The contact-based emergence of the subject-focus construction in Wolof

A dynamic perspective

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In this article, we focus on the origin of the Wolof subject-focus construction (SFC) from a dynamic perspective. In Wolof, argument focus is expressed morpho-syntactically by means of copulaless cleft constructions consisting of the juxtaposition of the focus and a free relative clause. The free relative clause is headed by a determiner, which takes the form *a* in the case of the SFC. The determiner *a* is not found anywhere else in the language outside of SFC. We hypothesise that Wolof borrowed its SFC from Berber languages. The sociohistorical scenario, based on oral tradition, could have been the emergence of Wolof, as a crucible of contact between peoples of diverse origin including Berber groups. This finding is strengthened by the occurrence of other elements common to Wolof and Berber languages, such as clitic attraction, negation, copula insertion, as well as a number of lexical parallelisms.

Keywords: Wolof, Berber, contact, subject focus, cleft

1. Introduction

The history of languages outside the Western sphere has always been seen as both attractive and challenging in historical linguistics. The fact that many of these languages lacked written records prior to the arrival of Europeans poses serious problems to traditional comparative linguistics, where a reliance on written materials has always been necessary before comparing and eventually reconstructing earlier stages of languages. Over the past five centuries, descriptive grammatical and lexical documentation efforts have dealt with this gap. However, as observed by earlier sociolinguists, the overreliance on written records constitutes a bias in itself (q.v. Seuren 1982; Thurston 1987). This has potentially affected our understanding of the linguistic past of Indigenous societies.

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To date, linguists studying linguistic practices outside the Western realm focus more on *in vivo* language use. As the study of language variation and change further departs from WEIRD (Western, European, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) contexts, the never-ending mixing nature of linguistic practices becomes more evident. Current sociolinguistic scholarship even agrees that translanguaging practices in complex multilingual scenarios are the rule rather than the exception. Africa is a crucible of translanguaging practices. The work of Lüpke, among others, has put the complex linguistic mosaic of the region in the spotlight (Lüpke 2016, 2017). In this regard, language change studies are progressively shifting from static to more dynamic views on contact. The grammars of natural languages are thus seen as recursively emerging systems, shaped by daily contact and the adaptation of linguistic repertoires over time (q.v. Bailey 1973).

In this article we focus on the Subject-Focus Construction (SFC) in Wolof, a Niger-Congo language of the North Atlantic family spoken in Senegal, the Gambia and Mauritania (see Pozdniakov & Segerer 2017 for genealogical classification). We claim that the SFC, together with a few other grammatical phenomena and lexical parallelisms make up a *layer* in the Dynamic Linguistics[1] sense, i.e. a bundle of historical markers (q.v. Rojas-Berscia 2021). This layer would be the result of routinised, and eventually fossilised, linguistic practices due to a specific relevant social force. In this case, a number of social forces involving contact between pre-Wolof populations and Berber groups have been identified. We deploy *triangulation* (a method used "to capture different dimensions of the same phenomenon by using evidence from three distinct scientific disciplines" (Robbeets et al. 2021 see Methods section in the article) as a baseline to integrate our linguistic inferences with two types of evidence, namely history and oral tradition. Even though oral tradition has been deemed "non-scientific" in academia, we consider it a source of great value when understanding the past of non-WEIRD societies.

1. Dynamic Linguistics (DL) is an offshoot model of late Generative Semantics as developed in Bailey (1973) and Seuren (1982). DL conceives mental competence as *polylectal* and *internally variable*. As such, beyond the transformation of speech acts+propositions into well-formed strings of symbols, competence would also encompass sociolinguistic variation. In this regard, the difference between monolingual and multilingual speakers would rest at the type-level distance between different lects. All language users would thus be polylectal. Languages, as cultural products, would be the results of recursive polylectal interaction. Language mixing would then be the rule, rather than the exception, in all scenarios of language formation. From a DL point of view, languages are assemblages of historical layers.

