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- Proof

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Oreste Floquet

15 Niger

Abstract: Although the arrival of the French army dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, Niger became a colony only in 1922. Today, Niger is made up of different ethnic groups which makes it extremely heterogeneous. French coexists with other national languages which are: Arabic, Buduma, Fulfulde, Gourmanchéma, Hausa, Kanuri, Tamasheq, Tasawaq, Tedaga, and Zarma. Niger's language policy has always ensured that national languages were used in education. In fact, since the early 1970s Niger has promoted various projects to develop bilingualism in primary school. As in many other French-speaking states of sub-Saharan Africa, French is an exogenous language that coexists with other languages which are learned from childhood in the family environment. The linguistic study of the Nigerien variety remains a largely unexplored field and has, to date, mostly focused on data obtained from surveys carried out in Niamey. The phenomena found appear consistent with those universal tendencies at reducing the markedness that can usually be found in other places in French-speaking Africa.

Keywords: French, Niger, sociolinguistics, language policy, Hausa

1 Sociolinguistic situation

National Languages – The population of Niger, about 22 million estimated in 2018 (Amato/Iocchi 2020, 36), is made up of different ethnic groups from quantitative, geographical, socio-economic, and cultural points of view, which makes it extremely heterogeneous, with almost 70% of the population being under 25 years of age. Numerically, the most important group is located in the South-East, Hausa-speaking, and representing about half of the Nigerien population. Heirs of the distant Kasar-Hausa 'Hausa country', the Hausa are divided between Niger, a former French colony, and Nigeria, a former English colony, and speak a language of the Chadic lineage. In the South-West, the Zarma represent the second largest group with just over 20% of the total population (Amato/Iocchi 2020, 36). It is not yet clear whether or not their language belongs to the Nilo-Saharan branch due to the enormous differences that are present in the different varieties of this idiom, to such an extent that some question the very existence of a Zarma linguistic unity, which would be nothing more than the fruit of a theoretical abstraction (Nicolai 1977; Platiel 1998; Moumouni 2015). The deserts North is essentially dominated by the Tuareg nomads, representing 10% of the total number of Nigeriens, who speak Tamasheq, an evolved form of Berber, and by the Tasawaq, a small sedentary population. This is followed by small communities of Kanuri in the oases of Kaouar and Agram, beyond the Teneré, and of Fulfulde, present in various tribes scattered throughout the Sahel. In the extreme East, we find, in very small

percentages, Tedaga, Arabic, and Buduma, while at the opposite extreme, to the West, some Gourmanchéma. National languages do not always have adequate space in the school system and can, in some cases, even be at risk of extinction, such as Tasawaq (Sidibé 2016). Among these, Hausa and Zarma are certainly the most used, while Arabic, although not very widespread, nevertheless enjoys great prestige as the language of the Koran. In recent years, there has been an increase in populations migrating to Niger. These are essentially citizens of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) area coming mainly from the Hausa-speaking areas of Nigeria and Benin, who arrive in Niger both for economic reasons and because of the rejection policies of migratory flows to Europe following the approval of a law from 2015, whose objective is to prevent migrants from reaching the coasts of the Mediterranean (Amato/Iocchi 2020, 9–19; Hamadou 2018). It is important to note that only a fraction of Nigeriens speak another African language. Perrin (1986, 16) had already shown, almost forty years ago, that the Hausa, whose language is understood and spoken in all regions of the country, and the Zarma, more concentrated in their region of origin, feel less need to use a second language; only 3% of the former and 8% of the latter are bilingual. Hausa is therefore a vehicular language for only part of the population.

French – As in many other French-speaking states of sub-Saharan Africa, French is not really a first or second language, if by the latter we mean a language learned at school at an older age; its condition is rather that of an exogenous, imported language that coexists with other languages which, on the other hand, are learned from childhood in the family environment (Singy 2004; Singy/Rouiller 2001; Sanaker/Holter/Skatum 2006, 161–247). In fact, the French language is used in schools, politics and the press; however, some informal conversations take place in one of the national languages.

Foreign languages – Among foreign languages, English and Chinese are acquiring, in recent years, an increasingly important role, for reasons linked to the substantial material and financial investments of the USA and China (Beidou 2014, 233–234). Spanish also belongs to this group of foreign languages, which has been taught for some years now in high schools and universities (Beidou 2014, 206).

