

PREMIER NUMERO  
DE LA REVUE  
AFRICAINNE DES  
LETTRES, DES  
SCIENCES



KURUKAN FUGA  
VOL : 1-N°1 MARS  
2022

KURUKAN FUGA

La Revue Africaine des Lettres, des Sciences Humaines et Sociales



ISSN : 1987-1465

Website : <http://revue-kurukanfuga.net>

E-mail : [revuekurukanfuga2021@gmail.com](mailto:revuekurukanfuga2021@gmail.com)

VOL : 1-N°1 MARS 2022



Bamako, Mars 2022

# *KURUKAN FUGA*

La Revue Africaine des Lettres, des Sciences Humaines et Sociales

ISSN : 1987-1465

E-mail : [revuekurukanfuga2021@gmail.com](mailto:revuekurukanfuga2021@gmail.com)

Website : <http://revue-kurukanfuga.net>

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## THE USE OF BAMANANKAN AMONG MALIAN PUBLIC OFFICE WORKERS, A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

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### Abstract

This paper aims at determining the attitudes of Malian public service workers towards the use of Bamanankan in office. The mixed method (direct and indirect) approach was designed to collect data from several office workers. The study is framed by the mentalist approach to language attitude study. The findings display that the status given to French does not reflect its popularity in Malian administration. Most public service workers and users resort to Bamanankan to communicate. The findings equally indicate that most workers have a proud feeling vis-à-vis the use of Bamanankan in service while French receives negative attitudes. Last, the findings uncover that most service workers face difficulties speaking and writing in French, and for some, such difficulties stem from the fact that French is excluded from work communication situations.

Keywords: Administration, Bamanankan, Language attitude, Official language, French.

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### Résumé

Cet article vise à déterminer les attitudes des travailleurs Maliens des services publics à l'égard de l'utilisation du bamanankan au travail. Une approche mixte (directe et indirecte) a été adoptée pour recueillir des données auprès de plusieurs travailleurs. L'enquête a privilégié l'approche mentaliste des études d'attitudes langagières. Les résultats obtenus montrent que le statut accordé au français ne reflète pas sa popularité dans l'administration malienne. La plupart des travailleurs et usagers des services publics ont recours au bamanankan pour communiquer. Les résultats indiquent également que les agents des services publics ont un sentiment de fierté vis-à-vis de l'utilisation du bamanankan au travail tandis que le français reçoit des attitudes négatives. Enfin, les résultats révèlent que la plupart des travailleurs des services publics rencontrent des difficultés à parler et à écrire en français et, pour certains, ces difficultés découlent du fait que le français est exclu des situations de communication au travail.

**Mot clés :** administration, bamanankan, attitude langagière, langue officielle, français

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*Cite This Article As : Minkailou, M., Maïga, I., (2022). "The Use of Bamanankan among Malian Public Office Workers, a Sociolinguistic Analysis of Language Attitudes" in Revue Kurukan Fuga. 1(1) (<https://revue-kurukanfuga.net/> The Use of Bamanankan among Malian Public Office Workers, a Sociolinguistic Analysis of Language Attitudes.pdf)*



## Introduction

**M**ali is a multilingual and multicultural nation. While several languages are in competitive use, Bamanankan remains the dominant and most widespread one used even in public services usually reserved to French (M. Minkailou and I. Abdoulaye, 2016). In the capital city, Bamako, Bamanankan tends to be the favorite communicative interaction language for most office workers while French remains the official language in public administration.

This paper aims at analyzing the attitudes that public office workers in Bamako have towards the use Bamanankan in their offices. The paper specifically aims to i) determine the favorite language of communication among public office workers in Mali, ii) identify the attitudes public office workers have towards the use of Bamanankan, iii) determine the possible impact of the use of Bamanankan on office workers' level of command over French as the official language.

Three research questions have been developed to reach the stated objectives: i) What is the favorite language of communication among public office workers and users in Mali? ii) What attitudes

do office workers have towards the use of Bamanankan in public offices? and iii) What could be the possible impact of the use of Bamanankan on office workers' level of command over French?

Research in attitude study is characterized by two main competing theories – the behaviorist and the mentalist. The behaviorist theory views attitudes as behaviors or reactions to a given situation and includes only an affective component which cannot predict verbal conduct – a serious scientific limitation. As to the mentalist (or cognitive) approach, it sustains that language is a mental phenomenon, not directly observable, but that can be inferred using the right stimuli. This perspective divides attitude into a tripartite model of attitude formation which differentiates between *cognitive*, *affective* and *conative* constituents (Baker, 1992) and makes it possible to predict linguistic behavior. Not all these three components are necessarily represented in any given attitude, and are easily distinguished from one another (Bohner and Wanke 2002, McKenzie, 2010). The mentalist approach remains the one that has received general acceptance from language attitude research community. The present research is grounded on this approach as it offers a better framework for explaining why

Malian public office workers and users use Bamanankan the way they do.

### 1. Methods and procedures

A mixed-method was used to design this study. The data was obtained through questionnaire (direct method) and participant observation (indirect method). This allowed to provide more certainty to the findings (P. Garrett et al., 2003).

