

# **NATIONAL LANGUAGES BECOME OFFICIAL LANGUAGES IN MALI: NEW PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES**

**KADIDIATOU TOURE**

*Maitre Assistante à l'Université des Lettres et des Science  
Humaines de Bamako (ULSHB) / MALI*

*Research Scholar at Michigan State University (MSU) / USA*

*kadidiatoutoure@ymail.com / toureka2@msu.edu*

*ORCID 0009-0003-6729-2300*

## **Abstract**

*Mali is a multicultural and multiethnic country with thirteen of its languages recognized as national languages by the law N°96-049 of August 23, 1996. Recently, After a referendum on June 18, 2023, the new constitution of Mali has been adopted by the decret N°2023-0401/PT-RM of July 22, 2023. Its article 31 states that the national languages of Mali are now official languages. The new constitution also identifies French as the language of work. This new disposition for languages in Mali creates confusion as far as the functions of the new official languages are concerned. The purpose of this research paper is to investigate into the new language policy of Mali in the framework of the new Constitution of the country and to see in what extend, the situation is really changing for the former national languages. The methodology advocated for this research is a qualitative one. The approaches used for the data analysis are content analysis and textual analysis. The results have show that if there is a significant change at the level of the national languages, which become official, and French, work language, at the level of language functions nothing has changed yet. In the perspective that the upcoming organic law will organize the thirteen official language so that to provide them with more functions as required by their new status, the research identifies some challenges stemming to the new situation.*

**Keywords:** *constitution, function, national language, official language, status*

## **Resume**

*Le Mali est un pays multiculturel et Multiethnique avec treize de ses langues reconnues comme langues national par la loi N°96-049 du 23 Août*

1996. Récemment, après un référendum tenu le 18 Juin 2023, la nouvelle constitution du Mali a été adopté par le Décret N°2023-0401/PT-RM du 22 Juillet 2023. Son article 31 mentionne que les langues nationales sont désormais des langues officielles. La nouvelle constitution reconnaît aussi le Français comme la langue de travail. Ces nouvelles dispositions concernant les langues du Mali créent certaines confusions quant au fonction des nouvelles langues officielles. L'objectif du présent article est d'analyser la nouvelle politique linguistique dans le cadre de la nouvelle constitution du Mali et de voir dans quelle mesure ces dispositions prises affectent réellement les fonctions des langues nationales. La méthodologie adoptée est qualitative avec l'approche analyse de contenu et analyse textuelle des données recueillies. Les résultats ont montrés un changement significatif pour les langues nationales, qui sont désormais des langues officielles, et le Français, qui devient langue de travail. Malgré ce changement important au niveau du statut des langues, en terme de fonction, rien n'a vraiment changée. Dans la perspective que la loi organique permettra d'organiser les treize langues officielle de manière à leur attribuer les fonctions qui leur reviennent, la présente recherche a identifié quelques challenges liés à cette nouvelle situation.

**Mots clés:** constitution, fonction, langue nationale , langue officielle , status

## 1. Introduction

Mali is a country situated in West Africa. It has a population of 22 395 485 inhabitants in 2022 (RGPH5)<sup>1</sup> for a land area of 1 241 238 km<sup>2</sup>. It has been colonized by France and after independence in 1960, French has been retained as the official language as stipulated by the law N°60-23 A.L.-R.S. of July 26, 1960: “ *La langue française est la langue d'expression officielle.* ”<sup>2</sup>

Mali is a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual country. According to Gordon (2005), fifty languages are spoken there. Among those languages, thirteen are recognized as national languages by the law N°96-049 of August 23, 1996. The thirteen national languages of Mali are: Bambara, Songhay,

<sup>1</sup> Recensement General de la Population et de l'Habitat 5

<sup>2</sup> “French is the official language.”

Bozo, Fulfulde, Dɔgɔsɔ, Mamara, Soninké, Malinké, Tamasheq, Bomu, Syenara, Hasanya, Xaasongaxaŋo.

The Malian government has undertaken a process of writing a new constitution. That was motivated by the idea of refoundation of Mali and regained sovereignty. Touré (2023) described it as the writing of a constitution based on the idea of “Mali Kuru” (new Mali) and “Maliden Kura” (new Malian). She argues : “ *Il est aujourd’hui question d’affirmer l’identité malienne à travers les langues maliennes et se défaire de l’identité du colonisateur*”<sup>3</sup> (p.10).

After a referendum on June 18, 2023, the new constitution of Mali has been adopted by the decree N°2023-0401/PT-RM of July 22, 2023. Its article 31 states that the national languages of Mali are now official languages and that is what the Malians have been pushing for. The new constitution also identifies French as the language of work. One may ask if that is in contradiction or complementarity with the new official languages’ functions. With the function of work language, French will continue to play the same role as it used to do. Then, what is really changing for the national languages apart from the status? The purpose of this research paper is to investigate into the national languages’ new policy of Mali in the framework of the new Constitution of the country and to see in what extend, the situation is really changing for the former national languages. The specific objectives are to:

- Compare the provisions of the new Constitution on the national languages policy with the national languages policy as stipulated in the 1992 Constitution;
- Analyze the place of French in the new Constitution;
- Identify the perspectives and challenges stemming from the new situation.

---

<sup>3</sup> “Today it is a question of asserting Malian identity through Malian languages and getting rid of the identity of the colonizer.”

## 2. Theoretical framework

Haugen (1966 as cited in Calvet 1996) pioneered the notion of language planning. He also pioneered the notion of language policy and language ecology (Encyclopedia of Bilingual Education 2008). He used the term language planning to refer to the actions done to prepare the grammar, dictionary and orthography of a language. In 1983, Haugen proposed an overall model of language planning in four steps: selection, codification, implementation and elaboration of functions. Selection involves the choice of a language variety and codification deals with the determination of script, phonology, grammar, orthography and morphology. The step of implementation concerns the diffusion of the new codified norm through its usage at school, media, official situations and more. The last step, elaboration of function, is about the extension of the new norm to various domains (McKay and Hornberger, 2009:129-130; Jahr, 1992:13-14; Crystal, 1987:364.).