2 Linguistic history

Although the arrival of the French army dates back to the end of the nineteenth century, Niger became a colony only in 1922 and for this reason, Abadie (1927, 17) defined it as the ‘Mascot of French Colonies’ (“benjamine des colonies françaises”). The first capital was Zinder, then, from 1926, Niamey, at the time a small village chosen for strategic reasons and for its healthy climate. Niamey then became a metropolis that currently has about one million inhabitants.

Within the process of decolonization that preceded the African independence of the 1960s and which had as a fundamental stage the referendum of 1958, in which the

colonies were proposed to join a new French Community (*Communauté française*) by General de Gaulle, Niger stands out for not completely rejecting the associative proposal (as Guinea did by opting immediately for secession). Yet Niger did not approve it with the overwhelming majority that has manifested itself elsewhere. The years preceding the independence of 1960 are in fact marked by a rift that divides two parties, the Nigerien Progressive Party (*Parti progressiste nigérien*) and the left-leaning *Sawaba* party, and the ethnic groups they respectively represented, to a certain degree: the Zarma in the West, historically French-speaking, and the Hausa to the East, which ultimately correspond to two different postures towards France. This split is embodied by the figures of the future first president of the Republic of Niger, Hamani Diori, a pro-French, and his historical rival, Djibo Bakary, who was a supporter of the “no” in the 1958 referendum, when he was still prime minister, and close to the positions of Guinea led by Sekou Touré. It is debated whether the referendum was won by the “yes” due to Djibo Bakary’s inability to see the contradictions that his too progressive and nationalist politics had generated in the very mixed base that supported him (Fuglestad 1973, 322–330; Raynaud 1990, 3–8) or if the defeat of the “no” was wisely orchestrated by France (Walraven 2009), which considered Niger, unlike Guinea, a country of enormous strategic importance because of the long border with Algeria as well as for uranium, a mineral necessary for its energy supply and still today at the centre of a heated debate on the socio-political and health consequences of its extraction (Cajati 2011; Boukar 2011; Weira 2016).

The rules of the French Community provided the possibilities of either becoming a department of France, to remain a territory of the Republic or to gain independence. Like many other countries, Niger soon opted for the latter solution. According to Fuglestad (1983, 10), Nigerien independence was not the result of a collective will of its people; no authentic nationalism existed before the 1960s and for many Nigeriens the idea of political independence did not make much sense since colonial power in Niger had always been weak and in any case had not represented a great discontinuity in Nigerien history. For a different analysis on the role of colonialism as a factor of rupture, at least in the western part of Niger, however, see the work of Olivier de Sardan (1984).

In the years following the Diori presidency, the history of Niger has been marked by authoritarianism, single-party corrupt regimes and military coups of various duration and value (Maidoka 2008). The first, and most important, led the country for fifteen consecutive years from 1974 to 1989 and is linked to the figure of Seyni Kountché. The slow process of democratic transition that led to the first free elections began with the National Sovereign Conference (*Conférence nationale*) of 1991, a true landmark in Nigerien politics (Cannelli 2011; Aparad 2015) that was born under the pressure of the fall of the Berlin Wall, but also as an imitation of the Conference of the Living Forces of the Nation (*Conférence des forces vives de la nation*) of Benin in 1990, as well as at the impulse of the famous speech by President Mitterrand in La Baule, in the same year, in which the French president promised greater support to those African countries that were on their way to a democratization process.

3 External language policy

3.1 Legislation

After its independence, the Republic of Niger chose French, emblem of the colonial administration, as official language, thus relegating the other African languages to the uncertain status of national languages. The various Nigerien constitutions have always sought to promote plurilingualism, while maintaining French as the only official language. The option for multilingualism has therefore never been questioned, contrary to what has happened in other countries, such as Burkina Faso or Guinea. Thus, French co-exists with ten national languages which are: Arabic, Buduma, Fulfulde Gourmanchéma, Hausa, Kanuri, Tamasheq, Tasawaq, Tedaga, and Zarma. In recent years, Niger's language policy, which has always ensured that national languages were used in education and in the media, is increasingly promoting their dissemination in the public administration, the judiciary, and health care, following a law from 2001.

