*) two varieties of acacia, *teichot* ‘*Balanites aegyptiaca*, thorny tree of the South’ (< Hass. *teyṣāt*), *titarek* ‘*Leptadenia spartium* or *pyrotechnica*, a small leafless shrub with small yellow flowers’ (< Hass. *titārək*), *tourja* ‘*Calotropis procera*, a small, non-thorny latex tree’ (< Hass. *tūrže*). Seven other terms borrowed from Hassaniyya are emblematic of the Moorish culture: *blah* ‘dates still insufficiently ripe’ (< Hass. *blah*), *guetna* ‘date-picking period which is also an occasion for celebration’ (< Hass. *gēṭne*), *aich* ‘millet cake (generally) which can be eaten with sweet milk’ (< Hass. *‘ayš*), *tejmart* ‘fruit of the baobab tree, the dried and powdered pulp of which is mixed with water to make a sour drink’ (< Hass. *težmaxt*), *tichtar* ‘dried raw meat’ (< Hass. *tīšṭār*), *tagine* ‘snack eaten outside meals’ (< Hass. *tāžīn*) and *zrig* ‘milk cut with water and sugar’ (< Hass. *zrīg*).

Usual objects – Concerning the terms used to designate everyday objects, all come from Hassaniyya: *beit* ‘leather case containing the smoker’s kit’ (< Hass. *beyt*), *delou* ‘large leather bag for drawing water’ (< Hass. *delu*), *faro* ‘large blanket made of lamb pelts’ (< Hass. *vāru*), *guerba* ‘goatskin bottle’ (< Hass. *gərbe*), *iliwich* ‘sheepskin used as a saddle and prayer mat’ (< Hass. *iliwīš*), *loh* ‘board on which the Koranic verses and other teachings are transcribed’ (< Hass. *lowḥ*), *rahla* ‘camel saddle always with a wide pommel’ (< Hass. *rāḥle*), *rkiza* ‘wooden tent support’ (< Hass. *rkīze*), *tadite* ‘wooden container used for milking animals (except camels)’ (< Hass. *tādīt*), *tidikt* ‘incense (light yellow gum-like grains)’ (< Hass. *tīdakt*).

Clothing – The same applies to clothing with one exception. Five terms come from Hassaniyya: *daraa* ‘loose garment worn by men, slit at the sides and going down to the mid-calf’ (< Hass. *darṛā‘a*), *haouli* ‘piece of fabric used as a turban’ (< Hass. *ḥawli*), *melehfa* ‘veil, clothing of Moorish women consisting of a long piece of very light fabric’ (< Hass. *melḥfe*), *séroual* ‘traditional loose trousers’ (< Hass. *sərwāl*). Only *foucoudiaye* ‘rags sold at stalls or at home by street vendors’ comes from Wolof (< Wol. *fukuɟaj*).

Arts – In the field of the arts, mainly poetry and music, there are two borrowings from Pulaar: *beyti* ‘religious poems’ (< Pul. *beyti*) and *goumbala* ‘chant’ (< Pul. *gumbala*). The others, with the exception of *qassida* ‘long poem in literary Arabic’ (< Ar. *qaṣīda*), are rather dialectal in meaning: *azawane* ‘Moorish music’ (< Hass. *aḏawān*), *ghna* ‘poetry in Hassaniyya’ (< Hass. *ḡne*), *tbel* ‘large percussion drum carved out of a tree trunk’ (< Hass. *tbel*), *medh* ‘religious song to the glory of the Prophet Mohammed’ (< Hass. *medḥ*). Yet others are specific to Hassaniyya. In addition to the musical mode of combat *faghou* (< Hass. *vāḡu*), the names of the two musical instruments of the griots are the *ardin* (< Hass. *ārdīn*), played by women and the *tidinit* (< Hass. *tīdīnīt*) played by men. These are also the names of the different prosodic forms of Moorish poetry: the *gav* (< Hass. *gāv*), poetry in four verses of *abab* rhymes, the *talaâ* (< Hass. *ṭal‘a*), poetry in at least 6 verses of *aaabab* rhymes, the distic called *tabrâ* (< Hass. *təbrā‘*) and the long poem with epic accents called *theydina* (< Hass. *theydīne*).