Haugen's approach to language planning is viewed by McKay and Hornberger (2009): *“as a largely technocratic process concerned with systematizing and cultivating a standardized language code in an effort to solve communication problems. He emphasizes the importance of the written standard over the spoken”* (p.130).

Scholars such as Kaplan and Baldauf (1997) distinguish between *“language planning,”* which concerns the actions and plans to promote linguistic change at the level of practices, considerations, and regulations, and *“language policy,”* which refers to the laws and regulations themselves. Spolsky (2004), on his part, prefers the term *“language policy”* for the action plans, and *“language management”* for the laws and regulations about language.

The two concepts have been combined by researchers like Wright (2016) and Ricento (2004), in the broader sense, as Language Planning and Language Policy (LPLP). Whatever the considerations are, both concepts are needed for a real result as mentioned in the Encyclopedia of Bilingual Education (2008): ‘*The implementation of language policies usually requires a formal plan of action based on guiding principles designed to promote, accommodate, maintain, protect, or restrict the use of languages in education or society*’ (p.70). The present work, relies on this position of interrelation as far as language planning and language policy are concerned, as well as the idea that language policy requires actions plans for the use of languages in education or society.

Language planning and policy can deal with both corpus and status planning. As mentioned in the International Encyclopedia of Linguistics, language planning is :

*deliberate, systematic, and theory-based attempt to solve the communication problems of a community by studying the various languages or dialects it uses, and developing a policy concerning their selection and use; also sometimes called language engineering or language treatment. Corpus planning deals with norm selection and codification, as in the writing of grammars and the standardization of spelling; status planning deals with initial choice of language, including attitudes toward alternative languages and the political implications of various choices.* (Bright, 1992: 310-311)

Corpus planning, according to Cooper (1989), involves "activities such as coining new terms, reforming spelling, and adopting a new script. It refers, in short, to the creation of new forms, the modification of old ones, or the selection from alternative forms in a spoken or written code" (p. 31). Status planning on the other hand is related to official or governmental

recognition of a language variety, and to authoritative attempts to extend or restrict language use in different contexts (Cooper, 1989, p.32).

Cooper (1989) proposes a third major type of language planning, acquisition planning, which he defines as: "*Language policy-making involves decisions concerning the teaching and use of language, and their careful formulation by those empowered to do so, for the guidance of others*" (p.31). He adds that this additional category is needed because considerable planning energy is directed toward language spread, especially through education.

### **2.1 Language Policies in Mali**

As with many African countries, Mali faced the problem related to the management of multilingualism after independence. From a previously neutral attitude to the recent officialisation of the national languages, the Malian government passed through many steps which make it sometimes difficult to identify the type of language planning adopted by the country. Many actions have been taken to promote the languages among which includes law 62-75/AN-RM of September 17, 1962 that authorized the creation of the *Institut des Sciences Humaines* of Mali, which attended to linguistic research, among its different duties.

Following that, the government instituted the *Réforme de l'Enseignement of 1962* with the objective to find solutions to Malian education qualitatively and quantitatively. It offers education to school age children and literacy to others. Then, the decree N°235/PG-RM of October 4, 1962 prescribed for the first time the place of the national languages in the domain of education. That decree predicted the use of the Malian languages in education when those languages will be codified. The languages were not yet codified but it was the starting point toward their promotion.

After a conference on education and national languages at Teheran in 1965, the decree N°85-PG of May 26, 1967 mentioned the alphabet for the transcription of four national languages: Bambara, Fulfulde, Songhay and Tamasheq. In 1968, the *Centre National d'alphabétisation Fonctionnel (CNAF)* was created to conduct activities derived from the conference related to the strengthening of farmers literacy capacities in rural areas. Three years later, in March 1972, the first journal “*Kibaru*” written in a national language (Bambara) appeared. Many editions were published before it disappeared in the second republic. One year after the adoption of the constitution of the second republic, the *Direction Nationale de l'Alphabétisation Fonctionnel et de la Linguistique Appliquée (DNAFLA)* was created by the ordonnance N°60-CMLN of October 20, 1975.

Upon the failure of the reform of education of 1962, it was a general thought that if the national languages were used at school, it would reduce school dropout rates (Ouane, 1995: 131). Because of the different institutions created previously, the education actors did not see any other obstacles to the introduction of national languages in formal education. Ouane (1995) said about that: “*grâce aux efforts de la DNAFLA, aucun argument technique ne s'oppose actuellement à cette innovation. Seule la volonté politique pourrait faire défaut*”<sup>4</sup> (p.126).

In 1980, four schools opened in Koulikoro (Kossa and Njifina) and Segou (Banankoroni and Zanbougu) that used Bambara as the formal language for education. It was the first generation of national languages used at school. Following that, in 1982-1983, three other national languages (Fulfulde, Songhay and Tamasheq) were introduced in formal educational contexts; the decree 159 PG-RM of July 1982 extended the number of

---

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the efforts of DNAFLA, there is no technical argument which can be opposed to this innovation. Only the political opposition may emerge as an obstacle?

national languages to ten, thus adding six additional languages : Bomu, Bozo, Dɔ̀gɔ̀sɔ̀, Syenara, Mamara, and Soninké.

After the referendum of 1992, the constitution still maintained French as the official language but mentioned the possibility for the officialisation of the national languages. In 1993, decree 93-107/P-RM allowed education in two more national languages: Soninké and Dɔ̀gɔ̀sɔ̀. Later, the law N°96-049 of August 23, 1996 related to the promotion of national languages extended the number of national languages to thirteen with the addition of Hassanya, Maninka and Xaamongaxango to the list.

