

# An account of distinctive phonetic and lexical features of Gambian English

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The article discusses the specific features of the English used in The Gambia by looking at the phonetic and lexical markers that distinguish Gambian English from the other national varieties of West African English. The study shows that Gambian English has a number of established and exclusive features owing to the formation of a national norm and the influence of certain indigenous languages, yielding a national quasi-standard easy to identify.

## 1. Introduction

One of the last white spots on the map of world Englishes in terms of linguistic literature is Gambian English. Except for a very cursory treatment of some “African English expressions in The Gambia” by Richmond (1989)<sup>1</sup> and some initial findings in Simo Bobda, Wolf and Peter (1999)<sup>2</sup> little is known about this variety. All one can find is that The Gambia is listed as one of the countries in which West African English is spoken, which may imply that there are no distinguishing features worthy of consideration (cf. e.g. Gramley and Pätzold 1992: 423–31; McArthur 1992: 428, 1111; Crystal 1995: 361; McArthur 2002: 274).

With this article we intend to shed further light on the specific features of the English spoken in the smallest (and also westernmost) of all the African

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1. Richmond’s study is hardly more than a sketchy wordlist of items, most of which are not even specific to The Gambia (e.g. *slowly-slowly*) or even are part of the common core (e.g. *piss, Is it?*).

2. These authors take a comparative perspective with respect to the varieties they discuss.

states by looking at phonetic and lexical features (including code-switching) that distinguish Gambian English from the other national varieties of West African English (Sierra Leonean English, Liberian English, Ghanaian English, Nigerian English and Cameroon English).<sup>3</sup> After methodological remarks we will present some sociolinguistic facts about The Gambia, since a number of features discussed can only be understood against the background of the linguistic situation in this country.

## 2. Methodological remarks

This paper is based primarily on data collected from fieldwork that was carried out in The Gambia in September/October 2000 and from interviews with Gambian informants living in Germany. The phonetic part is based on about 20 hours of recording plus observations in our daily interaction with Gambians during our stay. The informants were selected to represent the major ethnic groups (Mandinka, Fula, Wolof, Dyola; also Aku) and were differentiated according to gender, age and education. We have different sets of recordings: firstly, structured interviews partly aiming at sociolinguistic and socio-cultural content; secondly, *ad hoc* recordings of natural everyday communication (e.g. informal visits at home); and thirdly, recordings from Gambian TV.

Our corpus of written Gambian English is constantly being expanded. It consists of material gathered during our stay and comprises newspapers in print (*Daily Observer*, *Sunday Observer*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Point*), novels/short stories (e.g. by Ebou Dibba, Nana Grey-Johnson and Bala S. K. Saho) and travel literature (tourist guides). After our stay we have regularly surveyed Gambian newspapers available online (at: <http://www.gambianews.com/gambia%20daily/gambiadailymain2001.htm>); <http://www.gambianews.com/thespectator/>); <http://www.qanet.gm/Independent/independent.html>); <http://www.qanet.gm/point/point.html>)).

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3. Note that there are also grammatical peculiarities of Gambian English which are not exclusive and can also be found in other varieties of West African English (or other New Englishes).

### 3. The linguistic situation in The Gambia

Historically, contacts with the English go back to 1588, when the English acquired the territory around the mouth of the river Gambia from the Portuguese. In 1816 Bathurst, today Banjul, was founded to serve as a naval base and a settlement for freed slaves. After being jointly administered with Sierra Leone, The Gambia became a British colony in 1843. It gained independence and became part of the Commonwealth in 1965 (Wolf 2001).

The linguistic situation in The Gambia cannot be seen separately from that in francophone Senegal, which, except for The Gambia's coastline, completely surrounds the smaller of the two countries together referred to as *Senegambia*. The Gambia and Senegal have close linguistic and cultural ties; for example, with the exception of Aku,<sup>4</sup> the English-based creole spoken in and around Banjul, all ethnic groups and L1 languages found in The Gambia also exist in Senegal (cf. Grimes 1996). Besides English, which is the official language of The Gambia, and Aku, 18 other languages are reported for the country. Of the population of 1 411 205 (July 2001 est.; see United States. Government. Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook 2001 online, sub *The Gambia*, accessed 05/03/2002), Mandinka<sup>5</sup> L1 speakers make up 42%; other major languages include Fulfuldé (also known as Fula), Wolof and Dyola (also Jola).

As to English, no exact figures exist concerning the number of speakers, but since it is mostly acquired as a second language through formal education, one can deduce the percentage of speakers with some degree of competence in English by correlating it with the literacy rate, estimated to be 47,5% (age 15 and over with reading/writing skills; CIA World Factbook 2001 online — see above).