Other categories – One of the terms in other categories comes from Wolof: *khessal* ‘practice of lightening the skin by applying certain depigmenting products, a product used to lighten the skin’ (< Wol. *xesal*). The others come from Arabic. Some have taken on a meaning of their own such as Hassaniyya *mniha* ‘interest-free loan of animals by a rich or wealthy person to another in need’ (< Hass. *mnīḥa*), *moud* ‘measure for dry substances’ (< Hass. *mudd*), *ouguiya* ‘monetary unit of Mauritania’ (< Hass. *ugiyye*), *sahwa* ‘modesty’ (< Hass. *saḥwe*), *zeriba* ‘fence made of thorny tree branches to park small livestock; closed field usually planted with date palms’ (< Hass. *zrībe*), *ziyara* ‘trip to a cemetery to visit a grave’ (< Hass. *ziyyāra*). The absence of Soninke loans in this list will undoubtedly have been noted.

Diagana (1996, 170f.), in his article on the relationship between French and national languages, gives no more than that, but points out some particles, particularly *rek* and *de(y)* (< Wol.), widely used by Soninke, Hal-pulaaren and Wolofs: like the *ga*⁶ of Hassaniyya, they seem to serve to punctuate the discourse. Moreover, he gives some examples of calques, such as saying *I have dry eyes* to mean, as in the Soninke *an ya:wo n ka:wa* ‘to have insomnia’. There are certainly other calques. In their work, Ould Zein/Queffélec give the case of a *big tent*, a *good tent* in the sense of ‘good family, noble family’. This is certainly calqued on Hassaniyya. I would add to the list *short* (< Hass. *gšīr*) and *long* (< Hass. *ṭwīl*) to mean ‘small’ and ‘tall’, as well as the transitional uses of *divorcing* (*he divorced her*) and *marrying* (*a woman*), as well as their equivalents in Hassaniyya *xalle vlāne* ‘to divorce someone’ and *šedd vlāne* ‘to marry someone’.

4.3.2 Word formation in French

Neologisms – Many lexemes appear to be neologisms. The influence of mother tongues cannot be excluded here, especially in the case of Arabic, where derivations are very productive. These are often verbs from the first group, constructed on the basis of nouns: *commissionner* ‘to commission, to charge someone with a commission’, *compétir* ‘to compete, to take part in competitions’, *compresser* ‘to compress, to lay off by compression, to reduce staff’, *conscientiser* ‘to raise awareness’, *dévierger* ‘to deflower, to make lose one’s virginity’, *disponibiliser* ‘to make financial, material and human resources available for the achievement of an objective’, *enceinter* ‘to make pregnant’, *gommer* ‘to starch with gum or starch’, *siester* ‘to take a nap’, *cabiner* ‘to go to the toilets’.

There are also nominal neologisms such as *balbastik* ‘ice with variously flavoured water (mint or grenadine syrup...)', *boycottiste* ‘boycotter, person who boycotts’, *cartouchard* (student slang) ‘student who has repeated levels of his/her studies’, *exclusiviste* ‘[literate] who practises exclusion’, *flamiste* ‘partisan of the FLAM’, *maîtrisard* ‘master’s degree holder’, *pokériste* ‘poker player’, *profitard* ‘profiteer’, *promotionnaire* ‘classmate’, *terminaliste* ‘pupil in the final year of high school’, *trichage* ‘cheating on an examination’, *essencerie* ‘petrol station’, *primature* ‘services of the Prime Minister’, *coaxer* ‘young employee working on board a transport vehicle’ (< Engl. *coaxer* ‘he who persuades by dint of cajoling’, *ratement* ‘failure (of a combustion engine)’, *bordelle* ‘prostitute’, *putaine* ‘prostitute’.