3.2 Languages used by public authorities

Niger's public administration speaks essentially French, and all road signs are in French. However, the linguistic history of contemporary Niger can be read as an ever-increasing antagonism between French and the national languages, which are strongly present in political discourse. These, especially Hausa, are gradually gaining ground and have the ambition to become fully-fledged institutional languages, which is a prelude to possible forms of co-linguism (Balibar 1985), such as French-Wolof in Senegal. This sociolinguistic dynamic, which has nothing to do with what happens in Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon, or Cameroon, for example, where the number of speakers of French as a first language is greater than those who partially or exclusively speak another African language (Queffélec 2008), seems to reflect, in part, a more general change in Nigerien society and institutions that began with the democratization process of the 1990s. Niger, as a state, was built on the French model which affirmed the supremacy of French institutional structures and secularism over African and Muslim values. All the Nigerien constitutions reaffirm the separation of the state from religions, of the political order from the spiritual order. Furthermore, no political organization can be established on a sectarian basis despite the religion practised by over 90% of the population being Sunni Islam. However, for about thirty years, secularism as such, and the French language that conveys it, have been criticized by some Islamic currents, more closely linked to the radical Arab tradition, which militate against the mystical Sufi tradition, which, on the contrary, believes religion must be separated from politics and is therefore considered pro-Western (Piga 2008; 2021; Sounaye 2009). Political power thus gradually began to move away from the Western model of secularism and universality to embrace a more identitarian model closely linked to religion and ethnicity, putting democracy itself at risk (Yacouba 2017);

an example is the fact that the prime minister is now taking oath on the sacred book of his confession, the Koran (Moumouni 2014, 207).

3.3 Languages used in education

The French colonial school developed in Niger later than in the other countries of French West Africa (*Afrique-Occidentale française* – AOF). The first schools date back to the 1920s and were initially built in large urban centres. The teaching of the French language was such a priority that teachers were forbidden to speak local languages in class as well as students who, if caught in the act, were severely punished (Moumouni Dioffo 2019, 76). At the time of its independence, Niger had an enrolment rate of 3.6 %, one of the lowest in French-speaking Africa. Currently, despite the progress made, literacy still remains a major problem (Barreteau/Souley 1997), with an important gap between men and women (Goza et al. 2010; Lulli 2011, 173s.). In 2012, only 31 % of the population was literate; 70 % of school-age children are actually enrolled in the primary cycle, but only 44 % of them complete it (Diadé 1996; Amato/Iocchi 2020, 37).

Since the early 1970s, due to numerous dropouts, the government, which at the beginning had even considered promoting 85 % of pupils from elementary school to the next grade, has promoted a project to develop bilingualism in primary school. The measure concerned only the five national languages with greatest diffusion: Hausa, Zarma, Fulfulde, Kanuri, and Tamasheq. On the one hand, the desired outcome of this project was to enhance the students' context of belonging, which, at the time and still today, saw them become of school age already speaking one or more of the national languages and often perceiving the school in French negatively because of suspicions of it being a tool to prepare students for forced labour; on the other hand, the academic achievements of the French monolingual school, heir to the colonial era, were largely insufficient (Barreteau 1996). There has not been a single model for promoting bilingualism, especially as regards with the relation between French and national languages in terms of teaching hours (Mallam Garba/Hanafiou 2010). Starting in the 1970s in experimental schools, the student's national language was predominant during the first three years of the curriculum and French in the last three. However, the language within the school system has always been French and in practice it still is today despite the educational law of 1998 (*loi d'orientation du système éducatif* – LOSEN) sanctioning the right of national languages to also be represented in the primary education system both as teaching languages and as languages of learning (Saïbou Adamou/Hamidou 2008, 18s.). The bilingual pilot schools (*école bilingue pilote*) draw inspiration from the criticalities of the experimental schools and propose a single path in the national language and in the French language, but the project did not get any follow up because the funds deriving from the German-Niger cooperation have run out in 2003. Halfway between these first two options, the Soutéba (*soutien à l'éducation de base* 'Sustaining basic education') schools offer a chiasm-shaped path, in which one begins with a predominance of one of the national languages

that gradually decreases in favour of French, which becomes dominant at the end of the cycle. This approach is reaffirmed in the study programme launched in 2015 and, as regards teaching French language and languages in general, inserted in a learning model called “by situations” (*par situations*) which has aroused quite some criticism about its real effectiveness (Maurer 2018). Whatever the model, the fact remains that bilingualism at school has remained confined to the primary level only and that French remains the language of those entering secondary and higher education, whether public or private.

