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Impressionistic sketch of Fulfulde variation in Ngaoundéré, Cameroon

The paper provides a draft of a research project located in urban contexts of northern Cameroon utilizing social network theory to retrace linguistic variation and to model language change.

In a first pilot study in Ngaoundéré, the capital of the Adamawa region, we concentrated on the use of Fulfulde varieties (Atlantic, Niger-Congo). Surrounded by various indigenous languages of different groups (mainly Chadic and Adamawa) and being the language of the local noble authority, Fulfulde holds the status as lingua franca within the “Grand Nord”, particularly in the regional capitals Ngaoundéré, Garoua, and Maroua. While the prestigious Diamaré dialect is associated with Maroua in the extreme North other varieties are especially linked to the urban centres of Garoua and Ngaoundéré and are valued as somewhat simplified, deviant and corrupt.

Speakers in all three urban centers are somehow aware of certain linguistic features that are held to separate the different Fulfulde varieties, albeit their own use of corresponding linguistic variables is neither exclusive nor consistent. The appearance of one lexical variable even becomes manifest in a popular Fulfulde saying: “Maroua wi’i rawaandu, Garoua wi’i boosaaru, Ngaoundéré wi’i goyru” (quoting the different terms of the concept ‘dog’ used in the Fulfulde varieties of the three urban centers of the northern regions).

The aim of the paper is to present a few sets of linguistic variables (particularly on the lexical and morphosyntactic level) used in a small network of colleagues working together in an informal motorcycle garage in Ngaoundéré. Their language use is correlated with their position in networks based on various social relations as well as with “classical” social variables, i.e. quantifiable, “independent” attributes such as ethnicity, or education. Even though it is only a brief and tentative impression of language use in Ngaoundéré, the pilot study already give hints regarding further research activities for establishing both linguistic variables and socially influential relations determining significant networks.