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 is a brief introduction to the Wolof subject-focus construction. In Section 3 the grammatical evidence for a Berber-Wolof contact scenario evidence IS explored explored. Section 4 presents lexical evidence to support contact between Wolof and Berber. Section 5 triangulates historical and oral tradition evidence with our linguistic inferences. Finally, in Section 6 the potential future avenues of research in the field are discussed.

2. The Wolof subject-focus construction

In Wolof, subject focus is expressed morpho-syntactically by means of a copulaless cleft-construction, i.e. a cleft-construction without the equivalent of the English *it is* (Bourdeau n.d.). Compare the English cleft-construction in (1) with the Wolof copulaless cleft-construction in (2).

(1) *It's* OMAR *who bought it.*

(2) *OMAR a ko jënd.*
Omar DET 3.SG.O buy
'It's OMAR who bought it.'
(lit. 'OMAR the one who bought it')[2] (Diouf 2009: 175)

In (2), the focus *Omar* is not introduced in a copular clause as in English. Instead, the focus *Omar* and the free relative *a ko jënd* 'the one who bought it' are simply juxtaposed.

Often, the resumptive weak pronoun *mu* '(s)he' is inserted between the focus and the determiner *a*, leading to the form *moo* in virtue of the Wolof morpho-phonological rule /u/ + /a/ = /oo/ (Diouf 2009). Thus, (2) can also be expressed as in (3):

(3) *OMAR moo ko jënd.*
Omar 3.SG+DET 3.SG.O buy
'It's OMAR who bought it.'

Now, when the focus status of an NP is negated, a copula must be inserted in sentence-initial position and host the negation marker *-ul*, as in (4):

(4) *Sa yaay, d-ul feebar moo ko rey.*
your mother COP-NEG disease 3.SG+DET 3.SG.O kill
'Your mother, it's not the disease that killed her.' (RDR – Golden (4))[3]

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2. The glossing of the Wolof examples throughout the article is ours.

3. RDR refers to Radboud Data Repository, where the analysed data have been archived.

The negative subject-focus construction in (4) clearly mirrors the equivalent English *it*-cleft, especially if we use the alternative construction in (5) which does not make use of the resumptive pronoun *mu* '(s)he'.

(5) *Sa yaay, d-ul feebar a ko rey.*
your mother COP-NEG disease DET 3.SG.O kill
'Your mother, it's not the disease that killed her.'

The form *dul* 'is not', like the English *it is not*, introduces the focalised element *feebar* 'disease'. As for the free relative *a ko rey* 'the one that killed her', it serves the same function as the relative clause *that killed her* in the English translation.

For the purpose of this paper, it is important to note that the Wolof SFC differs substantially from the SFCs that we find in other languages of the family (Niger-Congo, North Atlantic). In Pulaar, for example, which also makes use of clefts, the copula takes the form *ko* and appears in the affirmative form, and relativisation is expressed by means of a specific verbal form, as in (6):

(6) *Ko aan walli mo.*
COP 2.SG help.REL 3.SG.O
'It's YOU who helped him.' (Fagerberg 1983: 143)

In Sereer and in Baynunk, subject focus is rendered by means of specific verbal forms. In Sereer, the morpheme *-u* is suffixed onto the verb, resulting in a participial form (Faye & Mous 2006). This is illustrated in (7).

(7) *Mi ñaam-u saaƈ ke.*
me eat-PTCP couscous the
'It's ME who ate the couscous.' (Faye 1979: 79)

In Baynunk (Guñaamolo dialect), the focus marker *g-* is prefixed onto the verb in its dependent form (DEP), as shown in (8):

(8) *Síídí g-a-hooŋ-ne.*
Sidy FOC-3.SG-CRY-DEP
'It's SIDY who cried.' (Bao Diop 2017: 353)

In sum, the use of copulaless cleft constructions for the expression of focus is specific to Wolof. The other North Atlantic languages tend to encode focus directly on the verb, by means of a specific affix. As for Pulaar, it does make use of clefts, but these have a morphosyntactic structure which differs from the Wolof clefts, among others because they involve a copula in the affirmative form. As we explain in the next section, SFC of the Wolof type resemble more the ones we find in Berber languages.