It is a well-known sociolinguistic problem how to define the L2 national forms of English. Some authors label certain national varieties as “emerging standards”. We are aware of the fact that these varieties must not be confused with an exonormative standard established by native varieties of English. From our point of view, however, with regard to The Gambia it is clearly warranted to speak of a national norm of Gambian English. Such a norm is established by intravarietal processes. This can be buttressed by the fact that even those

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4. For more information on Aku, see Peter and Wolf (2003).

5. Mandinka is also known as Mandingo or Manding (cf. Williamson and Blench 2000: 18–20). We prefer, however, Mandinka, as this is the name Gambians use for it. It may also be regarded as a national variety of Manding in The Gambia and Senegal.

speakers of Gambian English whose mother tongue phonemic systems do include specific phonemes abide by the national realization of certain sound features (e.g. Fulfuldè /t/; see below for these features and Simo Bobda 2003 for a general discussion of this phenomenon in African English).

As to internal variation in Gambian English, the phonetic features discussed below were identified in the speech of all of its speakers we have observed, but the frequency of occurrence of these markers varies and tends to correlate with the social strata of the language users and the domains in which they use English. These features are highly frequent in basilectal and more noticeable in mesolectal than in acrolectal contexts, but they do occur across all speaker groups.<sup>6</sup> The basilectal forms can often be associated with speakers who had no regular school education and were not formally trained in English but who use English in limited functional contexts (e.g. interaction with tourists). Thus, their pronunciation displays strong interference from their native languages. The phonetic features discussed below are shared by most speakers and are specific to The Gambia. Therefore, the inventory of such markers and other features constitutes what might be called “mainstream” Gambian English. This form may not apply to “been-tos” (Gambian people who lived and were trained in Britain, the U.S.A., etc.) and, for obvious reasons, the Krio-speaking Akus.

Contrary to claims made in some of the existing literature (Todd 1990: 13; Gramley and Pätzold 1992: 426), The Gambia differs from the other anglophone West African countries in that no pidgin or creole is used as a lingua franca there (Peter and Wolf 2003). This is due to the fact that other languages are used for interlingual contact situations.

The description of Aku (a creole and a descendant of the Sierra Leonean Krio) as a second language (Holm 1989: 417; Dalphinis 1980: 261–8) seems to be outdated, too. No informant of the younger generation who is not an Aku had a knowledge of Aku.<sup>7</sup> In the most recent edition of the *Ethnologue* (Grimes

6. In our recordings, the lowest frequency of occurrence was observed in the speech of a television announcer who may have been trained outside of The Gambia for a longer period of time, a suspicion that could not be verified because of the specific format of the recording.

7. This is due to the fact that the social influence of the Aku people has declined since independence. Among the Akus there are only a small number who, e.g., run a relatively bigger firm. In such a context, we met a young Aku man in the area of Banjul who owned a garage with approximately twenty workers. He told us that he spoke English, Aku, Wolof and other Gambian languages (his order) with his employees. We observed that he mostly used Aku in conversation with Krio-speaking fitters (Sierra Leonean refugees) and Wolof with Gambians, both sometimes mixed with some English terminology of car maintenance.

2000; but cf. also Grimes 1996), Aku or Gambian Krio is not even given a separate entry.

As noted earlier, Mandinka is the most widely spoken language in the country, and is also the main lingua franca. Fulfuldé and Wolof (see Sonko-Godwin 1988: 20) also function as contact languages, but not to the same extent as Mandinka. However, from a Senegambian perspective, in the long run Wolof may challenge the role of Mandinka as the main lingua franca. In Senegal, Wolof is the most important language in terms of its number of speakers and its function as a lingua franca. Wolof is gaining ground as an L1, as more and more Senegalese are claiming a Wolof ethnicity, a process known as “Wolofization”.<sup>8</sup> Since the Wolof are responsible for much of the Senegambian trade and being Wolof has some prestige, it is possible that Wolofization will take place in The Gambia as well.

As to the acquisition of English, the situation in The Gambia is different from that found in Sierra Leone, Nigeria and the anglophone part of Cameroon, where many children are able to speak Krio or Pidgin English, respectively, when they start school. In The Gambia, children start learning English as a subject when they enter school and at the same time they have to use it as the medium of instruction in other classes.