The law N°99-046 AN-RM of December 16, 1999 which fixed the major educational orientation emphasizes on the promotion of bilingual education in Mali. As article 10 stipulates: “*l'enseignement est dispensé dans la langue officielle et dans les langues nationales. Les modalités d'utilisation des langues nationales et étrangères dans l'enseignement sont fixées par arrêtés des ministres en charge de l'Education.*”<sup>5</sup> (Ministry of National Education, 1999). Although, it is in 2002 that the third generation of bilingual education started with a bilingual curriculum (the convergent pedagogy). This bilingual curriculum applied to eleven language: Bambara, Bomu, Bozo, Dɔ̀gɔ̀sɔ̀, Fulfulde, Khassonké, Mamara, Songhay, Soninké, Syenara and Tamasheq. In addition to the already mentioned laws, there are the *Programmes Décennaux de Développement de l'Education (PRODEC I 2002-2012 and PRODEC II 2019-2028)*<sup>6</sup> which aims at providing an inclusive, adapted, coherent and functional education to every Malian. Recently, after the adoption of the new constitution of 2023, the national languages of Mali are official languages.

---

<sup>5</sup> “education is in the official languages and the national languages. The modalities of usage of national and foreign languages in education are fixed by a decision from the ministry in charge of education.”

<sup>6</sup> It is a ten-year education development program which was a strategic planification of the refoundation of the national education system.



## 2.2 Document of language policy/planning in Mali

Mali have elaborated in 2014 a document of language planning. This document is built on the idea of promotion of national languages and the recognition of Malians' linguistic and cultural diversity. It highlights the notion of convivial multilingualism based on decentralization, so that each language may have function and serve its speakers where and when necessary. This document has seven building blocks which explain how the multilingual linguistic landscape of Mali should look:

- \* *les langues nationales constituent le socle de l'identité culturelle nationale ;*
- \* *le respect de la diversité linguistique consolide l'unité nationale ;*
- \* *tout citoyen a le droit de parler et d'être éduqué dans sa langue maternelle ;*
- \* *la promotion de toutes les langues nationales est une nécessité pour un développement endogène et une véritable décentralisation ;*
- \* *tout citoyen devrait pouvoir apprendre au moins une langue nationale, une ou deux langues africaines et une ou deux autres langues de communication internationale, en plus de sa langue maternelle ;*
- \* *les langues s'imposent par leur dynamique ;*
- \* *la politique linguistique du Mali est fondée sur un multilinguisme fonctionnel convivial s'articulant avec la décentralisation et l'intégration africaine, ayant comme matrice une langue identitaire, une langue véhiculaire et une langue de communication internationale.<sup>7</sup>*

---

<sup>7</sup> \* national languages constitute the basis of national cultural identity;

\* respect for linguistic diversity consolidates national unity;

\* every citizen has the right to speak and be educated in their mother tongue;

\* the promotion of all national languages is a necessity for endogenous development and true decentralization;

The document of language planning of Mali identifies the national languages as symbol of cultural identity. It recognizes the multicultural aspect of the country and the equality between the national languages. Moreover, it has a pan-Africanist dimension and an international one too. This document of the language policy in Mali highlights some functions for the new official languages of Mali. It tries to sum up all the previous efforts made for the promotion of the national languages and preparing for the date those languages would be officialized.

### 3. Methodology

The methodology utilized for this research is a qualitative one. Qualitative research is a broad umbrella of research methodologies such as discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003; Wodak and Meyer 2009), case study (Flyvbjerg 2006; Yin 2003), grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 2017; Strauss and Corbin 1990), phenomenology (Sanders 1982), and ethnography (Geertz 1973; Garfinkel 1967), among others. This methodology allows the analysis of the language policies and also an exploration and identification of new perspectives and challenges. Moreover, it permits the use of actual and real data about the research topic.

The data is obtained thanks to a survey and secondary data. The secondary data concerns the analysis of the two language policies (the provision of the constitution of 1992 and the new constitutional provision for national languages) as well as the literature review of the different laws and regulations on Malian languages. I constructed a survey using Google Forms and its

---

\* every citizen should be able to learn at least one national language, one or two African languages and one or two other languages of international communication, in addition to their mother tongue;

\* languages impose themselves through their dynamics;

\* Mali's linguistic policy is based on a friendly functional multilingualism linked to decentralization and African integration, having as matrix a language of identity language, a vehicular language and a language of international communication.

corresponding analysis to collect the opinion of some language specialists about the dispositions for languages in the new constitution. The approaches used for the data analysis are content analysis and textual analysis. Content analysis has been used to describe the survey data and the textual analysis has been used to examine the secondary data (documents of the language policies).

The survey is composed of seven questions, five of which are open-ended questions with two closed questions. The survey was completed by twelve specialists in linguistics, sociolinguistics, education science and sociology. The survey is written in French because the respondents felt at ease with that language than English. Therefore, the graphs and tables derived from the form are in French. The data collection process took place in September 2023.

#### **4. Analysis and Result**

The two language policies have been analyzed to see how far the official status of Malian languages is going to affect their function and use in society. Since the policy is recent and nothing has yet been decided about how the official languages are going to be organized, this analysis will contribute some recommendations of language specialists about pertinent concerns.

##### ***4.1 Comparison of the language policy of the new Constitution with the language policy in the Constitution of 1992***

For the present content, textual analysis permits descriptions and analyses of the function, structure and content of pieces of writing related to the two language policies. As Bauer et al. (2014) points out while talking about textual analysis:

*A social scientific text analysis aims to explain the life-world within which the text is embedded; to open up the perspective of the author that is delineated by his/her social and cultural context and to draw attention to the structural aspect of everyday practices and meaning patterns (p.03).*

In this sense, each of the language policies has been analyzed according to the social and political context which predominate at the time of their promulgation. They have been textually analyzed to find differences in term of structure as well as meaning.