3. Grammatical evidence for a borrowing scenario from Berber languages to Wolof

In the following subsections, linguistic data from several Berber languages spoken in different geographical areas, namely Zenaga Berber (Mauritania), Tamasheq Berber (Mali), Tachelhit Berber (Morocco), and Taqbaylit [Kabyle] Berber (Algeria), are presented. We do so for two reasons. First, we show that SFCs of the Wolof type are widespread among Berber languages in general. we claim they could have originated in a Wolof-Berber contact scenario. Second, it is not possible to determine which modern variety of Berber was the closest to the variety that Wolof may have borrowed from in the past. A likely source language could be Zenaga Berber because of its geographical proximity. This Berber language is spoken in the Trarza region in southwestern Mauritania, just across the Senegalese border. However, historical and anthropological accounts suggest that the Zenaga Berber may be somehow related to the Tuareg (current speakers of Tamasheq) and that, possibly, the linguistic distance between Zenaga Berber and Tachelhit Berber was considerably smaller at the time of the Almoravid expansion in the 11th century (Taine-Cheikh 2008).

3.1 The expression of focus in Berber languages

Berber languages make use of one single strategy to express both subject and complement focus. The structure is as follows: 'x | that (which…)' (Galand 2014: 93). In other words, Berber focus constructions are generally nominal. They consist of the juxtaposition of the focus and a free relative clause without a copula linking the two, as in (9) and (10):

Tachelhit Berber

(9) *Asrdun ad sġiġ.*
mule [is] that(which) PFV.1.SG.buy
'I bought A MULE.' (Galand 2014: 93)

Tamasheq Berber

(10) *Nækk a i-sassæ-n ætay.*
I FOC 3.SG-drink.PTCP tea
'It is *I* who drinks tea.' (Heath 2005: 644)

In other varieties, however, the focus is introduced by the copula *d*, as in Taqbaylit (11), or by a Berber equivalent of the English *it is*, formed from a demonstrative and a copula, as in Zenaga (12):

Taqbaylit Berber

(11) *D aɣrum i n-eċċa.*
COP bread REL 1.PL-eat.PFV
'It is bread that we ate.' (Mettouchi & Fleisch 2010: 208)

Zenaga Berber

(12) *Äyḍ-äḍ t-aṛba-ḍ̣=iʔḍ ār kənt šāwäy-äg.*
'It is the girl (there) with whom (PAST) I spoke.'
(Taine-Cheikh 2010: 13)

In sum, Berber focus constructions are clefts of the form '(COP) FOC | FR'. In the following section, we compare these Berber clefts to the Wolof SFC and highlight their commonalities.

3.2 Grammatical parallelisms between Wolof and Berber languages

There are eloquent parallels between the Wolof subject-focus construction and Berber focus constructions overall. First, there is a structural parallel in the most basic focus constructions. We provide an example in Tamasheq (14), in which the element heading the free relative clause is *a*, just as in Wolof (13) (glossing is ours):

Wolof

(13) $[Moom]_{FOC}$ $[a\ dem.]_{FR}$
he *a* go
'(It's) HIM who left.' (Robert 2000: 9)

Tamasheq Berber

(14) $[Nækk]_{FOC}$ $[a\ i\text{-}ssan\text{-}æn.]_{FR}$
I *a* 3.SG-know-PTCP
'(It's) ME who knows.' (Heath 2005: 644)

Furthermore, the element *a/ad/i* heading the free relative clause attracts all the clitics in its scope in both Wolof (15)–(16) and Berber languages (17)–(19).