Although no provisions have been made in the 1997 constitution concerning the role and status of English and of the Gambian languages, English is well established as The Gambia’s official language. Despite Wolofization and the use of other African languages as means of interethnic communication, we predict that its position will remain strong, apart from its international standing, because of its functions in the official domains (parliament, law courts, radio and television, education) and the efforts made by such institutions as the West African Examination Council (a transnational West African organization striving for maintaining the level of English among the school populations in its member states — The Gambia, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ghana and Nigeria). There is, in addition, the role of English as a factor of national identity and as a marker of separateness vis-à-vis francophone Senegal.

Last but not least, it should be pointed out that The Gambia hosts approximately 400 000 to 500 000 refugees from Senegal (particularly the *Casamance* region), Guinea and Sierra Leone; i.e. the number of refugees equals almost

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8. The process of Wolofization is not the result of language policy. It is due to Wolof gaining more and more native and L2 speakers because of the social prestige of the language, which goes back to the economic success of the Wolof people.

one third of the indigenous population. Depending on the duration of their stay, especially the influx of a large number of Krio-speaking Sierra Leoneans may have some impact on the linguistic situation and the English spoken there.

#### 4. Specific features of Gambian English

One of the reasons for referring to the English used in The Gambia as Gambian English is the fact that, as it appears, a number of established and relatively stable Gambian features can be identified in both spoken and written texts. Such peculiarities occur mainly in pronunciation and lexis. Concerning grammar, Gambian English has many features in common with other African varieties of English, such as pluralization of Standard English non-count nouns, specific uses of articles and prepositions, etc. As Gambian English does not appear to be different in that respect from other varieties of West African English, we refer the reader to Hansen, Carls and Lucko (1996: 186–7) for an overview.

##### 4.1 Phonetic features of Gambian English

Gambian English pronunciation constitutes one of the West African English accents. As such, it has typical features associated with the whole region, but also some subregional features and, predictably, some quasi-exclusive features.

The Gambia shares with most of West Africa features like /ɔ/ for the STRUT vowel in the examples [strɔt, kɔt, mɔnde, jɔŋ] *strut, cut, Monday, young*, /ɔ/ for the NURSE vowel represented graphically by ⟨or, our, ur⟩, e.g. [wɔk, dʒɔne, pɔpɔs] *work, journey, purpose*, and /ɔ/ for the post-tonic COMMA vowel represented by ⟨ure, ur, our, or⟩, e.g. [kɔltʃ, mɔmɔ, leɔ, dɔktɔ] *culture, murmur, labour, doctor*.

Several features are shared by Sierra Leone and some by Nigeria (especially Yorubaland), which form with The Gambia what has been termed “the Krio connection” (Simo Bobda 2003). These features include the realization of the NURSE vowel for ⟨er, ear, ir, yr⟩ as /a/ and for ⟨ir⟩ in some words as /ɔ/, contrasting with /ɛ, e/ elsewhere. Examples: [masi, lan, tati, ma] *mercy, learn, thirty, myrrh*; [fɔst, bɔd, tɔd] *first, bird, third*.

Among the NURSE lexical set, it is worth noting the particular pronunciation in The Gambia of the words *person* and *girl* as p[a]rson and g[a]l. The Krio-induced p[ɔ]rson, which predominates in basilectal Sierra Leonean and Nigerian Yoruba English, hardly occurs in The Gambia. The almost systematic [gal]

across the speech continuum contrasts with the predominance of [g(i)ɛl] in Nigeria, even in basilectal English.

Note that, in some of the above words, /ɔ/ and /a/ alternate in Gambian acrolectal English with /ɛ, e/, these two substitutes being in complementary distribution in the sense that the ε-Tensing Rule (Simo Bobda 1994: 179ff) may yield [e] before one consonant in medial position. In other words, some Gambian acrolectal English may have /ɛ, e/, in addition to /a/ and /ɔ/; e.g. *th[ɛ]rst* ~ *th[e]rsty* ('thirst ~ -y'), *w[ɛ]rk* ~ *w[e]rking* ('work ~ -ing').

In the pronunciation of SQUARE words, The Gambia also shares the features of the other countries forming the Krio connection: contrasting generally with /ɛ/ elsewhere in West Africa, Gambians, like Sierra Leoneans and Nigerians, realize the SQUARE vowels as [ea, eɛ, ia, iɛ] in many words including *square, there, wear, prepare, air*. While the alternation between /e/ and /i/ in these diphthongal sequences may be in free variation or lexically conditioned, /a/ and /ɛ/ are generally determined by the level of speech, with /a/ generally occurring on the basilectal side and /ɛ/ on the acrolectal side of the continuum.