Some of the criticalities of multilingual teaching can be summarized as follows (Mamane 2016a; 2018): teachers are not always sufficiently prepared, especially on the written side, which applies to both French and national languages. Students very often lack the manuals adopted. But above all, the national language still tends to maintain a subordinate role because it is perceived as a tool for transmitting what is not clear in French, and not as an autonomous knowledge. Teachers are authorized to resort to multilingual teaching, alternating between French and a national language in their explanations, with the aim of facilitating the student’s comprehension; however, when they do, they often use the national language for the rudimentary translation of content previously expressed in French without any real benefit to the learner (Saïbou Adamou/Mohamed Sagayar 2015, 155ss.). However, it should be remembered that several studies have shown the benefits of bilingual education, in Niger and elsewhere (Benson 2002, 307; Hovens 2002, 257; Ismaël 2007). In general, students who have followed a bilingual schooling pathway are better in both the scientific and humanities disciplines. This would seem to indicate that the introduction of a foreign language, namely French, at the beginning of schooling, together with an equally foreign educational content, is likely to create a handicap in terms of cognitive development. These considerations are at the origin of a new institutional interest in the diffusion of bilingualism in schools.

The use of Arabic in a country like Niger, which is among the most Islamized in the world, deserves a separate argument. In addition to Franco-Arab bilingual schools (where the teaching is done half in French, half in Arabic with the addition of Islamic education), which remain underdeveloped for now, although the very recent phenomenon of the multiplication of Turkish-funded private schools offering a Franco-Arab course of study must be noted, there is a very extensive network of about 40,000 Koranic schools. These are informal educational structures that are chosen by families wishing to complete the education of their children with a religious deepening since Islamic education is absent from the primary cycle of national school systems (Gandolfi 2003). The Koranic schools also offer training to adults who want to approach the reading of sacred texts. There is also a public university, the Islamic University of Say, unique of its kind, which offers courses in French and Arabic.

3.4 Languages used in the media

Print media – With the exception of the phase of the so-called developmental journalism in rural areas during the 1960s and 1970s, whose educational mission was to provide farmers and shepherds with practical information to help them improve their economic conditions and solve social issues, and which can now be considered definitively over (Frère 2000, 32–36), the press in Niger has always been exclusively French. Until the 1990s, the regime used it as a tool to cement national unity, thus maintaining the monopoly of information and freedom of expression (Frère 2000, 33). Even after the beginning of the democratization process which led to the development of a private press (*Haské, Le Républicain, Anfani, Le Démocrate, Le Paon*), whose ambition was to replace the governmental one (*Le Sahel, Le Sahel Dimanche*), Nigerien journalism continued to address exclusively the intellectual elite (Tudesq 1995, 39) and to express itself in French, in fact continuing a tradition that had its roots in the colonial period (Frère 2000, 295s.). And it did so in a context that until a few years ago was characterized by censorship, harsh penalties for journalists in the event of press infringements, primarily defamation, and the inability to access public documents (Drioli 2011). The situation has clearly improved, ranking 57th in 2020 according to *Reporters Without Borders* compared to 139th in 2009, despite the persistence of critical issues, such as the fact that journalists continue not to have regular contracts and are thus obliged to carry out parallel activities that have nothing to do with their job, or to provide reports on commission from external clients, very often politicians, which makes the quality of the informational content not always up to par, sometimes bordering actual propaganda, as was the case during the revolt of the Touareg (Frère 1995).

However, there are two important changes to note. Compared to the French used in the previous era, the new private press of the 1990s partially breaks with the classic high and pompous style, starting to give space to a French of mesolectal level as well, closer to the one spoken every day. Furthermore, French is increasingly becoming the language that conveys the new democratic values and is therefore a positive symbol of modernity, and not of oppression.

The first non-governmental newspaper in a national language was published only in 2005; it is *Ra'ayi*, a bimonthly newspaper of only six pages, in Hausa. Its diffusion remained rather limited because on the one hand, the editorial office was located in Niamey, a less Hausa-speaking city than Maradi or Zinder; on the other hand, because it had not aroused enthusiasm among the traditionally French speaking intellectual elites who can speak Hausa but do not always know how to read it and who, last but not least, see the expansion of national languages as a threat to their own status (Abba 2009, 96–99).

Radio – National languages represent about 70 % of the language used in radio programmes. In Niger, there are three types of radio (Perrin 1986, 21ss.; Abba 2009, 69–84): the national broadcaster, which follows step by step the activities of the government and other political authorities, private radios, which are more open to social and economic issues, and the so-called community radios, which differ from the private ones in that

they are managed by people who are not professionals of audiovisual journalism and who mostly provide proximity information. In the villages where a Radio Club operates, the host (often a teacher or a doctor) organizes a debate in one of the national languages with the aim of promoting the economic and social development of the country. The themes of the programmes concern agriculture, livestock, water and forests, health and also socio-economic problems. This participatory experience has been very successful and has often been supported by international institutions (e.g., UNICEF and WHO).