Wolof

(15) *Sa jàng,* $[àdduna\ yëpp]_{FOC}$ $[\textbf{\textit{a=ko}}\ xam.]_{FR}$
your study world all *a*=3.SG.O know
'Your studies, EVERYONE knows about it.' (RDR – Keur gui ak koor gui (2))

(16) $[Daba]_{FOC}$ *mu* $[\textbf{\textit{a=ma=ko}}\ bind.]_{FR}$
Daba 3.SG *a*=1.SG.O=3.SG.O write
'(It's) DABA who wrote it to me.' (Robert 2000: 10)

Tamasheq Berber

(17) [*Ənta*]$_{\text{FOC}}$ [***a=hi*** *i-nhæy-æn.*]$_{\text{FR}}$
she *a*=1.SG.O 3.SG-see-PTCP
'(It was) HER who saw me.' (Heath 2005: 644)

Tachelhit Berber

(18) [*Argaz*]$_{\text{FOC}}$ [***ad=as*** *i-fka* *lktab.*]$_{\text{FR}}$
man *ad*=3.SG.DAT 3.SG-give.PFV book
'(It is) THE MAN who gave him the book.' (Mettouchi & Fleisch 2010: 225)

Taqbaylit Berber

(19) [*Iḍelli*]$_{\text{FOC}}$ [***i=t*** *n-ečča.*]$_{\text{FR}}$
yesterday *i*=3.SG.O 1.PL-eat.PFV
'(It is) yesterday that we ate it.' (Mettouchi & Fleisch 2010: 209)

Moreover, both Wolof and Berber languages have a rule of *copula insertion* in negative clefts. In these, a copula hosting the negation marker has to be inserted before the focus, see (20)–(23):

Wolof

(20) ***D-u(l)*** [*saa-y mbokk*]$_{\text{FOC}}$ [*a=ma=ko* *wax.*]$_{\text{FR}}$
COP-NEG my-PL relative *a*=1.SG.O=3.SG.O speak
'It was not MY PARENTS who told me.' (Robert 2018: 18)

Tachelhit Berber

(21) ***Ur d*** [*argaz*]$_{\text{FOC}}$ [*ad=as* *i-fka* *lktab.*]$_{\text{FR}}$
NEG COP man *ad*=3.SG.O 3.SG-give.PFV book
'It's not THE MAN who gave him the book.' (Mettouchi & Fleisch 2010: 225)

Taqbaylit Berber

(22) ***Maççi d*** [*argaz*]$_{\text{FOC}}$ [*i d* *iri.*]$_{\text{FR}}$
NEG COP man *i* COP bad
'It was not THE HUSBAND that was bad.' (Mettouchi 2009: 291)

Zenaga Berber

(23) *Ämäžär* ***wä(r)-ygi*** [*nəttä*]$_{\text{FOC}}$ [*äd yukfaʔn* *oʔdyi.*]$_{\text{FR}}$
emir NEG-COP he *äd* give.PFV.NEG.PTCP.3.SG horse
'The emir, it is not HIM who gave the horse.' (Taine-Cheikh 2011: 6)

In addition to the basic structure '(COP) FOC | *a*-FR', Wolof and Berber languages have two grammatical rules in common: *clitic attraction* and *copula insertion*. Also, the Wolof copula *di* and negation marker *-ul* seem to have been borrowed from Berber.

The Berber copula *d* is used in Taqbaylit, as in (11) and (22), in Tachelhit, as in (21), and in Zenaga where it takes the form *äḏ*, as in (12). It presumably made

its way into Wolof, where it became *di* after morphological accommodation. This hypothesis is supported by the peculiar morphological behaviour of *di*. According to Wolof morphophonological rules, every time the negation marker *-ul* and the past marker *-oon* are to be suffixed onto a verb stem ending in a vowel, /w/ must be inserted for support. Therefore, *julli* 'to pray' gives *julli-w-ul* 'not to pray' and *julli-w-oon* 'to have prayed'; and *jéppi* 'to despise' gives *jéppi-w-ul* 'not to despise' and *jéppi-w-oon* 'to have despised'. The copula *di*, on the other hand, becomes *d-ul* 'is not', as in (20), and *d-oon* 'was' instead of **di-wul* and **di-woon*. The Berber borrowing hypothesis permits to explain these irregularities. We can indeed surmise that the /i/ in *d(i)* is a phonological support, and that the original Berber form *d* resurfaces every time the morphophonological context allows for it, as in *dul* 'is not' and *doon* 'was'.