Finally, the Gambian realization of the NEAR vowel is similar to that of Sierra Leone and Nigeria: for /iə, iɛ/ in Cameroon and Ghana, Gambians, like Sierra Leoneans and Nigerians, generally have /ia/ for *near, beer, fear, dear*, especially in basilectal and mesolectal speech.

There is a tendency towards a palatal pronunciation of /u/ as /i/ typically in *ed[i]cation* (cf. also below: palatalization in consonants). Even more specific is the occasional realization of the TRAP vowel as /ɛ/ in words like [ɛ]*nimal* and *scr[ɛ]tch*. The occurrence of /ɛ/ for RP /æ/, which in West Africa is normally associated only with Liberia, is quite surprising in Gambian English, which has no particular connection or resemblance with Liberian English, or the English of the countries of north-east, east and especially southern Africa where this feature occurs.

Many Gambian speakers, unlike other West Africans, do differentiate between long and short monophthongs, as their native languages (e.g. Mandinka and Wolof) have two sets of vowels set apart by quantity. See the contrast in the examples [put] *put* and [gʊt] *good* or [sit] *sit* and ['li:da] *leader*; for long monophthongs cf. also [hɑ:ps] *herbs*, [wɔ:k] *work* and [hɑ:d] *hard*, for a monophthongized closing diphthong ['o:zən] *ocean*, and for loan-words from Mandinka the lexemes ['kɔ:ra] *kora* and [al'ka:lɔ] *alkalo*.

Concerning Gambian English consonants, an important feature of the articulatory setting is "fronting", i.e. a number of consonants appear to be fronted in comparison with the corresponding RP sounds. Obviously, fronting

is caused by the structure of the underlying native languages. It yields such striking results as apicalization and palatalization (cf. the vowel /u/ above). This process particularly affects the realization of the broad spirants /ʃ/ and /ʒ/, the affricates /tʃ/ and /dʒ/, /r/, but also /s/. Consequently, RP /ʃ/ is replaced by /s/, which is by far the most distinctive feature of Gambian English. The substitution of /s/ for the /ʃ/ of European languages is not an uncommon feature in West Africa, for example, of the French of speakers of many northern and West Atlantic Niger-Congo languages. For instance, many Senegalese, Malians, Cameroonians will say *bou[s]e*, *[s]aussure*, *pé[s]é* for French *bouche*, *chaussure*, *péché* ‘mouth’, ‘shoe’, ‘sin’. Outside of The Gambia, however, the feature occurs only rarely; if it does, it is the pronunciation of speakers from specific linguistic backgrounds, similar to Gambians, and also of users of Sierra Leonean English. But nowhere in Africa has the occurrence of /s/ for /ʃ/ acquired the status of a national norm as in The Gambia (cf. Section 3). This is primarily due to the fact that the two dominant Gambian languages, Mandinka and Wolof, and probably some of the others, do not have /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ nor /z/ in their phonological systems. Their inventories are restricted to /s/ only (see Haust 1995:85, 89, for Mandinka and Wolof; Rowlands 1959:9, for Mandinka).

The most educated Gambian speaker is likely to say *[s]ip* ‘ship’, *[s]op* ‘shop’, *expan[s]ion*, *spe[s]ial*, etc. This phenomenon affects all positions. Also, the /ʃ/ of *-ion* words which in most African Englishes occurs for RP /ʒ/, becomes [s]. Gambian English thus has *conclu[s]ion*, *divi[s]ion*, *circumci[s]ion*, etc.

The hypercorrect /ʃ/ corresponding to the above phenomenon may occur in pronunciations like *[ʃ]oup*, *[ʃ]auce*, *[ʃ]ong* for ‘soup’, ‘sauce’, ‘song’. It is the result of over-generalizing the foreign sound /ʃ/ as a result of intralingual interference in the acquisition of L2 English. In The Gambia, it has also become a characteristic national feature.

Predictably /ʒ/, the voiced (and weak) counterpart of /ʃ/, is realized as /z/, yielding *u[z]ual*, *mea[z]ure*, *[z]enre*.

Furthermore, apicalization/palatalization concerns the pronunciation of affricates. RP /tʃ/ and /dʒ/ (cf. also /ʃ/ and /ʒ/ above) are commonly rendered as /tj/ or /tʃ/, less commonly /dj/ (e.g. [tʃentʃ] *change*, [tʃetʃis] *churches*, [kɔntedʒɔn] *contagion*). /tʃ/ is sometimes pronounced as /dj/, caused by lenition; e.g. *much* [mɔdj]. Further, /dʒ/ may be pronounced as /j/; e.g. *ma[j]ority*, *reli[j]ion*, while syllable-final /tʃ/ may be realized as /t/ (or weakened as /d/), e.g. [skɾet, witkɾaf] *scratch*, *witchcraft*. This is an exclusive feature of Gambian English.