Television – Television arrived in Niger as early as 1964. At the beginning, it had only pedagogical purposes and was aimed at an audience of elementary school children who, gathered in class, watched four television programmes a day, concerning various subjects, lasting about one quarter of an hour each. All this was done exclusively in French (Egly 1973). This experiment, which ended in 1979 and which for many observers is not entirely positive considering the illiteracy rate in Niger, is marked by what Alzouma (2011–2012, 166) calls the technologic messianism (“messianisme technologique”) or technologic determinism (“déterminisme technologique”, Alzouma 2011–2012, 184), meaning the confidence that technological development is the key element for the economic and social rebirth of Africa. The abandonment of the project was partly linked to the cost of creating and storing the audiovisual material and to the protests over the fact that the classrooms were not led by real teachers but by simple supervisors, trained, in a very rough way, only to comment on the videos. However, two socio-political factors must be added. For a long time, schools and television were seen, especially in the rural environment, as a symbol of neo-colonial domination. Furthermore, when the Nigerien political power grasped the importance of television as a vehicle for the affirmation of its power, it quickly decided to get rid of the experience of educational television to found a French-speaking national television in 1979 (*Télé-Sahel*). In 2001, a second national channel (*Tal TV*) was added, with limited broadcasting in Niamey.

Like the public ones, most of the private television channels were born after the liberalization of the 1990s; they essentially present programmes in French, more rarely in the national languages, mainly in Hausa, Zarma, Fulfulde, Tamasheq, and Kanuri. As the majority of the population is illiterate, national languages are often used to convey important messages in the life of the nation, usually news headings or political-cultural debates, that are, not always satisfactorily, translated by journalists or translators. Many of the products that are disseminated are not designed and manufactured in Niger but are packages that are bought abroad (e.g., from *Canal France international*, *TV5*, *Go Africa*).

4 Linguistic characteristics

The linguistic study of the Nigerien variety is a still largely unexplored field which focuses mostly on data obtained from surveys carried out in Niamey, a city of about one million inhabitants who speak essentially Zarma and partly Hausa, moreover on quite small samples. The data that will be presented, therefore, cannot aspire to any complete-

ness either from the analysis point of view or from the geographical point of view, but will be considered as an integral part of exploratory research which is still in progress.

4.1 Pronunciation

Generally speaking, the phenomena found in the Nigerien variety of Niamey appear consistent with those universal tendencies at reducing the markedness that can usually be found in the historical evolution of phonological systems. These phenomena are similar to those found in other places in French-speaking Africa, such as the reduction of nasal vowels, considered to be strongly marked.

Nasal vowels – From a phonological point of view, the situation follows the standard of four nasal vowel phonemes in opposition to each other. From a phonetic point of view, however, we detect a certain tendency to produce variants that are not very nasalized if not completely de-nasalized, and therefore less marked, which affects the unstressed vowels with a greater frequency.

Schwa – Regarding the schwa, /ə/, we briefly recall that in standard French there are two main characteristics: the possibility of not being realized, and the richness of possible phonetic realizations. As in other African varieties, the central vowel in Niamey speech no longer alternates with zero. Since in African French, the only schwa that remains optional is the one inside a word (e.g., in *bêtement* [betəmã] ~ [betmã]), in Nigerien French the fall is very rare even in this position, for which *médecin* will almost always be pronounced [medesɛ̃] instead of [med(ə)sɛ̃]. Regarding the schwa timbre, [e] (instead of [ə]) is also attested, which attests a shift of the central vowel towards more peripheral and therefore less marked positions as well as a pressure of the written on the oral production (i.e. written <e> realized as [e]).

Consonants – As regards consonants, dentals are palatalized and the rhotic has multiple allophones with a clear predominance of [r] (Busà 2018).

Liaison – Regarding the liaison, the only study available for now is that of De Flaviis (2018), analyzing the idiolect of a secondary school French teacher belonging to the Zarma ethnic group. The results of the analysis are in line with general trends: the categorical liaisons (e.g., *les amis* [lezami]) are always realized while the variable ones (e.g., *trop important* [tʁopɛ̃pɔ̃tã]) tend not to be, not only in spontaneous speech but also in reading.