As regards the expression of negation, the Wolof morpheme *-ul* seems to have been borrowed from Berber too. Mettouchi (2009) writes that the most widespread preverbal negator in Berber languages is *wər/ur* and its variants. Among the possible variants, she mentions *wəl*, which resembles *(w)ul*. Moreover, Faidherbe (1877) reports the variant *ul* for Zenaga Berber, which is the exact same form in Wolof. See (24):

Zenaga

(24) *Ul-inni.*
NEG-he.said
'He didn't say.' (Faidherbe 1877: 24)

Ul must be the origin of the Taqbaylit existential negation *ula* 'there is not', which we find in words such as *ulanda* 'nowhere' (< *anda* 'where'), *ulaḥed* 'no one' (< *ḥed* 'person') and *ulamək* 'no way' (< *amək* 'how') (Mettouchi 2009: 291).

In sum, the common structure of Wolof and Berber clefts, the rules of *clitic attraction* and *copula insertion*, and the similarity of the morphemes involved (*a(d), d(i), ur/ul*) point to a scenario of potential contact between Berber and Wolof. In the next section, lexical evidence in support of this hypothesis is presented.

3.3 Lexical parallelisms

A few common lexical parallelisms between Wolof and Berber languages are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Wolof words presumably borrowed from Berber

	Wolof	Zenaga Berber (Taine-Cheikh 2008)	Tamasheq Berber (Heath 2006)	Tachelhit Berber (Oulhadj 2014)	Taqbaylit (Dallet 1985; Amazit-Hamidchi & Lounaci 2005)	Meaning in Berber
	digg 'middle', 'centre'	*ḏäg, ḏägg*	*dæ̀y*	–	*deg*	in, inside
I	*duuf* 'be fat'	*äḏiʔf*	*á-duf* (*-æ̀ddofæ-t* 'be plump')	*adif*	*adif*	marrow
II	*mel* 'look like'	–	*-əmæ̀l-, -mæ̀l-*	*mel*	*mel*	show, indicate
	ne, ni, nan 'to say'	*-nnäh*	*-ə̀nna-*	*-ni*	*ini, inna*	say
	res 'liver'	*taʔšä*	–	*tasa*	*tasa*	liver
III	*war* 'sit astride, ride' / 'must, have to'		*-ə̀wær-, -wæ̀r-*			be on / (duty) be incumbent on
IV	*woy* 'sing'	*äwih*	*-æ̀wwæy-, -èwæy-* 'carry / sing, perform (song or poem)'	*awi*	*awi*	bring
	baram 'twist'			*bṛṛem*	*beṛṛem*	twist, turn
	xaalis 'money'				*xelleṣ*	pay
	bàkkaar 'commit a sin'		*-ə̀bbukkæḍ-* (*a-bǽkkaḍ* 'sin (n)')			commit a sin
V	*yax* 'bone'	*iʔSi*	*é-yæss* (pl: *i-yǽs-an*)	*ixess*	*iɣes*	bone
	xar 'sheep'		*é-kræ̀r, é-krar* 'ram'		*ikerri* (pl: *akraren*)	sheep

I. Wolof *duuf* 'to be fat' seems to derive from the Berber root *DF*, on which the word for 'marrow' is based. Besides, in Tamasheq Berber, 'to be plump' is said *-æddofæt*, which is derived from the same root as 'marrow'. This semantic connection between 'marrow' and 'to be fat' seems to be quite natural as it is found in other languages, such as Persian.[4]

II. *Mel* 'to look like' may have been borrowed from Berber *mel* 'to show, indicate' as Wolof has another word for 'to look like', namely, *niru*.