#### **4.1.1 Structure**

The structure of the article advocated to the status of languages is different in the two constitutions. First, in the constitution of 1992, the statement relative to languages is part of the article 25 which first defines the state, its principles, its institutions, its emblem, its hymn and then the official and national languages. The article 25 is written as followed :

*Article 25 : Le Mali est une République indépendante, souveraine, indivisible, démocratique, laïque et sociale. Son principe est le gouvernement du Peuple, par le Peuple et pour le Peuple.*

*Les institutions de la République sont :*

- *le Président de la République ;*
- *le Gouvernement ;*
- *l'Assemblée Nationale ;*
- *la Cour Suprême ;*
- *la Cour Constitutionnelle ;*
- *la Haute Cour de Justice ;*
- *le Haut Conseil des Collectivités territoriales ;*

- *le Conseil Economique, Social et Culturel.*

*L'emblème national est composé de trois bandes verticales et égales de couleurs vert, or et rouge.*

*La devise de la République est "Un Peuple -Un But - Une Foi".*

*L'hymne nationale est "Le Mali".*

*La loi détermine le sceau et les armoiries de la République.*

*Le français est la langue d'expression officielle.*

*La loi fixe les modalités de promotion et d'officialisation des langues nationales<sup>8</sup>.*

Here, languages are mentioned in the last part of the article 25, giving them less importance. It seems that the writers of that constitution wanted to leave the question of languages to the future, perhaps because the national languages had not been codified yet and the multilingual situation of the country was not in favor for the selection of the Malian languages as official at that time.

Whereas in the new constitution of 2023, there is a separate article that defines the state and article 31, which talked about languages only. It is written as followed:

---

<sup>8</sup> Article 25: Mali is an independent, sovereign, indivisible, democratic Republic, secular and social. Its principle is the government of the People, by the People and for the People.

The institutions of the Republic are:

- the President of the Republic;
- the Government;
- the National Assembly;
- the Supreme Court;
- the Constitutional Court;
- the High Court of Justice;
- the High Council of Territorial Authorities;
- the Economic, Social and Cultural Council.

The national emblem is composed of three equal vertical bands of green, gold and red.

The device of the Republic is "One People – One Goal – One Faith".

The national hymn is "Mali".

The law determines the seal and coat of arms of the Republic.

French is the official language of expression.

The law establishes the modalities for the promotion and officialization of national languages.

*Article 31 : Les langues nationales sont les langues officielles du Mali.*

*Une loi organique détermine les conditions et les modalités de leur emploi.*

*Le français est la langue de travail.*

*L'Etat peut adopter toute autre langue comme langue de travail<sup>9</sup>.*

Here, the language status deserves a particular article. It is to show that it is an important decision and part of Malian sovereignty. The article opens with “*the national languages are the official languages of Mali*”. It expresses the solid decision of the government to make changes and the readiness to execute those changes as opposed to the situation in 1992.

#### **4.1.2 Contents**

The contents of the two articles are also different. In article 25 of the constitution of 1992, French was declared the official language. The article made a provision for the promotion and officialization of the national languages. Still, the article is vague about the national languages, their functions and organization. As mentioned by Pakarinen (2009): “*Pourtant, le 25eme article de la constitution du Mali ne définit que la langue officielle qui est le Français. Les langues nationales ne sont pas nommée...*”<sup>10</sup> (p.4-5). This way of formulation shows the awareness of the authorities about the necessity to promote the national languages, and their apprehension about mentioning a particular language. Because of the ideology of respect of linguistic diversity, the Malian authorities for a long time have

---

<sup>9</sup> Article 31 : the national languages of Mali are official languages.

An organic law determines the conditions and modalities of use.

French is the work language.

The state can choose any other language as work language.

<sup>10</sup> “In fact, the article 25 of the constitution only defines the official language which is French. The national languages are not named...”

adopted a neutral attitude toward the choice or the mention of a particular Malian language in the constitution.

This focus on the respect of linguistic diversity is mentioned in many official documents like the preamble of the constitution of 1992: “*le peuple souverain du Mali [...] proclame sa détermination à défendre les droits de la femme et de l'enfant ainsi que la diversité culturelle et linguistique de la communauté nationale.*”<sup>11</sup>. In addition, the law N°96-049 of August 23, 1996 about the modalities and promotion of national languages still put an emphasis on the respect of the linguistic diversity and the equality between languages in its article 1: “*les langues nationales jouissent des mêmes droits dans le respect des diversités culturelles et de l'unité nationale*”<sup>12</sup>.

It appears to be a neutral attitude that justified the choice of French as official language since it is the language of any Malian, and also it was ready for use. While seeking for the respect of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the country, the authorities were avoiding the choice of a Malian language and letting them impose themselves by their dynamism. That is why Baggioni (1996) qualified the Malian language policy as ‘*planification linguistique par défaut*’ (default language planning) which describes a situation where languages should impose themselves by their dynamism. In such situation, some languages (minority languages) are simply going to be eaten by others (majority languages). Calvet (1983) also mentioned such language planning as characterized by: “*une absence de choix clairement formulés qui consiste au bout du compte à entériner l'ordre des choses*”<sup>13</sup>.” (p.287).

With article 25 of the constitution of 1992, the situation as far as the promotion of the national language did not evolve

<sup>11</sup> “The sovereign nation of Mali [...] affirms its determination to defend the rights of women and children as well as the the cultural and linguistic diversity of the national community.”

<sup>12</sup> “The national languages have the same rights in the respect of cultural diversity and national unity.”

<sup>13</sup> “an absence of clear formulated choice which consist at the end to approve the way things are”

significantly. Many laws have been promulgated toward their promotion but in practice, the results were not satisfying. As Ag Muphtah (2003) citing Barry et al. (1992) said: “*si les discours politiques des dirigeants et des décideurs étaient en faveur d'une valorisation des langues nationales, dans les faits ils n'ont pas pris de décisions politiques pour valoriser et favoriser leur promotion*<sup>14</sup>.” (p. 32). That seems to be among the reasons behind the conception of a document of language planning in 2014 in order to fill the gaps in the previous legislations about the national languages.

Article 31 of the new constitution, on the other hand, clearly identifies the thirteen national languages as being the official languages of the country. The situation has evolved and the Malian as well as the decision makers are ready to pass to the next step for the national languages after sixty-three years of independence. The motivation to do so is highly expressed by the first statement of the article mentioning the national languages as being the official languages of the country.