The other consonantal features of Gambian English include the occurrence of the (apical) trill (for RP post-alveolar /r/), a feature also found in the French

and English of speakers from northern and West-Atlantic Niger-Congo languages; elsewhere in West Africa the prevailing pronunciation is an (apico-) alveolar fricative or frictionless continuant.

The confusion between /f, v, b/ is attributable to the missing /v/ in Mandinka and Wolof (cf. Haust 1995:85, 89), which yields pronunciations like *cassa*[b]a, sometimes similar to the bilabial fricative [β] in Spanish, or *cassa*[f]a.

In Gambian English, RP syllabic dark /l/, transformed to [-ul] by West African l-vocalization, and post-vocalic /l/ in word-final position are generally preserved, whereas they are often prone to be elided in Ghanaian, Nigerian and Cameroonian English. Examples are [pipul] *people*, [baisikul] *bicycle*, [travul] *travel*, [skul] *school* and [lɔkal] *local*.

Word-final weak (lenis) consonants are often preserved (with less plosion) and not produced as strong (fortis) sounds. Sometimes, due to overgeneralization, even strong consonants become weak. Thus the neutralization of the phonemic opposition between strong and weak in final position, which occurs in the English of Ghanaians, Nigerians and Cameroonians, is often avoided — a feature that may also occur in Sierra Leonean English (cf. Maryns 2000:161–3); cf. e.g. [traib] *tribe* and [tɕad] *Chad*.

Finally, Gambian consonantal phonology is sometimes marked by a severe simplification of consonant clusters which affects, in addition to the usual clusters in West Africa, others like /sk-/ (e.g. [kret] *scratch*).

Gambian suprasegmental English phonology is characterized by a high frequency of different backward stress. In addition to stress patterns like *'appropriate*, *'despite*, *'extent* and *'success* already found in other West African Englishes, a Gambian English speaker may produce features like (noun) *'mistake*, *'occur*, *'remember*, *'religion*, etc.

Intonation may differ from speaker to speaker, but pitch in mainstream Gambian English is generally very high on all stressed syllables, a characteristic, like some of the above features, of the French and English of speakers from the West Atlantic and northern group of Niger-Congo languages. Of the major languages, Mandinka is reported to be tonal (with high and low tones) and Wolof is considered a non-tonal (or accent) language (cf. Haust 1995:85, 89). Mandinka and Wolof speakers of English, though, do not differ greatly. In Mandinka speakers, for example, we find that high pitches refer to prominent syllables (usually of content words) and low pitches to unstressed syllables, with a fall on the nucleus (e.g. in declarative sentences). Interestingly, the overall pitch contour of Mandinka speakers resembles that of speakers with an accent-

language background. Also, declination is not distinct.<sup>9</sup> Intonation appears to be tonal only in the small group of L1 users of Aku, the Gambian variety of Krio.<sup>10</sup> Here, declination is quite distinct.

#### 4.2 A brief survey of lexical Gambianisms

It is widely accepted that the emergence of lexical peculiarities in a country where English is used as a second language in a non-occidental cultural situation, as in many West African countries, is primarily a result of indigenization. This process materializes in the adaptation of the English lexicon to the given local socio-cultural background. It finds its expression in loan-words that have been borrowed from the indigenous languages and that relate to concepts unknown to users of English elsewhere; cf. the Mandinka word *kafo* ‘group of people forming an association or club’. Also, new word-formations or lexical phrases are coined, sometimes mixed with loan-words in hybrid structures, to refer to denotata specific to The Gambia only; cf. *gate-takings* ‘total amount of entrance or admission fees’, *Judicial Service Commission* ‘commission whose task it is to advise the Gambian President on the appointment of judges and other personnel in the judiciary’ and *nawetan zone* ‘one of the zones into which a larger area is divided for the purpose of holding off-season football tournaments’.

The following list, although non-exhaustive, is to reflect the exclusive structure of Gambian English vocabulary only. Our findings are based on a large corpus of lexemes (compiled at Humboldt University Berlin), presently 4000, that originate from all six national varieties of West African English. This corpus is designed in such a way that the distribution of each lexeme across the varieties in question is marked. Thus, we are able to arrive at conclusions about the exclusiveness or inclusiveness of each entry. Such a comparative approach, which goes beyond the more or less indiscriminate listing of items as peculiar to one variety, though certain lexical entries exist as well in other varieties,<sup>11</sup> is deemed promising and warranted (for the feasibility of such a comparative

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9. The term “declination” is used to refer to the pitch levels that show a tendency to become gradually lower through the course of a speech group. Accordingly, the degree of articulatory force is also reduced continually from the start to the end of such a unit.