III. Wolof *war* 'to sit astride', 'to be on (horseback, motorbike, etc.)' may come from Berber *-war* 'to be on'. Interestingly, Wolof *war* also means 'must, have to', and Berber *-war* is sometimes involved in the expression of 'obligation', thus taking the meaning 'to be incumbent on', as in (25):

Tamasheq Berber

(25) *I-war-t æ-ɣæras ən t-eɣse.*
3.SG-be.on-3.SG.O SG-slaughter POSS F-sheep
'He should slaughter a sheep.'
(lit. 'sheep slaughter is on him') (Heath 2005: 679)

In Wolof, the nominal expression referring to the person to whom the obligation falls usually functions as the syntactic subject of the sentence. Still, sentences like (26) do occur, where the person under the obligation is referred to by means of a pronominal clitic in the accusative form, as is the case in Tamasheq Berber in (25):

(26) ***L-ii la war***, *(ci) sama diggante ak yow, matle-woo ci dara.*
NC-DEM 2.SG.O must PREP my relationship with you fulfil-NEG.2.SG PREP something
'What falls to you, in our relationship, you don't fulfil anything of it.'
(RDR – Keur Laobé (2))

IV. The connection proposed between Wolof *woy* 'to sing' and Berber *awi* 'to bring' may appear far-fetched at first sight. However, Berber languages derive vocabulary related to poetry and songs from this root. For example, de Motylinski (1908) reports the word *tesawit* 'poem' / 'song' and the collocation *awi asahaɣ* 'to sing' (lit. 'to bring song') for Tamahaq Berber, which is the Tuareg dialect spoken in Hoggar, Algeria. Heath (2005) too reports the collocation 'bring song' for Tamasheq, as in (27):

4. Hamed Rahmani (p.c.) mentions that Persian speakers sometimes refer to the 'fat' of a stew or a soup as its 'marrow'.

(27) *æwwæy-æɣ e-hæḍ dæɣ aggay n æ-sahæɣ.*
bring.PFV-1.SG SG-night in bringing POSS SG-song
'I spent the night singing.'
(lit. 'I brought the night in song-bringing.') (Heath 2005: 665)

The form *aggay* 'bringing' in (27) may be related to the Berber term for 'griot', *iggīw* (pl: *iggāwen*), as was proposed by Hassan Jouad (Shoup 2014). After all, griots play the roles of musicians, genealogists and historians, thus "carrying" or "bringing" the oral tradition to the people.

V. The similarity between Wolof *yax* 'bone' and Berber *iġes* 'bone' appears more clearly when the Berber word is in its construct state *yeġs*, as in (28), from Taqbaylit:

(28) *ṭbib n yeġs-an*
doctor POSS bone.CS-PL
'osteopath'

In addition, four Wolof lexical items belonging to basic vocabulary display similarities with Berber words (see Table 2). A point to be taken into account is that Wolof has eight singular noun classes and two plural ones. Whether a noun belongs to a particular noun class is encoded on determiners by means of a single-consonant morpheme: *b-, g-, j-, m-, l-, s-, w-* or *k-* in the singular, and *y-* or *ñ-* in the plural. Typically, noun class markers appear on definite articles, as in (29), demonstratives, as in (30), and relative determiners, as in (31):

(29) *xale b-a*
child NC-DEF.DIST
'the child'

(30) *kër g-ii*
house NC-DEM.PROX
'this house'

(31) *nit ñ-u bare*
person NC.PL-REL be.a.lot
'a lot of people'
(lit. 'person that$_{PL}$ are a lot')

In modern Wolof, nouns are invariable as both number and noun-class membership are marked on determiners. It has not always been this way. McLaughlin (1997); Pozdniakov & Segerer (2017) and Merrill (2021) report that noun class markers used to be prefixed onto nouns themselves, and that some of them got lexicalised with their hosts, thus surviving until nowadays. Merrill (2021) gives a list of words whose initial consonants are historical prefixes. Among them, we find

b-ët 'eye', *b-uur* 'king' and *k-ëf* 'thing', which display initial-consonant mutation when compared to their plural forms: *g-ët* 'eyes', *w-uur* 'kings' and *y-ëf* 'things'. These patterns of consonant mutation make the spotting of historical noun class prefixes easier, but are not a necessary condition for hypothesising the presence of such a prefix. In fact, any word beginning with one of the ten noun class markers (*b-, j-, g-, s-, m-, w-, l-, k-, y-, ñ-*) is a potential candidate (q.v. Merrill 2021).

These four words can thus be analysed as a combination of an historical noun class marker and a Berber radical.