Moreover, it also identifies French as the language of work. This second statement reduced the functions of the new official languages of the country. In addition, it keeps the new official languages to the same functions of when they were national languages. This indirectly suggests the fear of the elaborators about the incapacity for the national languages to be used in all spheres of scientific and professional life.

While there is a strong readiness for the officialization of the national languages which is expressed explicitly, in the meantime, there is also a fear about the functions that should follow. With the status of work language given to French, the only thing which has really changed as for the content is the

---

<sup>14</sup> “If the political discourses of the different leaders and decision makers reflect the valorization of national languages, in practice, they did not take political decisions to promote them.”



status of the languages without a change of function and that seems to be conflictual. Status when it comes to language is related to functions as mentioned by Robillard (1997) “*position d’une langue dans la hiérarchie sociolinguistique d’une communauté linguistique, cette position étant liée aux fonctions remplies par la langue, et à la valeur sociale relative conférée à ces fonctions*”<sup>15</sup>(p. 269-270). Status is then a position related both to function and value. It does not make sense to have a status without functions that go with it. The last statement of article 31 predicts a future change at this level too, when the Malian languages will be sufficiently codified to be used in all domains.

The survey pointed out the same result. For respondents, the two constitutions are different in the sense that the national languages are now official languages and French is a work language. In terms of function, the situation will remain unchanged. Some comments from the survey are:

*“Dans la constitution de 1992, le français est la langue officielle du Mali. Il devient uniquement langue de travail dans la nouvelle constitution et les langues nationales deviennent les langues officielles du Mali.”*

*“Presque pareil, seulement les langues nationales s’érigent en langues officielles.”*

*“Le statut du français dans la Constitution de 2023 diffère en ce qu’il cesse d’être une langue officielle. Statut dont il jouissait exclusivement.”*<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> “the position a given language may have in the sociolinguistic hierarchy of a given speech community, this position being related to the functions played by the language and the social value given to those functions”

<sup>16</sup> “In the constitution of 1992, French is the official language of Mali. It becomes a work language in the new constitution and the national languages become the official language of Mali.”

“Almost the same, only national languages become official languages.”

“The status of French in the constitution of 2023 is different in the sense that it is no more the official language. A status that it had exclusively.”

When the respondents of the survey have been asked about the differences between the two language policies, it is only the change of status, which has been mentioned. Of course, there is a difference at the level of structure which signals how the sociopolitical situation of 1992 was not in favor of major decisions about Malian languages and the strong willingness for the officialization of Malian languages in 2023. The content also shows some differences at the level of languages status. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that a change of status only does not change the linguistic situation of a country (Pakarinen, 2009).

#### ***4.2 Analysis of the place of French in the new Constitution***

French has regressed in status. It is no more the official language but a language of work. At this level everything seems clear, but when we look at it practically, things become quickly confusing. French is no more the official language but it is the language which will continue to be used in the administration, at school, for scientific work etc. As pointed out in our survey :

*“Le français occupe une place en apparence marginale mais continuera de remplir des fonctions importantes dans l'administration, au niveau de la justice et de l'éducation.”*

*“Le français va demeurer la langue de communication dans l'administration, les entreprises et dans la communication scientifique et académique<sup>17</sup>.”*

Therefore, the function of French in the new constitution seems to be in conflict with the function of official languages. French will continue to play the same role it use to play in the country. For almost all of our respondents, the function of

---

<sup>17</sup> “French occupies a seemingly marginal place but will continue to fulfill important functions in the administration, in terms of justice and education.”

“French will remain the language of communication in administration, enterprises, and scientific and academic communication.”

French is in conflict with the new official languages functions as represented in the following diagram:

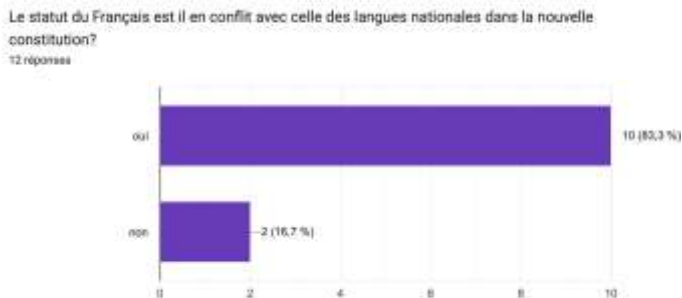


Figure 1: Is the status of French in conflict with the official languages' functions?

This conflictual situation is clear for everyone but does not seem to be a problem for the simple reason that the mention “official language” is all what is requested for the moment. People are satisfied with the current status of the official languages. For some participants of the survey, it is a transitional phase which is needed before the national languages could be used in all domains. Some arguments are:

*“Je pense que le français joue un rôle de transition avant d'être remplacé par l'une des langues nationales. L'idée c'est peut être laissé le français à cote des langues nationales avant d'être supprimer”*

*“Étant donné que les documents administratifs et l'architecture de la nation sont régis et documentés en français, il est nécessaire de continuer avec cette langue dans un temps déterminé pour assurer le bon fonctionnement des affaires administratives (internes et externes) du pays. Alors, on peut dire que le français est pour le moment une langue de travail au Mali utilisé dans l'administration et dans les*

*institutions du pays sans exclusion des langues locales considérées comme officielles*<sup>18</sup>.

In the coming years, they may be seeking for more functions for the official languages. Then Mali may pass to another step which is the use of the official languages as work languages and all what should follow. The situation in Mali shows how far language planning is a process with a vision of a future sociolinguistic situation (Daoust, 2007).

### ***4.3 The perspectives and challenges stemming from the new situation.***

This abstention of the authorities to use the official languages of Mali as language of work shows the challenges that need to be met before those official languages could effectively play their entire functions. For many years, Mali has been using a politic of non intervention as regard to national languages according to Leclerc (Pakarinen 2005). There is a linguistic policy which identifies the status of languages but this linguistic policy is also based on the idea of neutrality and leaving the languages impose themselves thanks to their dynamic. Now things should change with the officialisation of the thirteen national languages.