10. Krio has been described to have a two-tone system with an optional rise on medial high tones (see Fyle and Jones 1980:xx–xxiii), and so has Aku.

11. For a recent example, see Dako (2001), who, e.g. lists *been-to* and *wrapper*, and a few others, which are found in practically all West African varieties.

perspective see Wolf and Igboanusi 2003). For comparison, we have also included some non-exclusive lexemes that stem from Aku (and Krio respectively); they are marked with an asterisk (\*).

The lexical items are arranged on the basis of specific socio-cultural domains that are used as titles for the subsections. The lexemes are listed with meanings and the source languages (or countries of origin, where known) in square brackets, if not English.

#### 4.2.1 *Food and beverages*

- *attaya* ‘local green tea, of Chinese origin’
- *benachen* ‘rice cooked together with fish (or sometimes meat) and vegetables with tomato puree’ [Wol.]<sup>12</sup>
- *cherreh* ‘meal of steamed millet flour balls’ [Wol.]
- *churai-gerteh* ‘sweet porridge consisting of pounded groundnuts and rice, served with yoghurt or sour milk’ [Wol.]
- *chicken yassa* ‘chicken cooked with fresh lime, onions and ground black pepper’ [*yassa*: Wol.]
- *domoda* ‘meat in groundnut stew and usually served with rice’ [Md.]
- *durang* synonymous with *domoda* [Md.]
- *fish yassa* ‘fish cooked similar to *chicken yassa*’ (see above)
- *kanja* ‘the vegetable okra’ [Md.]
- *kingkili-ba* ‘aromatic, lightly green herb tea’ [Md.]
- *olele\** ‘bean dumpling cooked in palm oil’ [Krio/Aku]
- *sisay yassa* synonymous with *chicken yassa* [*sisay*: Md.]
- *superkanja* ‘okra, fish (or meat), palm oil onions and pepper boiled together’ (see *kanja*)
- *teng dolo* ‘palm-wine’ [Md.]
- *wondjo* ‘red tea made from Hibiscus’ [Md.]

#### 4.2.2 *Culture and traditional social life*

- *40th day charity* ‘memorial celebration of the dead’
- *acting chief* ‘deputy chief’
- *alkalo*<sup>13</sup> ‘head of a community or village’ [Ar. > Md.]

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12. See list of abbreviations (end of article).

13. Cf. the word *alkali* (e.g. in Nigeria) that has the same origin but has undergone a different process of linguistic assimilation and nativization.

- *asiko*\* ‘drums used in the playing of *gumbay music*’ [Ewe? > Krio/Aku]
- *berti* ‘fashionable hair style’ [prob. Senegal]
- *bukarabu* (*drums*) ‘traditional drums in Senegal and The Gambia’ [Dyola]
- *bour* ‘chief; traditional ruler’ [Dyola]
- *griot* ‘storyteller, poet and musician’ [French]
- *gumbay*\* ‘music and dance traditional to the Akus’ [Krio/Aku]
- *hallam* ‘traditional guitar-like musical instrument’ [Wol.]
- *jali* synonymous with *griot* [Md.]
- *kora* ‘traditional harp-like instrument’ [Md.]
- *kumpo* ‘Dyola mask dance’ [Dyola]
- *mansa* ‘chief; traditional ruler’ [Md.]
- *mbalax* ‘basic rhythm in Wolof drumming; modern energetic and rhythmical Wolof-dominated style of music’ [Wol.]
- *Roots Homecoming Festival* ‘festival related to the ancestry of African-American people as described by Alex Haley’s *Roots*’
- *sabar* (*drums*) ‘set of five to seven drums played by Wolof musicians’ [Wol.]
- *tama* (*drum*) ‘Wolof talking drum’ [Wol.]
- *tiko* ‘headcloth worn by women’ [Md.]
- *traditional chief* ‘chief elected in the traditional way as opposed to those who are appointed by the government’
- *woman alkalo* ‘female head of a village’ (see *alkalo*)

#### 4.2.3 Religion

- *almudo* ‘boy given by his parents to a marabout for Islamic education; street child’ [Ar. > Md.]
- *daras* ‘Islamic community of followers’ [Ar.]
- *fadjarr* ‘first prayer of the day for Muslims’ [Ar. > Wol.]
- *koriteh* ‘three-day Muslim feast of Eid al-fitr’ [Wol.]
- *talibeh* ‘Islamic follower’ [Ar. > Wol.]
- *tobaski* ‘Muslim feast of Eid al-adha’ [Wol.]