Table 2. Wolof words presumably borrowed from Berber with historical noun class prefix

Wolof	Zenaga Berber (Taine-Cheikh 2008)	Tamasheq Berber (Heath 2006)	Tachelhit Berber (Oulhadj 2014)	Taqbaylit (Dallet 1985; Amazit-Hamidchi & Lounaci 2005)	Meaning in Berber
b-ës 'day'*	*aṣṣ*	*á-šæl*	*ass*	*ass*	day
g-uddi 'night'	*īḍ*	*é-hæḍ*	*iḍ*	*iḍ* (pl: *uḍan*)	night
g-émmiñ 'mouth' *l-àmmiñ* 'tongue'	*əmmi*	*é-mm*	*imi*	*imi*	mouth

* There is another word for 'day' in Wolof, namely *fan*, which further supports the hypothesis than ***bës*** could have been borrowed from Berber languages.

4. Triangulating evidence from history and oral tradition

Triangulation is a method that allows us to integrate linguistic inference with other types of evidence coming from other fields. This method is used when aiming at capturing "different dimensions of the same phenomenon by using evidence from three distinct scientific disciplines" (see Robbeets et al. 2021; Suleimanova & Fomina 2023). This methodology has been of great value to understand the linguistic past of complex linguistic scenarios (see Robbeets et al. 2021 for Transeurasian; Rojas-Berscia 2020 for Chachapuya; Urban 2021 for Cholón). We have devoted the previous sections to presenting the linguistic evidence. This section is dedicated to evidence coming from historical studies and oral tradition (for

a similar take on the importance of oral tradition in the understanding of linguistic history, see the copious work of the Price's (Price & Price 2002; Price 2002), in some way sketching a potential answer to Naro's *wh-nightmare* (who said what to whom, how, and why) (Naro 1978).

4.1 Historical evidence

We do not know much about the early history of the Wolof as medieval accounts of Muslim geographers and travellers rather focus on the neighbouring Ghana and Mali Empires, which were at the heart of the Trans-Saharan trade. The little we know, however, suggests that the Wolof, or the populations that were to define the Wolof ethnicity from the thirteenth century onward, evolved in intimate contact with Berber populations.

One of these pieces of evidence is the expansion of Maraboutism in the area. The practice of Maraboutism is common in Muslim Senegambia where believers follow a *marabout*, that is, a religious leader who gathers disciples and teaches them his religious thoughts or "path", thus forming religious brotherhoods. This tradition in Senegal is a Sudanic extension of its Moorish version in the southwestern Sahara" (Levtzion 1978: 676). Levtzion argues that one of the reasons behind this is the relatively lenient weather conditions of the Western Sahara and, as a consequence, the continuous occupation of the geographic area stretching from Morocco to the Senegal river. For the same climatic reasons, the first trade routes across the Sahara went along the Atlantic coast, linking Morocco to the Senegalese river (Levtzion 1978). In such circumstances, it is easy to imagine that the Western Sahara was well connected and constituted, at some point, a cultural area characterised by a shared form of Islam, commercial exchanges and the diffusion of common customs. There is evidence of the presence of Zenaga clerics or *marabouts* at the Wolof court (Boulègue 1987; Levtzion 2000). The Jolof Empire benefitted from direct commercial relations with the Sahara, even when in the sphere of influence of the Empire of Mali in the fourteenth century (Levtzion 2000).[5]

A second piece of evidence is provided by *griotism*. The *griots* are professional musicians, oral historians, genealogists and praise singers, i.e. an African sort of bards. They came to constitute a social caste after the development of caste systems in West Africa, a process that is likely to have begun in thirteenth-century Malinke society in the aftermath of the Soso/Malinke war (Tamari 1991). But gri-

5. Interestingly, the Wolof word for griot géwël seems to have been borrowed from Berber, where iggāwen means 'griots'. -en, which is the Berber plural marker, possibly became -ël in Wolof.

ots existed before. The Muslim geographer Al-Bakri, who wrote in the eleventh century, already reported that the Zenaga Berber princes had adopted court rituals of the Ghana Empire, such as the use of court musicians or *griots* (Shoup 2007). This means that the Berbers had griots at their courts about two centuries before the birth of the first Wolof state.[6]

It would not be far-fetched to assume that such a context would have entailed contact between the ancestors of the modern Wolof and contemporary Berber groups, where the spread of religious and cultural practices would have been the rule, thus triggering language exchange.