Meaning shifts – However, the most numerous cases are those that show shifts in meaning. Changes often concern very common French lexemes. For some verbs the meaning is simply modified, for example *s’absenter* ‘to not show up’ instead of ‘to be absent’, *se baigner* ‘to wash with a bucket of water or to shower’ instead of ‘to bathe’, *attraper* ‘to put aside’ instead of ‘to catch’, *consulter* ‘to examine (for a doctor)’ instead of ‘to consult’, *déguerpir* ‘to move (people)’ instead of ‘to leave’, *gâter* ‘to damage, to deteriorate an object to the point that it cannot function’ instead of ‘to spoil’, *indexer* ‘to point’ instead of ‘to index’, *monter* ‘to take up one’s workstation, to go to work’ instead of ‘to go up’ and *descendre* ‘to end one’s working day’ instead of ‘to go down’, *durer* intr. ‘to stay, live or stay somewhere for a while’ instead of ‘to last’, *payer* ‘to buy’ instead of ‘to pay’, *quitter* ‘to go away, leave, disappear’ instead of ‘to leave’.

There are also meaning shifts among nouns and adjectives, regardless of their frequency: *popote* ‘group of people who join together to share food and sometimes accommodation’ instead of ‘cooking’, *portier* ‘goalkeeper’ instead of ‘porter’, *pot* ‘tin can’ instead of ‘pot’, *poubelle* ‘rubbish heap, rubbish tip’ instead of ‘bin’, *roman* ‘book (not necessarily fictional)’ instead of ‘novel’, *carent* ‘incompetent, deficient’ instead of ‘carent’, *cynique* ‘[literate] sneaky, concealed’ instead of ‘cynical’, *marrant* ‘boring, annoying’ instead of ‘funny’, *sérieux* ‘(person) kind, sympathetic, helpful’ instead of ‘serious’.

Many lexemes are used with a more restrictive meaning than in standard French. Examples of verbs include the following: *consommer* ‘to drink alcoholic beverages’ instead of ‘to consume’, *coucher* ‘to have sex with someone’ instead of ‘to put to bed’, *coudre* ‘to make (a garment)’ instead of ‘to sew’ and *couture* ‘making, embroidery of a garment’ instead of ‘sewing’, *couper* ‘to break the Ramadan fast’ and ‘to buy a ticket (cinema, theatre)’ instead of ‘to cut’. Among the nouns one finds the following: *accident* ‘car accident’ instead of ‘accident’, *charbon* ‘charcoal’ instead of ‘coal’, *goudron* for ‘tarred road’ instead of ‘tar’.

Nouns used in a different sense include: *arachide* ‘ground nut, even when roasted’ instead of ‘peanut’, *aventure* ‘comic book’ instead of ‘adventure’, *bande* ‘audio cassette’ instead of ‘tape’, *baptême* ‘naming ceremony’ instead of ‘baptism’, *brousse* ‘region far from urban centres’ instead of ‘bush’ and *broussard* ‘who lives in a region far from urban centres’ instead of ‘bushman’, *carré* ‘undeveloped land’ instead of ‘square’, *coiffure* ‘haircut’ instead of ‘hairstyle’, *concession* ‘delimited land constituting the habitat of one or more families and comprising several constructions (huts or houses) and a courtyard’ instead of ‘concession’, *contact* ‘switch, electric switch’ instead of ‘contact’, *dépense* ‘sum necessary to feed a family on a daily basis’ instead of ‘expenditure’, *écritoire* ‘any instrument used for writing’ instead of ‘writing case’, *fourneau* ‘a kind of brazier, generally made of sheet metal, used for charcoal cooking’ instead of ‘stove’, *frère* ‘any male individual from the same family, from the same generation, with whom one feels a common bond (ethnic group, caste, clan, tribe, country...)’ instead of ‘brother’, *invitation* ‘reception, party, ceremony’ instead of ‘invitation’, *jaquette* ‘jacket’ instead of ‘morning coat’, *(une) grosse* ‘(a) carton of cigarettes’ instead of ‘(a) big thing’, *mèche* ‘cigarette’ instead of ‘wick’, *miche* ‘French baguette’ instead of ‘cob (of bread)’, *pion* ‘anti-depressant pill’ instead of ‘pawn’, *prêt* ‘borrowing’ instead of ‘loan’.