4.2 Morphosyntax

There is a whole literature of listed morphosyntactic traits which can be considered typical of French spoken in Africa and which are not always reflected elsewhere in the French language (cf. Zang Zang 1998; Boutin 2007; Biloa 2012). A first interesting fact is that only some of these traits are found in the French spoken in the capital, namely in

very small quantities; this seems to be repeated even where the speakers are not well educated (Floquet 2018a). The French spoken in Niamey would therefore still seem quite close to the standard; this seems to be confirmed by the fact that there is no awareness of an endogenous norm among Nigeriens, as is the case elsewhere. We point out some phenomena in which a difference with respect to the standard is however shown.

This is the case with the simplification of the system of determinants to the advantage of the definite article, a well-attested phenomenon in other parts of Africa, as Zang Zang (1998, 317–335) points out. In Niamey, it can also involve the possessive article, for which the phrase *le visage in l'enfant n'a pas lavé le visage* will be interpreted as the equivalent of *son visage*, effectively transforming the sentence from unacceptable to acceptable, which is not possible in other varieties of French (Floquet 2018b). Another particular trait is the disappearance of the anaphoric personal pronoun, in the position of subject or object (direct or indirect), whose presence is instead mandatory in the standard, for example *puisque moi suis touareg* instead of *puisque moi je suis touareg* in standard French or *elle a combien d'enfants? Alors ma mère elle a trois* instead of *elle a combien d'enfants? Alors ma mère elle en a trois* in standard French. Rather than a phenomenon of transference originating from African languages (Noumssi 1999, 122), it would seem to be a process of syntactic simplification common to other varieties of French (Ploog 1999; Légliše 2012), which is however completely absent in those Nigerien speakers who adhere to the norm more easily. Regarding the verbal system, there are some cases of use of the present indicative to the detriment of other tenses and modes as in *il faut que je sors* instead of *il faut que je sorte* in standard French, a phenomenon found elsewhere in the French speaking world, not only in Africa, as emerges from Mitchell (2009) for Gabon and by Rossi-Gensane (2010) for the European French. In formal written language, data by Sabi'u (2018) show a tendency of the definite article, a less marked element among the determinants as also the acquisitional data confirm (Véronique 2009), to supplant the other determinants, a phenomenon that is common in other French Africans (Celani/Celata/Floquet 2021, 29s.). Furthermore, a diathesis change can be observed, and the construction of verbs vary, for example *il s'est divorcé* for *il a divorcé*, even in standardized phrases such as *il a failli laisser sa peau* instead of *il a failli y laisser sa peau* or *il fait toujours à sa tête* for *il en fait toujours à sa tête*, a phenomenon also found in other areas of African French-speaking countries, for example in Cameroon (Zang Zang 1998, 387s.), where a different system of attribution of thematic roles seems to emerge (Celani/Celata/Floquet 2021, 31ss.) On the other hand, there is less occurrence of simplifications concerning the concordance of tenses, which tend towards a structural simplification in favour of the less marked pole, that is present instead of imperfect, future instead of conditional, simple forms instead of complex ones, and errors of the type *unification* for *réunification* or *ce que* for *c'est que*, which seem to have a non-strictly linguistic explanation.

4.3 Lexicon

Loans – The multilingualism in which Nigeriens live has given rise to French words and expressions in which national languages like Zarma (Zar.), Hausa (Hau.), or Fulfulde (Ful.) transpire in filigree (Barreteau 1997; Sow/Mossi 2011; Reutner 2017, 47–51). This is the case of calques or neo-formations from Zarma, such as *avoir le soleil* ‘having hemorrhoids’ (< Zar. *baranda woyno* ‘having the sun [which burns like hemorrhoids]’), *balseur* ‘freeloader’ (< Zar. *balsa* ‘the fact of taking advantage’), *roubeur* ‘vain person’ (< Zar. *rubu* ‘vanity’) or from Hausa as for example *reculer en arrière* ‘backing away’ (< Hau. *ja baya* ‘pull back!’). In some cases, it is necessary to refer to the African cultures of origin to understand these calques. This is the case, for example, of the calque *accepter avec un cœur* or *accepter avec deux*; the first means ‘accept without hesitation’, that is, only with a good heart, since it is believed that there are two of them, the second ‘to accept with hesitation’ because the bad one also comes into play. We also report *sauter la lune* ‘to be late with the menstrual cycle, (lit.) jumping the moon’, with *lune* standing for ‘month’, or *et les deux jours?* ‘how have you been since the last time we met?, (lit.) and the last two days?’, where *deux jours* stands for an indefinite duration. There are obviously also complete loanwords such as *chayi* ‘tea or coffee with milk’ from Arabic, *dan banga* ‘security officer’ from Hausa, *djantaré* ‘woman of easy virtue’ from Fulfulde, *faba-faba* ‘low-cost public transport’ from Zarma. Data by Sabi’u (2018), obtained from a newspapers corpus, shows also Nigerisms in written language coming from national languages, e.g., *gabdimment* ‘in the manner of prostitutes’ (< Zar. *gabdi* ‘prostitute’ + *ment*), *wassossiste* ‘grabber’ (< Hau. *wasoso* ‘to grab’ + *iste*), or *zaki* ‘lion’ (< Hau. *zaki* ‘lion’).