4.2 Oral tradition

Oral tradition and the Indigenous knowledge embedded within is progressively being taken seriously in Western scientific scholarship (e.g. Favaron 2022 for the Amazon; Price 1990 for Suriname). In this regard, the value of oral tradition should not be discredited for the effects of triangulation. Wolof oral tradition reports a few facts that suggest intense contact with Berber populations since the dawn of Wolof history.

According to oral tradition, the first Wolof state ever, said to be the origin of the Wolof ethnicity and language, is the Kingdom of Waalo (Boulègue 1987). It was located on the lower Senegal river, by the Atlantic Ocean, and thus neighboured the Zenaga Berber tribes occupying the Western Sahara. Interestingly, Njajaan Njaay, the mythical founder of the Kingdom of Waalo, who would later also found the Jolof Kingdom,[7] is reported to be of Berber Almoravid lineage through his father, a descendant of the great eleventh-century Almoravid commander Abu Bakr Ibn-'Umar (Boulègue 1987). Whether oral tradition is correct or whether Njajaan Njaay's genealogy was "falsified" in order to give legitimacy to his dynasty is trivial. Either way, it says much about the prestige of the Almoravid in the Wolof society of the day and thus indirectly testifies to contact between the Wolof and the Berber.

In addition, according to oral tradition, the Wolof ethnicity and language took shape at the court of Njajaan Njaay in the Kingdom of Waalo, as a result of the mixing of people of diverse origins (Boulègue 1987). This is certainly correct given that "the ethnic identities of Black African groups were contextual and subject to transformation as a result of changing historical circumstance" (Webb 1995: 472).

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6. Interestingly, the Wolof word for griot géwël seems to have been borrowed from Berber, where iggāwen means 'griots'. -en, which is the Berber plural marker, possibly became -ël in Wolof.

7. "Jolof" is a historical variant of "Wolof".

In such a context, and given the geographic proximity and influence of the Berber groups, a Berber element might well have been present in Wolof society from its very beginning.

5. Final ideas

In the previous sections, we have explored linguistic similarities between Wolof and Berber languages. Besides the lexical items presumably borrowed from Berber languages into Wolof, we have proposed that the Wolof SFC is a calque of the Berber generic focus construction. Not only are they both best described as copulaless cleft constructions, but they also make use of the same grammatical morphemes (formally and functionally) and share specific syntactic properties that we have dubbed *clitic attraction* and *copula insertion* (limited to the negative form). To make our point stronger, we have also appealed to data from historical accounts as well as from the Wolof oral tradition. Both sources point to a scenario of intense contact between the people inhabiting the banks of the lower Senegal river (cradle of the Wolof culture) and Berber populations. All this suggests that there is a Berber *layer* in Wolof, potentially formed through the recursive interaction of speakers of Wolof-like and Berber-like lects in the scenario previously described. Importantly, this claim does not imply any genealogical relationship between the two. We are dealing with a case of contact involving borrowing of linguistic material from Berber languages into Wolof. Further research in the area is still necessary. The assumption of multilingualism as the rule rather than the exception is not only showing us what the very nature of linguistic practices are, but also what dynamics existed behind the formation of contemporary said languages.

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Abbreviations

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
COP	copula
CS	construct state
DAT	dative
DEF	definiteness marker
DEM	demonstrative marker
DEP	syntactic dependence marker
DET	determiner
DIST	distal
F	feminine
FOC	focus
FR	free relative clause
NC	noun class marker
NEG	negation marker
O	object
PFV	perfective
PTCP	participial form
PL	plural
POSS	possessive
PREP	preposition
PROX	proximal
RDR	Radboud Data Repository
REL	relative
SG	singular

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