In this sense, as stated by (Cuq et al. 2003): *“Quelle que soit sa forme, une politique linguistique doit se fonder sur une analyse aussi précise que possible des situations sociolinguistiques, sociopolitiques, socioéconomiques et socioculturelles du pays concerné et prévoir un calendrier de*

---

<sup>18</sup> “I think French plays a transitional role before being replaced by one of the national languages. The idea is perhaps to leave French alongside national languages before being deleted.”

“Knowing that the administrative documents and the architecture of the the nation are written in French, it is necessary to continue with that language for a determined period in order to guaranty the well functioning of administrative affairs (internal and external) of the country. Then we can say that French is for the moment the language of work in Mali used in administration and in the institutions of the country without exclusion of the local languages considered as official.”

*mise en œuvre*<sup>19</sup>” (p. 197). The sociolinguistic environment is a crucial element to consider for any perspective about language use. That is why the authorities mentioned in the article 31 that an organic law will be made to determine how the official languages will be used. At this point, it is important to rely on the document of linguistic policy of Mali for the idea of functional convivial multilingualism and decentralization.

### **4.3.1 Functional convivial multilingualism**

As defined in the document of language planning (2014), the functional convivial multilingualism refers to an: “*approche stratégique de gestion du pluralisme linguistique africain prenant en compte à la fois le principe d’équité des langues et le principe de réalité des différentes fonctions assumées par celles-ci*”<sup>20</sup> (p. 8). In reference to this approach, the different official languages should be assigned function in particular geographical location and administrative level (local, regional, national and African) where they serves as major language of communication. In the mean time, they will be used with other languages of the locality when and where necessary based on the idea of solidarity between languages. This is refers to as ‘*délégation de souveraineté linguistique*<sup>21</sup>’ (document of language planning 2014). The notion of conviviality as mentioned in the document of language planning concerns both the relationship between the Malian languages as well as the relationship between the Malian languages and the other African or international language.

---

<sup>19</sup> “whatever its type is, a linguistic policy must be based on a precise analysis of the sociolinguistic, sociopolitical, socioeconomic, and sociocultural situation of the concerned country and plan an implementation calendar.”

<sup>20</sup> “a strategical approach to the management of African linguistic pluralism taking into account the principle of equity between languages and the Principle of reality of the different functions fulfill by them.”

<sup>21</sup> ‘delegation of linguistic sovereignty’

### 4.3.2 Decentralization

An important element to the management of the different official languages based on the above functional convivial multilingualism is through decentralization. In fact, Mali has started a process of decentralization since 1992. It is a process which involve the local management of administration. The power of the state is no more centralized but spread to the level of collectivities. This decentralized management requires the use of a specific national language depending on the collectivity. Touré et al. (2022) mentions how the use of national language is important to decentralization:

*S'agissant de la décentralisation et de ses implications linguistiques, ... , les élus locaux ne peuvent plus se passer de la langue locale dans le cadre de la communication politique. Cela n'est pas étonnant d'autant plus que la population est analphabète pour la majorité ... Les élus, étant de la localité et aussi par le biais de la langue, sont devenus plus proches des populations. Ceci étant, la légitimité s'est trouvée renforcée et la confiance instaurée<sup>22</sup> (p. 40- 42)*

That is why, the document of language planning mentioned the role of the collectivities in the promotion of national languages and the respect of cultural and linguistic diversity. Through the principle of decentralization, the use of the thirteen official languages should be organized without creating any linguistic conflict or discrimination.

### 4.3.3 Perspectives and challenges

In the social spheres, the new official languages already have their place in Malian's everyday life. In the sector of media too

---

<sup>22</sup> talking about decentralization and its linguistic implications, ..., the local elected authorities can no more avoid the use of local language in their political communication. This is not surprisingly with the majority of population which is illiterate ... being from the locality, the local authorities, through the use of local language, become close to the population. Therefore, the legitimate is reinforce and the confidence is insured

they are represented in many radio and television shows. The perspective in this sector is to have written newspapers in national languages spread all over the country. In the administrations in general, they serve as language for oral communication. This is not surprising with only 30.76% of population which is literate in 2020 (World Bank). Since French is the work language, they will continue to serve that role as shown by the result of the survey below.

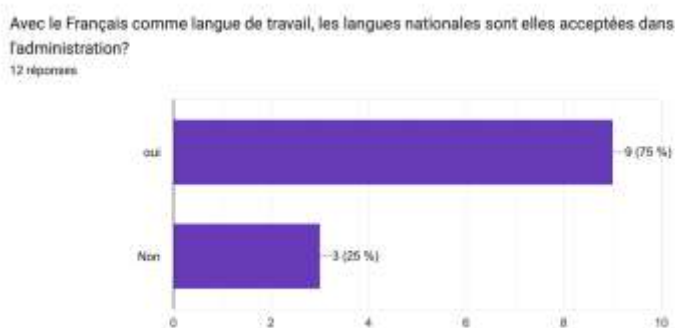


Figure2: *will the official languages be used in administration with French, the work language?*

While use for oral interaction within administration, the perspective will be to start using them in writing official administrative documents so that progressively, people get used to it and switch to their usage. It is in the domain of education that much should be done. It is through education that we can work on the corpus, status and acquisition planning and ensuring a real language promotion. Bilingual education has been known as an important instrument of language planning and in the Encyclopedia of Bilingual Education (1992),

*It is directly related to what has been called acquisition planning because the implementation of bilingual education programs creates new language learners and new users of a language. Also, by giving a language a prestigious domain in which to function such as the school, bilingual education is also a means of status planning, that is, modifying the prestige of a language. Finally, because of the school's emphasis on literacy, bilingual education is an important means of corpus planning, standardizing the language forms, and developing new terms for academic functions.(p. 435)*

The national languages, being official now, should not stop to the first grade of education. It should share the equal educational time with French from primary school to university (two-way bilingual program). The analysis of the survey reflects that half of the respondents share this position. The figure below represents the percentages:



Figure3: what are the perspectives for the use of the new official languages in education?