Changes of meaning – However, there are also neologisms that do not derive from contact with other languages but develop within French. This is the case of the semantic ones, such as, e.g., (*la situation est*) *caillou* ‘(the situation is) difficult, (lit.) pebble’, *recevoir un dix chiffres* ‘receive foreign transfer, (lit.) receive a ten figure’, *béton armé* ‘millet paste, (lit.) reinforced concrete’, *bavure* ‘impropriety that generates disorder, (lit.) saliva’, *ça cloche/ça ne cloche pas* ‘it’s ok/it’s not ok, (lit.) sounds good/sounds bad’, *descente* ‘end of work, (lit.) slope’, *régulière* ‘lover always available, (lit.) regular’, *tablier* ‘street vendor, (lit.) apron’, *au revoir Europe* ‘European car sold in Africa, (lit.) Goobye Europe’, *café au lait* ‘white coffee, (lit.) milk and coffee’, in which words or expressions in standard French acquire a different meaning. It should be noted that the students’ language is very rich in innovative vocabulary such as *bâtiment R* ‘university restaurant, (lit.) building R’, *boucher* ‘biology student, (lit.) butcher’, *carnageur* ‘student who devours all the meat at the university canteen, (lit.) student who makes a carnage’, *carriériste* ‘student who studies a lot, for a long time and with scarce profit, (lit.) careerist’, *égorger* ‘to finish a meal, (lit.) to slaughter’.

Word formation – We point out some neo-formations, some of which are found in other parts of French-speaking Africa, such as *rhuminer* ‘to blow one’s nose’ (< *rhume* ‘cold’ + *-iner*), *mangement* ‘meal/thing that can generate profit’ (< *manger* + *-ment*), *man-géocratie* ‘public corruption’ (< *manger* ‘to eat’ + *-cratie*), *pouvoiriste* ‘who loves power’ (<

pouvoir ‘power’ + *-iste*), *cartouchard* ‘student who failed many years’ (< *cartouche* ‘cartridge’ + *-iste*), *lazaret lazaret* ‘shared vehicles’ (< *lazaret* ‘hospital’ + *lazaret*), *mange-mil* ‘housewife’ (< *manger* ‘to eat’ + *mil* ‘millet’).

5 Internal language policy

5.1 Linguistic purism

Many educated Nigeriens (not just adults) have the impression that the French spoken in Niger is of a higher quality than that spoken in other Sahel countries. This perception could be dictated by the fact that Nigerian French is closer to the standard model due to the absence of an internal sociolinguistic dynamic that has generated a well-defined endogenous norm, as in the case of the Côte d’Ivoire, due to the fact that French remains the language of a small intellectual elite. After all, according to data from Sanaker/Holter/Skattum (2006, 213), which however dates back to 1995, the French speakers in Niger with at least six years of schooling behind them, the so-called real French speakers (“Francophones réels”), would be only 3% of the population; the potential French speakers (“Francophones potentiels”), who speak French but could lose their competence, are about 8% (Perrin 1986, 63–103; Rossillon 1995, 87).

5.2 Usage of linguistic characteristics

Variety used in education – The language within the school system has always been French. However, it should be noted that for some observers, the performance of French teachers shows an insufficient level of appropriation of the oral language and a general linguistic insecurity, which contrasts with a highly ritualized practice in the written language (Mallam Garba/Hanafiou 2010). This is mainly due to the inability of the state to pay teachers’ salaries regularly, which makes the profession unattractive, causing a huge recruitment problem, both quantitative and qualitative, because French teachers are few and often poorly trained. Saïbou Adamou/Mamane/Karidio (2021, 963–964) also points out that because of unsorted recruitment, there is a mismatch between the training received and the function performed. French teachers often operate without pedagogical objectives and evaluate without using criteria developed by specialists in the field. This situation explains the decline in the level of French, especially in writing. Mamane (2016b) lists the most frequent mistakes in the texts of middle school students: inappropriate lexicon, words borrowed from the mother tongue, mixing of verbal tenses, many spelling mistakes (for this aspect cf. also Floquet/Pinto 2019). It cannot be underestimated either that Niger is in the midst of a population boom, averaging more than seven children per woman and having the highest fertility rate in the world (Amato/Iocchi 2020, 36), which has a strong impact on the margins of maneuver for educational poli-