#### 4.2.4 Social groups and activities

- *kafo* ‘group of people forming an association or club’ [Md.]
- *nawetan*<sup>14</sup> (also ~ *match*, ~ *league*) ‘off-season tournament football’ [Wol.]
- *osuso* ‘traditional scheme of saving among women to assist each other’ [Md.]

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14. The word *nawetan*, as others, also occurs in less common orthographic variants; cf. *nawettan*, *nawetaan* and *nawettaan*.

#### 4.2.5 *Political and administrative system*

##### 4.2.5.1 *Administrative positions*

- *Deputy Permanent Secretary* ‘senior civil servant in a central ministry’
- *Local Government Officer* ‘civil servant at local level’
- *Secretary of State* ‘cabinet member; member of the Gambian central government; minister’

##### 4.2.5.2 *Administrative structures*

- *MacCarthy Island Division* ‘central province’
- *Lower River Division* ‘province east of Banjul’
- *North Bank Division* ‘province north of Banjul’
- *Upper River Division* ‘easternmost province of the country’
- *Western Division* ‘westernmost province south of Banjul’
- *Basse Area* ‘administrative area of and around Basse Santa Su’
- *Greater Banjul Area* ‘administrative area of the Kombo and Banjul city’
- *Kombo (area)* ‘complex of towns/cities in the Western Division near Banjul, including Serrekunda, Bakau and others’ [Md.]

##### 4.2.5.3 *Government institutions*

- *Area Council* ‘local government’
- *GNA (Gambia National Army)* ‘The Gambia’s armed forces’
- *Judicial Service Commission* ‘commission whose task is to advise the Gambian President on the appointment of judges and other personnel in the judiciary’
- *Land Allocation Board* ‘board of people responsible for allocating land for special purposes, such as recreation, to social groups’
- *Village Development Committee* (self-explaining)

#### 4.2.6 *Education system*

- *Lower Basic School* ‘primary school level, grades one to six’
- *Junior Secondary School* ‘first secondary school, grades seven to nine’
- *Senior Secondary School* ‘second secondary school, grades ten to twelve’
- *Basic Education Cycle* ‘schooling from grade one to grade nine’

#### 4.2.7 *Miscellaneous*

- *Aku* ‘Gambian of Krio origin; (in Sierra Leone) initially, Krio refusing to abandon the Islamic faith for Christianity;<sup>15</sup> Gambian Krio variety’ [?Yor. > Krio]
- *Aku marabout* ‘Aku who is a muslim’ (see above)
- *bana bano* ‘fishmonger’ [Md.]
- *beach bar* ‘small restaurant or shop on or near the beach’
- *bumster* ‘usually young man or boy who follows tourists pestering them to be guided by him for money, also takes money for “finding” a taxi’
- *butut* ‘subunit of the Gambian currency’ [Wol.]
- *dalasi* ‘Gambian currency unit’
- *gate-takings* ‘total amount of entrance or admission fees’
- *half-day* (in Islamic Gambia Friday is a half workday)
- *market canteen* ‘small shop in a marketplace that provides light meals’
- [pus] [pus] *push push* ‘big hand-propelled two-wheeled cart carrying a load’
- *small truck* synonymous with *push push* [Aku]
- *rasta people* ‘young people who are adherents of the rasta culture, often *bumsters*’ (cf. above) [Amh. > Jam.]
- *tesito* ‘The Gambia’s development philosophy of self-reliance under President Jawara’ [Md.]
- *tubab* ‘white person; European’ [Md.].

Most lexical units listed above are loan-words from the major indigenous languages, many of which originate from Mandinka (e.g. *jali* and *tiko*) and Wolof (e.g. *cherreh* and *koriteh*). Some of them are used to refer to concepts or denotata which occur in no other anglophone West African country. As to others, e.g. those associated with Islam, there seems to be a tendency to prefer the local expression to non-local ones, i.e. Arabic or English lexemes are avoided.

Many expressions that occur in the lexical domains of food/beverages, religion, social activities and traditional culture are also found in neighbouring francophone Senegal. Nevertheless, with regard to English, we consider them Gambianisms.