Most of the respondents (50%) think that the official language should be used concomitantly with French throughout the all



stages of education (primary, secondary and university). Only 18.2% of the respondents are favor to the use of the official languages only as the medium of interaction at school. 1/3 of them want the official languages to be used at primary school only. The positions are diverse because there are lot of challenges in the domain.

For the achievement of all the above perspective in the domain of media, administration and education, there are challenges to overcome. One of the important challenges that stem to the new situation is at the level of instrumentation. The new official languages are not sufficiently instrumented to be used in all domains. After that, there is the question of resources in the official languages (educational syllabus, teaching and learning resources, financial). Then, training is another challenge since their use in all grade of education requires teachers trained in the teaching of national languages. These challenges can be faced if institutions working on those languages and teacher training institutions received the adequate resource needed to push the actual status of use of the official languages to a higher position.

After analysis of the survey, the challenges which have been mentioned are summarized to the following:

- ❖ *Le manque criarde de matériel scientifiquement documentés,*
- ❖ *Le problème de financement des recherches scientifiques à mener dans les langues locales,*
- ❖ *L'absence de manuels pédagogiques complets couvrant le système éducatif tout au long des différents niveaux d'enseignement : pre- scolaire, fondamental, secondaire, et supérieur...*
- ❖ *L'instrumentation*

❖ *La formation des formateurs*<sup>23</sup>.

## 5. Discussion

Mali passes through different steps as we have seen previously. Now it is time to practically implement the new language policy to ensure a real development of the new official languages. The above mentioned perspectives and challenges requires important financial means. As mentioned in Guindo (2021): *“il va se poser un poser problème quand il s’agira de généraliser l’enseignement bi-plurilingue. Dans le contexte malien marqué par un multilinguisme, certes modéré à l’échelle nationale, le manque de moyens financiers et donc, l’autofinancement mèneront à un pilotage à vue*<sup>24</sup>”(p. 61).

By officializing the thirteen languages, the authorities were normally aware of the important financial resources that will be needed to the implementation of such policy. With the notion of functional convivial multilingualism and decentralization, the financial management also should be feasible since it is not all of the thirteen languages which will be required for use everywhere and at every time. The problem which may emerge is that the country is going to continue with the default language planning (Baggioni, 1996)and leaving the languages impose themselves by their dynamism. In this sense, the majority languages will continue to be indirectly favor as opposed to the minority languages.

While the document of language planning and the new language policy have a multilingual dimension with the thirteen

---

<sup>23</sup> Lack of scientific materials;

Lack of funds for scientific research on local languages;

Absence of pedagogical resources for the different grades of education ( pre-school, fundamental, secondary and university);

Instrumentation;

Training for trainers

<sup>24</sup> “there will be a problem as for the generalization of bilingual education. In the Malian context which is marked by multilingualism, certainly moderate at the national level, the lack of financial means and so the auto funding will lead to direct management”

official languages, only two or three of them will really be promoted. It is a situation which is also relevant to South Africa with eleven official languages and only two (English and Afrikaans) are the official languages in all nine provinces. The incoherence between the language policy and the practice is evident in their language-in-education policy (Posel and Casale 2011: 444).

The country's multilingual policy comprises education in the eleven official languages, but the situation in practice is quite different and is not in favor of indigenous language speakers:

*While these provisions were aimed at promoting multilingualism through the decentralization of decision-making power to parents and teachers, their non-prescriptive nature has instead resulted in the opposite effect; the South African educational landscape has become more monolingual in the post-apartheid era, with English the main language of teaching and learning (ibid: 444).*

The situation is as such because after first years of school, the language of instruction becomes English or Afrikaans with a choice of preferred second language. In the English language schools, student may be interested to choose among the various languages as their secondarily language. Whereas in the Afrikaans language schools, the second language is generally English. In both situations, English remains among the languages of instruction.

While the language policy allows for the use of the mother tongue, it also allows parents and teachers to choose English as the language of instruction, even if it is not the home language for the majority of the students (UNICEF, 2016). Many researches show the same situation in schools in South Africa (Probyn, 2009; Wildsmith & Gordon, 2009). In 2015, the

Government of South Africa took steps to counter the choice of English as the language of instruction through a policy amendment that requires the learning and use of an African language in the classroom, which is to be informed by the local context (UNICEF, 2016).

For the next step and the organic law about how the thirteen official languages of Mali should be used, it is important to learn from what is happening elsewhere so that to avoid the same errors. Moreover, it is essential to include and take into consideration the opinions of linguists, sociolinguists, language planners who really show prove of their value as specialists of the domain. This is an important step for the country and everyone should be concerned and involved in the practice of the upcoming laws and regulations toward the use and promotion of the Malian languages.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research paper investigated into the national languages' new policy of Mali as stipulated in the constitution of 2023. Through textual analysis, it contrasted the language policy of the constitution of 1992 with the new language policy. In addition, content analysis and google form have also been used to collect and investigate a survey submitted to some language specialists. The results have show that if there is a significant change at the level of the national languages, which become official, and French, work language, at the level of language functions nothing has changed yet. In the perspective that the organic law will organize the thirteen official language so that to provide them with more functions as required by their new status and based on the idea of functional convivial multilingualism and decentralization. The research also identifies some challenges stemming to the new situation at the level of instrumentation, media, administration and education.

## Bibliography

Baggioni D. (1996). La 'planification linguistique par défaut 'dans la gestion du plurilinguisme après les indépendances : Politiques linguistiques 'in vivo 'ou 'in vitro '?  
*In C. Juillard & L. J. Calvet (Éds.). Les politiques linguistiques, mythes et réalités.* Paris: AUPELF: UREF, p. 23-29.

Bauer M. W., Bicquelet A., Suerdem A. K. (2014). Textual Analysis: an introductory manifesto. London, UK: *SAGE Benchmarks in Social Research Methods, Vol. 4*, p. 1-35.