cies. However, recent investigations in Niamey have shown that middle school students never express any insecurity about their linguistic intuitions or doubts about their legitimacy to make judgments about French sentences. They are therefore adolescents who legitimately consider themselves Francophone and who respond freely on the basis of their knowledge of the norm and their representation of it, however partial this may be. They therefore find themselves in an attitude of linguistic security and not of insecurity, contrary to teachers; and although, from a sociolinguistic point of view, they could be considered second language speakers, at a more psycholinguistic level, they perceive themselves as full-fledged first language speakers (Boutin/Floquet 2020).

Variety used in the media – The language of the Nigerien press has not yet been the subject of systematic studies, contrary to other countries of the sub-region (Raschi 2010) with the exception of data by Barreteau (1997) and Sabi'u (2018), which however are obtained from a reduced and not very recent corpus.

Variety used in literature – French-speaking literature makes its first appearance only on the threshold of independence, in 1959, with Ibrahim Issa, and since then it has coexisted with literary production in national languages, both of oral and written tradition, which historically precede it (Bertho 2019). The great authors of the first generation as well as those post-independence (Boubou Hama, Mahamane Dangobi, Abdoulaye Mamani, André Salifou) have often shared a passion for writing with a strong political commitment, which partly explains the themes they dealt with, often linked to the intertwining of colonialism and African traditions. Abdoulaye Mamani's great masterpiece, *Sarraounia* (1980), is an illuminating example. In it, with an epic style and from an African perspective, Mamani tells of the resistance to the colonial conquest of the Hausa queen against the advance of the column led by two French officers, Voulet and Chanoine. The critic debates whether, in the intentions of the author, a socialist militant close to Djibo Bakari, there was the will to build a national myth by affirming the superiority of traditional African values (Tandina 1993; Yahaya 2015) or to denounce, through the figure of a woman, all the oppressions of the world pointing out the brotherhood between peoples as the only possible solution (Bertho 2011).

From a linguistic point of view, the literary French of these writers is in line with the European literary standard and does not present any particular specificity. On the other hand, the current panorama is different, with an emergence of authors who propose new linguistic solutions. These can concern the use of Nigerisms and in general of forms that diverge from the European standard up to the actual mixing of French with words or entire phrases that come from African languages, generating in fact a literature that makes an aesthetic use of plurilingualism. This is the case of *Le roi des cons* (2019) by Idi Nouhou, an agile novel set in Niamey's nocturnal world in which the protagonist tackles the themes of the difficult relationship with tradition, of marital relationships but also the desire for social ascent with all the limits it implies. In this text there are typically Nigerien expressions, such as *belle à la diablesse* 'devilishly beautiful' or *elle avait cherché à me gris-griser* 'she tried to put a spell on me' (with *gris-griser* 'casting spell'), non-standard syntactic structures like *sa soyeuse robe* (instead of *sa robe soyeuse*

'her silk dress') or *il faisait très jour* (instead of *il faisait jour* 'it was dawning'), and various borrowings from African languages often already glossed in the text itself, for example (i) und (ii) that go in the direction of greater adherence to the oral language as it is spoken in the capital (Van Geertruijden 2019).

- (i) "c'était du 'dambu', couscous de riz, avec une chair de pigeonneaux broyés avec du sésame rouge" (Nouhou 2019, 18).¹
- (ii) "Un griot traditionnel animait remarquablement la soirée avec sa voix rocailleuse et son 'gurumi', instrument à deux cordes" (Nouhou 2019, 101).²

Also noteworthy is the production of the impro-singer (*slameur*) Jhonel, a modern urban griot, who stylistically underlines his connection with the story-telling tradition (*Jasare*) by inserting fragments in African languages, typically Zarma, Hausa, or Fulfulde; this generates intertext with the poems of traditional griots from which, however, Jhonel wants to distinguish himself by the fact that he no longer has the powerful as an audience and their deeds as a theme, preferring rather to become an instrument of vindication of the weakest (Bertho/Bornand 2020).

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1 'It was some "dambu", rice couscous, with pidgeon stew and red sesame'.

2 'A traditional griot was providing an evening of entertainment with his husky voice and his "gurumi", a two-string instrument'.

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