

## 21A.506 Module 1

### Summary of "Strategies of Status Manipulation in the Wolof Greeting"

"Strategies of Status Manipulation in the Wolof Greeting," by Judith Irvine is an anthropological study describing the linguistic routine of Wolof greetings and how they are fraught with power dynamics and social inequity. As Irvine writes, "the principle of social inequality is fundamental to the organization of social life among the Wolof." This social inequity is reflected in speech, and the greeting in particular is a useful insight into the social life of the Wolof because it is fundamental to every interaction. The data in the study comes from field observation of people greeting each other, informants' statements, and Irvine's own experiences of the greeting.

Irvine first discusses the structure of the greeting in terms of sequences and speaking roles. A greeting is required when two Wolof are in the presence of each other, even if this necessitates taking a wide detour. The order of who is greeted first relates to social status: "If a person ranks relatively lower than oneself or some other person present, one may delay greeting him until more important people have been greeted." Social status is determined by criteria such as age, sex, case, and achieved prestige. Furthermore, the person who initiates the greeting should be the lower-ranking party. The greeting structure is very systematic and stereotypical; certain exchanges are expected, and in a certain order. These exchanges involve the conversation initiator asking after the respondent's health and family, as well as praising god. It is only after the typical exchanges have occurred that the speakers can move on to a 'normal' conversation.

While it is typical that the conversation initiator is the person of lower status, speakers often manipulate their roles in the greeting and thus "take the social statuses implied by those roles." Low-status persons are dependent on high-status persons, so they can call on the higher-status person for financial assistance. Therefore, it is often preferable to be the conversation initiator so as to avoid being asked for money, even if this does not conform with one's place in society. This strategy, called "self-lowering," can be achieved in a few ways, including being quick enough to initiate the conversation, or, if not, then ignoring the initiator and taking over his role. Self-lowering occurs much more frequently than its opposite, self-elevation, because "elevation is an ambitious claim; and such a contest can lead, through the challenge, to an open confrontation of motives."

Not only can a speaker manipulate his role choice, but he can also communicate his "own self-image and his attitude toward the greeting role he has taken" using persona and demeanor. The status implied by his intonation does not need to correspond to that implied by his greeting role. If, in an encounter, the speaker finds himself in a status in which he does not really belong, he can adapt his pitch, loudness, and tempo of speaking. "High, strident, rapid speech" is associated with low status, so a low-status person who finds himself in the role of respondent could use this style of speaking to indicate his self-image. Furthermore, "an individual may switch styles as he interacts with different people," according to his status relative to the other person.

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