Newly coined English expressions can mainly be found in the political and administrative sphere, in which they are predominant (as an exception cf. *tesito*). This phenomenon correlates with the official functions the English language is assigned and more or less restricted to (e.g. government and

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15. See Wyse (1991:9).

governance, parliament, education). Such words and lexical phrases were introduced for specifically Gambian societal subsystems; cf. e.g. *Basic Education Cycle, Judicial Service Commission, Secretary of State and Western Division*.

The majority of lexemes stemming from Aku/Krio (cf. e.g. *wowo* 'ugly') can only be found in novels or short stories written by Aku authors. Only rarely will they be actively used by non-Aku speakers or writers.

Due to their common ethnic and linguistic background, the small community of Aku speakers, who in their majority are Christians, share a number of lexical items with Sierra Leoneans in general and Krios in particular, or even with Nigerian Yoruba speakers. Such examples are *cabaslot* 'large cover-all dress worn by elderly Krio and Aku women', *ebe* 'traditional dish cooked with yams, cassava, etc.' or *ori butter* 'butter made from the seeds of the shea tree, used as food and for the production of soap'.

Thus, lexically, Gambian English seems to be a distinct national form of English. This especially holds true for mainstream Gambian English (i.e. exclusive of Aku English), which has its base in the 90% Muslim population of predominantly Mandinka-Wolof socio-cultural background.

English lexical material also plays an important role in code-switching between Gambian languages (cf. Haust 1995). Our observations show that the change of language choice may result in either the use of an indigenous language in one utterance and English in another one during the same conversation, or in the insertion of English expressions into a Wolof, Mandinka, etc. sentence, thus yielding a hybrid syntactic structure. Common examples of code-switching are e.g.:

- the use of English numbers in sentences otherwise purely Wolof, Mandinka, etc., presumably because English is the medium of instruction in all subjects at school, resulting in a lack of knowledge in certain lexical fields of the native languages;
- conversational formulas such as *What do you mean?, Don't be afraid or this time ... last time ...*, possibly preferred because of their shortness and/or directness;
- business-related utterances, for example for the purpose of hotel management, book-keeping, etc., as in *five litres* [of oil for cooking], *I can give you that* (manager to cook), or *You have service three days* (manager to clerk).

## 5. Summary and conclusion

English is the official language of The Gambia. In this role, it is used in specific domains, such as administration, education, the legal system and the media. As a second language, Gambian English cannot fully be compared to some of the other West African national varieties of English. It is not very likely to be used in spoken interethnic communication (cf. the role of Liberian English and Ghanaian English as national lingua francas among more educated speakers in an urban context). This function is taken by the country's major languages, Mandinka and Wolof.

Although the use of English is functionally restricted and our study is only meant to be preliminary, in weighing up the various phonetic/lexical data and the results of their analysis, we can state that Gambian English is relatively homogeneous, except for the very small group of Aku people, who, owing to different linguistic and socio-cultural origin, have their own peculiarities. Mainstream Gambian English can thus be understood as, roughly, Gambian English excluding Aku English.

In its pronunciation we find a number of established features, i.e. recurrent in different groups of speakers, and even, with regard to other West African varieties of English, exclusive markers. They are originally based on phonetic/phonological features in the major substratum languages (Mandinka, Wolof). The high frequency of occurrence they have, however, is largely due to the formation of a national norm determining the use of English, which, in turn, even has an influence on speakers whose mother tongues do not differ from native Standard English with respect to the above-mentioned features.

Concerning lexis, the Gambianisms reflect domains of reference that are specific to The Gambia. English coinages can chiefly be found to represent phenomena in the spheres of administration, education, law, etc. Correspondingly, they are used in both speech and written form. Loans from indigenous languages mainly occur in the newspapers to denote items of religion, cultural tradition, social activities and in the lexical field of food and beverages.

All in all, Gambian English, as a national form, is, at the phonetic and lexical levels, distinct from other national varieties of West African English. There is sufficient structural evidence for us to draw such a general conclusion at this early stage of work. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that the study will be complemented by future research expanding the scope of investigation. An important field that needs further examining, in all varieties of West African English, is that of discourse structure and textual organization.

As for the specific situation of The Gambia, the possible linguistic influence of the many anglophone and Krio-speaking Sierra Leonean immigrants may have a structural impact on Gambian English and strengthen its position. Given this development and the process of Wolofization (cf. Section 3), it might be warranted to scrutinize the structure and role of Gambian English again after some time.

## Abbreviations

Amh.	Amharic (Ethiopia)
Ar.	Arabic
Jam.	Jamaica
Md.	Mandinka
Wol.	Wolof
Yor.	Yoruba

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