Semantic fields – The changes concern certain semantic fields more particularly, for both lexemes and expressions. The semantic field of schooling is productive (see also the neologisms above): *apprendre* ‘to educate oneself’ instead of ‘to learn’, *intellectuel* ‘a person who has been to school and can therefore read and write’ instead of ‘intellectual’, *faire les bancs* ‘to study, to be at school’ instead of ‘to make the benches’, *fondamental* n./adj. ‘primary (education)’ instead of ‘fundamental’, *ouverture* ‘back to school’ instead of ‘opening’, *passant* ‘pupil or student who passes to the next class’ instead of ‘passing’, *trouver le bac* ‘to pass the baccalaureate’ instead of ‘to find the baccalaureate’.

There are also examples from commerce: *boutique* ‘store where one can buy ordinary consumer products’ instead of ‘shop’ and *boutiquier* ‘trader who runs a small store (a shop)’ instead of ‘shopkeeper’, *four* ‘bakehouse’ instead of ‘oven’, *standard* ‘stall that sells music tapes and other recordings’ instead of ‘standard’, *table* ‘stall table on which a trader sells his wares’ instead of ‘table’ and *tablier* ‘salesman who displays his wares on a stall’ instead of ‘apron’.

The field of work is also productive: *affecter* ‘transfer, move’ instead of ‘to assign’, *débauche* ‘leaving work’ instead of ‘dissolute living’, *descente* ‘leaving work’ instead of ‘going down’, *missionnaire* ‘person who carries out a mission on behalf of his employer’ instead of ‘missionary’, *premier ministre* ‘services of the Prime Minister’ instead of ‘first ministry’, *séminariste* ‘participant in a seminar, in a work meeting’ instead of ‘seminarian’.

The semantic field of transport, cars and mechanics is richly endowed: *apprenti* ‘young employee working on board a transport vehicle’ instead of ‘apprentice’, *encaisseur* ‘young employee working on board a transport vehicle’ instead of ‘collector’, *garage* ‘bus station’ (but also ‘siding, cupboard’) instead of ‘garage’, *porte-bagages* ‘boot of a car, rear boot’ instead of ‘luggage rack’, *salon* ‘all the seats of a car, interior of a car’ instead of ‘living room’, *cliquer* ‘emit an abnormal rattling noise, for the gearbox of a car’ instead of ‘to click’, *segmenter* ‘to change the piston rings of a car’ instead of ‘to segment’, *taxi-brousse* ‘collective vehicle carrying eight or nine passengers on interurban journeys’ instead of ‘bush

taxi’, *venant de France* ‘second-hand car imported from France or Europe’ instead of ‘coming from France’, *véhiculé* ‘who owns a car’ instead of ‘conveyed’.

Some examples fall within the scope of criticism, mockery and brawling: *bandit* ‘cunning person’ instead of ‘bandit’, *cow-boy* ‘cunning person, [hum.] mischievous boy’ instead of ‘cowboy’, *bourrer* ‘to tell false stories to make it interesting’ instead of ‘to stuff’, *brûler* ‘to tell false stories to make it interesting’ instead of ‘to burn’, *botter* ‘to hit’ instead of ‘to kick’, *bastonner* ‘to hit’ instead of to beat’, *chicoter* ‘to hit’ instead of ‘to bicker’, *comédien* ‘jester, comedian’ instead of ‘actor’, *farcier* ‘to joke’ instead of ‘to play pranks’, *fumiste* ‘sycophant, flatterer’ instead of ‘practical joker’, *maquereau* ‘sycophant, flatterer’ instead of ‘pimp’, *ramasser* ‘to remonstrate with someone’ instead of ‘to pick up’, *saboter* ‘to make fun of someone, to mock, to heckle’ instead of ‘to sabotage’.