Bright W. (Eds). (1992). *International encyclopedia of linguistics, vols. 1-4.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Calvet L-J. (1983). Le bambara : Planification par défaut au Mali. *In Fodor, F & Hagege, C. (Éds.). La réforme des langues.* Hamburg : Buske, p. 281-287.

Cooper R. L. (1989). *Language planning and social change.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal D. (1987). *The Cambridge encyclopedia of language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cuq J.-P., ASDIFLE (Eds). (2003). *Dictionnaire de didactique du français langue étrangère et seconde.* Paris : CLE International.

DAOUST D. (2007). Language Planning and Language Reform. *In The Handbook of Sociolinguistics.* Coulmas, Florian (ed). Blackwell Publishing.

Fairclough N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research.* Abingdon: Routledge.

Flyvbjerg B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12(2)*, p. 219-245.

Garfinkel H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology.* Malden: Blackwell Publishers.

Geertz C. (1973). *Interpretation of cultures.* New York: Basic Books.

Glaser B. G., Strauss A. L. (2017). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Routledge.

Gonzalez J. M. (2008). *Encyclopedia of Bilingual Education 1&2*. California: SAGE Publication.

Gordon R. G. Jr. (2005). *Ethnologue. Languages of the world*. Dallas: SIL International.

Guindo A. S. (2021). *Multilinguisme et enseignement / apprentissage des langues en Pays dogon (Mali)*. Doctorate Thesis in Linguistique. Université Paul Valéry - Montpellier III.

Haugen E. (1966). *Language conflict and language planning: The case of modern Norwegian*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Haugen E. (1983). The implementation of corpus planning: Theory and practice. In J. Cobarrubias & J. A. Fishman (Eds.), *Progress in language planning*, The Hague: Mouton, p. 269-289.

Jahr E. H. (1992). Sociolinguistics: Minorities and sociolinguistics. In W. Bright (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of linguistics, Vol. 4*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 12-15.

Kaplan R., Baldauf R. (1997). *Language planning: From practice to theory*. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Mali. (2014). Document of language policy in Mali. Mali: Bamako.

Mali. (2023). Recensement General de la Population et de l'Habitat 5. Mali: INSTAT.

McKay S. L., Hornberger N. H. (2009). *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Muphtah E. A. (2003). *L'alphabétisation en milieu urbain au Mali : Offre de formation et besoins des populations*. Doctorate Thesis in Language Sciences. Université de Lille 1.

Ouane A. (1995). *Vers une culture multilingue de l'éducation*. Hambourg : Institut de l'Unesco pour l'éducation.

Ouane A. (1995). L'impossible débat sur l'utilisation des langues maternelles dans l'enseignement. In Ouane, A. (Éd.), *Vers une culture multilingue de l'éducation*. Hambourg : IUE, p. 89-152.

Pakarinen A. (2005). *Le statut du Français en Afrique: la politique linguistique du Mali et du Sénégal*. Mémoire de maîtrise . Université de Tampere.

Posel D., Casale D. (2011). Language proficiency and language policy in South Africa: Findings from new data. *International Journal of Educational Development* 31, p. 443–451.

Probyn M. (2009). Smuggling the vernacular into the classroom': conflicts and tensions in classroom codeswitching in township/rural schools in South Africa. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 12 (2), p. 123-136.

Ricento T. (Ed.). (2006). *An introduction to language policy: Theory and method*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Ridwan M. (2018). National and Official Language: The Long Journey of Indonesian Language. *Budapest International Research and Critics Institute-Journal (BIRCI Journal) Volume I, No 2, June 2018*, p. 72-78.

Robillard D. (1997). Statut. In Moreau, M-L. (Éd.), *Sociolinguistique, concepts de base*. Sprimont Hayen : Mardaga, p. 269-270.

Sanders P. (1982). Phenomenology: A new way of viewing organizational research. *Academy of Management Review*, 7(3), p. 353-360.

Strauss A., Corbin J. M. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Spolsky B. (2004). *Language policy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Touré K. (2023). *Quelle langue officielle pour le Mali à l'ère du Mali Kuru: Entre patriotisme et réalisme scientifique*. Republic of Moldova: Editions Universitaires Européennes.

Touré K., Nounta Z., Minkailou M. (2022). Décentralisation et développement endogène: quelle place pour les langues nationales ?. *Le Journal des Sciences Sociales N° Spécial "Les actes du colloque CUAPTD"*, p. 35-44.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). (2016). *The impact of language policy and practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa, Rwanda*. [https://www.unicef.org/esaro/UNICEF\(2016\)LanguageandLearningFullReport\(SingleView\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/esaro/UNICEF(2016)LanguageandLearningFullReport(SingleView).pdf).

Wildsmith-Cromarty R., Gordon M. (2009). Policy versus practice: the role of the home language in learning mathematics and science in English-medium classrooms. *Language Learning Journal*, 37(3), p. 359-370.

Wodak R., Meyer M. (Eds.). (2009). *Methods for critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage.

Wright S. (2016). *Language policy and language planning: From nationalism to globalization*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan. 2nd edition.

Yin R. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

## **Laws and Decrees**

Decree N° 92-0731 P-CTSP about promulgation of the constitution of 1992.

Decree N°235/PG-RM of October 4, 1962 about the organisation of the fundamental education.

Decree N°85-PG of May 26, 1967 about the alphabet for the transcription of four national languages.

Decree 159 PG-RM of July 1982 extended the number of national languages to ten.



Decree 93-107/P-RM of April 16, 1993 allowed education in Soninké and Dɔ̀gɔ̀sɔ̀.

Decree N°2023-0401/PT-RM of July 22, 2023 about promulgation of the constitution of 2023

Law 62-75/AN-RM of September 17, 1962 on the creation of the Institut des Sciences Humaines of Mali .

Law N°96-049 of August 23, 1996 about the promotion of thirteen national languages.

Law N°99-046 AN-RM of December 16, 1999 which fixed the major educational orientation.