Finally, other examples fall within the scope of flirtation and sexual relations (see also the neologisms above): *femme de joie* ‘prostitute’ instead of ‘woman of joy’, *crâneur* ‘flirt, swinger’ instead of ‘whore, show-off’ and *crâner* ‘to flirt with women’ instead of ‘to show-off’, *faire la femme* ‘to flirt, to have affairs with women’ instead of ‘to make woman’, *tenter* ‘to court a woman’ instead of ‘to try’, *matrice* ‘female genitals’ instead of ‘womb’, *enjamber* tr. ‘to put your genitals between a woman’s thighs for enjoyment, without penetrating her’ instead of ‘to step over’, *taper* ‘to possess sexually’ instead of ‘to hit’, *vedette* ‘very beautiful woman’ instead of ‘star’.

Special register – Among the lexemes that belong to the familiar and coarse register and often originate in slang, some are used in French, e.g. *bouloter*, *boulotter* ‘to work, to have a job’, *clando* ‘undocumented worker’, *bagaux* ‘luggage’, *frigo* ‘refrigerator’. Others show more or less marked semantic change, e.g. *gober* tr. ‘to catch a disease’ instead of ‘to swallow’, *godasse* ‘man’s shoe’ instead of ‘shoe’, *môme* ‘girlfriend, fiancée’ instead of ‘kid, young girl’. Some of them correspond to real innovation e.g. *boudin* ‘penis’ instead of ‘blood pudding’, *clandoter* ‘to share a room with the legitimate tenant (student slang)’ instead of ‘to be undocumented’ and *merco* ‘motor vehicle of the brand Mercedes’ (< *Mercedes*).

Brand names – Unlike *frigo* and *merco*, which are used in abbreviated form, other brand names, which have entered the local French language without distortion, have become generics, notably *bic* ‘any instrument used for writing’, *célia* ‘all high-fat powdered milk powder’, *gloria* ‘unsweetened condensed milk’, *samsonite* ‘attaché case, briefcase or trunk (whatever the brand) intended to hold precious things’. In this series, *Michelin* (from the name of the tyre brand) is a special case as it does not mean ‘tyre’ but ‘wheel repairer who also washes cars’.

4.3.3 Traces of French in the national languages

Loans shared by several languages – In the article quoted above, Diagona states:

‘French is in a paradoxical situation in Mauritania. On the one hand, it is declining both officially and in daily use by the population (Arabs, Halpulaar’en, Soninke and Wolof); on the other hand, it continues to influence the local languages’.⁴

According to him, many words pass from French into the national languages in various areas of life. He gives only five examples, but shows the effects of phonetic and syllabic adaptation:

	‘the school’	‘aeroplane’	‘policy’	‘carrot’	‘music’
French	<i>l’école</i>	<i>avion</i>	<i>politique</i>	<i>carotte</i>	<i>musique</i>

⁴ “Le français connaît une situation paradoxale en Mauritanie. D’une part, il recule aussi bien sur le plan officiel que dans l’usage quotidien des populations (Arabes, Halpulaar’en, Soninkés et Wolofs); d’autre part il continue à influencer les langues locales” (Diagona 1996, 167).

Soninke	<i>Lekkoli</i>	<i>abiyo</i>	<i>politiki</i>	<i>karo:ti</i>	<i>misiki</i>
Pulaar	<i>Lekkol</i>	<i>abiyon</i>	<i>polotik</i>	<i>karot</i>	<i>misik</i>
Wolof	<i>Ekkol</i>	<i>awiyon</i>	<i>politig</i>	<i>karo:t</i>	–

Table 2: Borrowings from French and their adaptations into Soninke, Pulaar and Wolof.

In Hassaniyya one would have *lekūr* ‘school’, *ḥolotīg* ‘politics’, *karot* ‘carrot’ and *misīk* ‘music’, but *medārṣa* is much more common than *lekūr* and the term for ‘plane’ is from Arabic (Hass. *ṭayyār*).

Maintaining or replacing loans in Hassaniyya – While there is no shortage of French loans, they tend to vary over time. This is why a large share of the loans in current use during colonization have been withdrawn, such as Hass. *debbīš* ‘telegram’ (< Fr. *dépêche*), Hass. *kebbūt* ‘capote (coat of the riflemen)’ (< Fr. *capote*), Hass. *gūmyāt* ‘meharists’ (< Fr. *goumiers*), Hass. *keweyye* ‘convoy’ (< Fr. *convoi*) or Hass. *ṣarwaš* ‘to be very close to the Whites, the colonisers’ (< Fr. *service*). This is true for realities that have disappeared (such as the currency Hass. *sūwāyā* ‘small coin’ (< Fr. *sou*) or *misīk* in the sense of ‘phonograph’ (< Fr. *musique*), but also for those that are now denoted by literary Arabic (e.g. Hass. *mināstr* ‘minister’ replaced by Ar. *wazīr*). However, this has not prevented the regular entry of new lexemes such as Hass. *mubayl* ‘mobile (telephone)’ (< Fr. *mobile*) and *tlekse* ‘to practice, to love luxury’ (< Fr. *luxe*), nor does it prevent the permanence of some older loans such as Hass. *wete* ‘car’ (< Fr. *voiture*), Hass. *kemyūn* ‘truck’ (< Fr. *camion*), Hass. *maṣṣa* ‘market’ (< Fr. *marché*), Hass. *kīl* ‘kilogram’ (< Fr. *kilo*), Hass. *brāg* ‘hut’ (< Fr. *baraque*), Hass. *pōbaṣ* ‘pepper’ (< Fr. *poivre*), Hass. *beydūn* ‘can’ (< Fr. *bidon*), Hass. *rebīne* ‘tap’ (< Fr. *robinet*), Hass. *beṣṣa* ‘roll of cloth, piece of cloth’ (< Fr. *pièce*), Hass. *baṭṭṛan* ‘oil’ (< Fr. *pétrole*). Note that some loans are still more common than the standard Arabic terms: Hass. *kurā^h/kurā^h* ‘electricity, current’ (< Fr. *courant*) rather than Ar. *kaḥṛaba*, Hass. *baḷḷoh* (< Fr. *ballon*) rather than Ar. *kūra*, Hass. *bneygaṛ* ‘vinegar’ (< Fr. *vinaigre*) rather than Ar. *xall*, Hass. *būtīg* ‘shop’ (< Fr. *boutique*) or Hass. *maḡaṣayne* ‘shop’ (< Fr. *magasin*) rather than Ar. *ḥanūt*, which has taken on the special meaning of ‘blacksmith's bellows’ in Hassaniyya.

Borrowings can take several forms, sometimes very similar as in Hass. *‘limet* or *‘ālimet* ‘matches’ (< Fr. *allumettes*), *gārāž* or *egārāž* ‘garage’ (< Fr. *garage*), *gāz* or *gāš* ‘gas’ (< Fr. *gaz*), *išāš* or *išā(n)š* ‘petrol’ (< Fr. *essence*), *lebtān* or *lebbitān* ‘hospital, dispensary’ (< Fr. *l’hospital*), *kīnīn* or *kīni* ‘quinine’ (< Fr. *quinine*), or more distinct as in *ṣaržan* or *ṣarṣar* ‘sergeant’ (< Fr. *sergent*), *vāle* or *peyle* (< Fr. *pelle*), *guyəṛnār* or *guyəṛ/geyəṛ* ‘governor’ (< Fr. *gouverneur*), *baṭṭmāle* or *qoṭṭmāl* ‘wallet’ (< Fr. *porte-monnaie*).

From source to target – In general, it is fairly easy to identify the source lexeme of a loan. A very frequent modification is vowel lengthening, especially that of the last (or only) syllable, e.g. in /gṛa:m/ ‘gram (measure of weight)’. Another common modification is consonant emphatization, notably /s/ > /s^ʕ/ as in /s^ʕanti:m/ ‘cent’ or /s^ʕala:d/ ‘salad’ and /t/ > /t^ʕ/ as in /ṭown/ ‘tonne’ or /bat^ʕr^ʕu:n/ ‘boss’, but also /d/ > /d^ʕ/ as in /maḡad^ʕam/ ‘madam’ or /ḍ/ > /ḍ^ʕ/ as in /ḍ^ʕa:mət/ḍ^ʕa:me/ ‘draughts, draughts game’, /l/ > /l^ʕ/ as in /bal^ʕa:ye/ ‘broom (manufactured)’ (< Fr. *balai*) and /bal^ʕge/ ‘arrogance’ (< Fr. *blague*). Note that the vowel realizations [a], [ā] and [o] are hardly to be found at Hassaniyya, except in the presence of emphatic consonants such as /r^ʕ, s^ʕ, t^ʕ, d^ʕ, ḍ^ʕ/ (noted here respectively *r*, *š*, *t*, *d*, *ḍ*).

Sometimes, however, the source of the loan is less obvious. This may be due to a distortion as in *baṭṭa* ‘can’ (< Fr. *boîte*), *dəlwīr* ‘oil’ (< Fr. *de l’huile*), *būzāwi* ‘butcher’ (< Fr. *boucher*) and *aḷamān* ‘fine’ (< Fr. *l’amende*). This may be due to a more or less extensive change (semantic change or change of the term used in French), as in *ḥḥāš* ‘ticket (aeroplane, taxi, etc.)’ (< Fr. *passee, passeport*), *rūsi* ‘receipt’ (< Fr. *reçu*), *tərki* ‘shirt’ (< Fr. *tricot*), *lašo* ‘cement’ (< Fr. *la chaux*). Among these cases are the specializations of employment in the

field of card games, e.g. for *maḍam* ‘lady (gambling)’ (< Fr. *madame*), *maryāṣ* ‘wedding’ (< Fr. *mariage*) and *bâtər* ‘shuffle cards’ (< Fr. *battre*).

The formation of verbs – It should be noted that Hassaniyya uses a number of verbs that originate in French borrowings. Often the verbs are formed on loans of a nominal nature, e.g. *laṣṣa/laṣṣa* ‘to cement’ < *laṣo* ‘cement’ (< Fr. *la chaux*), *bāla* ‘to sweep with a broom’ < *balāye* ‘broom’ (< Fr. *balai*), *bekkaṭ* ‘to pack’ < *bekkaṭ* ‘package’ (< Fr. *paquet*), *deywen* ‘to clear’ < *dīwāne* ‘customs’ (< Fr. *douanes*), *ḷawmen* ‘to impose a fine’ < *alamān* ‘fine’ (< Fr. *l’amende*), *ḥowteg* ‘to keep shop’ < *būtīg* ‘shop’ (< Fr. *boutique*), *retret* ‘to be retired’ < *retrēt* ‘retirement, pension’ (< Fr. *retraite*), *tbaṭran* ‘to be, to become a boss’ < *baṭrūn* ‘boss’ (< Fr. *patron*), *stegvar* ‘to want to be governor, to pretend to be governor, to be appointed governor’ < *guyər/geyər* ‘governor’ (< Fr. *gouverneur*), *telven* ‘to phone’ < *tīlfūn* ‘phone’ (< Fr. *téléphone*). However, there are also non-denominative verbs such as *varṣa* ‘to oblige, to compel’ (< Fr. *forcer*), *bowṣa/bāṣa* ‘to iron (the laundry)’ (< Fr. *repasser*), *‘arte* ‘to arrest, to apprehend (sb)’ (< Fr. *arrêter*), *ṣarṣe* ‘to load (a vehicle)’ (< Fr. *charger*), *kowmed* ‘to give orders’ (< Fr. *commander*), *weste* ‘to search’ (< Fr. *visiter*), *maṣše* ‘to be current, to be in fashion’ (< Fr. *marcher*), *‘anter* ‘to bring to the hospital, to hospitalize’ (< Fr. *entrer, rentrer*) and especially its passive form with *u-* (specific to Hassaniyya) *u‘anter* ‘to be hospitalized’.

The form of the verbs is relatively varied, but less than that of the nouns. Some verbs are integrated as derived forms and a majority of them are integrated as quadrilateral root verbs (with four radicals). The only verb that appears to be irregular is *genye* ‘to win (especially a competition)’ (< Fr. *gagner*). To be regular, it would have to have a long first vowel *gānye or be a true *genye quadrilateral (but a root like GNY Y seems to have no equivalent in Hassaniyya).

The high proportion of verbs is one of the characteristics of the borrowings of Hassaniyya from French compared to the diatopic borrowings of French in Mauritania.

The other specificity concerns the semantic fields in play, which also tend to be differentiated. Apart from the semantic fields of the army and public services, inherited from colonization and the beginnings of the modern state, the most significant field is undoubtedly that of industrialized objects. For more details, see Ould Mohamed Baba (2003).

5. Internal Language Policy

5.1 Linguistic Purism

If there is one trait of French that Mauritians have never sought to adopt, it is the guttural pronunciation of the *r* as practised in most of France. Not rolling the *r* as in the national languages is a sign of suspicious acculturation, but it is practically the only example of linguistic purism to be reported. However, it can be said that in the 1960s and 1970s, when French was the training and working language of a small elite, it was fashionable to avoid code-switching between French and any of the mother tongues. This attitude became much less frequent when French ceased to be a well-mastered language among students, employees and intellectuals. In addition, there has always been a variety of French, used in unofficial communication (both oral and written), which can be considered a form of local French. According to Leclerc (2018, 5), there are even two different sub-varieties: that of the Moors, influenced more particularly by Hassaniyya, and that of the Black Africans, influenced above all by the Wolof language. To my knowledge, neither has been systematically criticized.

5.2 Description of Linguistic Characteristics

As far as I know, there is no grammar or dictionary. The work by Ould Zein/Queffélec (1997) remains the most informative on the description of the linguistic characteristics.

5.3 Usage of Linguistic Characteristics

Orality – Leaving aside not only what can be considered incorrect, but also what appears to be particular lexicons (of schoolchildren or students, of mechanics, etc.), it can be said that the majority of the characteristics identified above are likely to be used fairly widely in non-literary contexts. It is difficult to be very precise, although Ould Zein/Queffélec (1997) give various indications of the frequency and type of use (oral or written) of many lexemes.

Media – The written language of the media is generally very close to standard French, but there is also a tendency to give sway to the characteristics of local French. This tendency was embodied by a talented journalist, Habib Ould Mahfoudh, whose columns were gathered together in two anthologies (2012/2018) after his untimely death. In his articles, he was so good at combining different language registers, from the slangiest to the most academic, and various varieties of French, from local French (even integrating entire phrases from Hassaniyya), to standard French, that he almost created his own language. The fact that his style is still being emulated by Mauritanian journalists and writers proves not only that it is appreciated, but also that it meets the needs and expectations of those who use French.

Literature – French-language Mauritanian literature, with its limited production (see Belvaude 1989, Martin Granel/Ould Mohamed Lemine/Voisset 1992, Bariou et al. 1995, Diagana 2004 and 2008), has so far been dominated by the use of a high register. This is, in any case, the point of view defended by Diagana (2004) in the final chapter of his thesis where he explores the language and style of Mauritanian writers. However, he notes one exception, that of Harouna-Rachid Ly, whose writing differs from the aesthetics of other authors, both by the attestation of a sentence in pidgin (“petit nègre”) and by the use of French words transcribed according to local pronunciation (such as *yaawour* for *yoghurt* and *karenté dentité* for *identity card*).

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