#### 1.1. The questionnaire

The participants were questioned on their knowledge of the attitudinal use of Bamanankan in the administration. Two different questionnaires were given to white collar workers in the ministerial city where they had to answer to a variety of questions. One was given to service managers and the other to the staff workers. The questionnaire given to staff workers consisted of questions grouped into four sections: participant information, the favorite language of communication in office, the perception of Bamanankan by the agents and users of public services, and the effect of the use of Bamanankan on the level of proficiency in French by public service agents. The one addressed to service managers had the same structure with additional questions in the fourth part. Both closed-ended and open-ended questions followed by an option for a

clarification comment were incorporated in the two questionnaires.

The data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively. Percentages were calculated and the findings are summarized in table format. Each table is followed by a qualitative analysis of the clarification comments provided by the respondents.

#### 1.2. The observation

The researchers conversed with and observed the participants and some public service users without their awareness and notes were taken immediately afterward. However, for ethical considerations, the participants were informed about the observation procedure as soon as possible (R. Mckenzie 2010). Some questions in the questionnaires were modified and used as observation tool. It was important to observe the same attitudes towards Bamanankan that the questionnaire attempted to solicit so that what was observed could be correlated with the questionnaire data.

#### 1.3. Profile of the respondents

The respondents were all ministry workers. A total of 32 service managers accepted to participate in the study, yet only 10 were able to answer the questionnaire. Most of them were male (80%) with an average age of 42 years. Twenty staff workers

with an average age of 33 years also answered the questionnaire given to them. Male respondents were dominant among staff workers as well (81%). It is worth mentioning that 90% of service managers and 70% of staff workers have completed higher education.

Table01 presents information about the

Table 01: Background information about the participants

	<i>Gender</i>		<i>Age groups</i>			<i>Level of education</i>			
	Male	Female	20-40	41-50	51-62	L	M	D	Bac+
<i>Service Managers</i>	80%	20%	50%	20%	30%	60%	20%	10%	10%
<i>Staff Workers</i>	81%	19%	70%	30%	0%	65%	5%	0%	30%

participants. The background characteristics include gender, age, and the level of education. The names of the different ministries and the position occupied by the respondents were not mentioned to ensure anonymity

## 2. Results and Discussion

This section details the results obtained through the questionnaires and observation. As noted earlier, different questionnaires were given to service managers and staff workers. Some questions are shared

those common to both are dealt with simultaneously and presented in the same tables.

### 2.1. Findings from the questionnaire data analysis

These findings have been analyzed in three sections.

in both questionnaires, yet it was important to consider the relevance of the question to the position of the respondents. The responses to questions particular to each questionnaire are examined separately, and

**Section one:** The favorite language of communication in office

**What language do visitors use most often when addressing you at the office?**

Table02: The most used language by public service visitors

	<b>Bamanankan</b>	French	<b>Bamanankan&amp; French</b>
<i>Service Managers</i>	20%	60%	20%
<i>Staff Workers</i>	75%	20%	5%

Table 02 reveals that a large number of public service users (75%) address staff worker in Bamanankan (from the reception and orientation staff to secretaries). However, they use Bamanankan less often as they climb higher in the administrative hierarchy (20%). For social reasons, people use language differently in different situations. The choice of language and the style used depend solely on the interlocutor and the context. Visitors’

frequent use of French with service managers (60%) can be interpreted as a mark of correctness. It is worth mentioning that despite this sociolinguistic awareness, Malians, in general, can hardly hold a conversation in French only. As a result, they switch to Bamanankan from time to time. 20% of service managers and 5% of staff workers mentioned this occurrence.

**Do workers reply in the same language?**

Table03: The language used by service agents when responding to visitors

	Yes	No
<i>Service Managers</i>	100%	0%
<i>Staff Workers</i>	100%	0%

All the respondents said that they reply in the language first used by the visitors. The reason for this, as stated by the respondents, is to make the service users feel comfortable. Those who initiate conversation in French generally have no problem when you give them the information they came looking for in French. However, the respondents noted that

not all the visitors are educated people; therefore, it is easier for both sides to communicate in Bamanankan. A switch to French might create embarrassment and failure of communication, they added.

**What language do office workers most often use among themselves when they communicate?**

Table04: The most used language of communication among service agents

	<b>Bamanankan</b>	French	<b>Bamanankan&amp; French</b>
<i>Service managers</i>	20%	60%	20%
<i>Staff Workers</i>	70%	30%	10%

Table04 highlights contradictions between staff workers' and service managers' use of Bamanankan and French at work place. The findings also stress the social status of both

themselves in French. Service managers were also asked about the language they think should be spoken at work (Table05).

**What language should be spoken in public**

	<b>Bamanankan</b>	French	<b>Bamanankan &amp; French</b>
<i>Service managers</i>	20%	60%	20%

languages in Mali. While more than the majority (70%<sup>1</sup>) of lower rank workers prefer to exchange in Bamanankan, a large number (60%) of those in higher positions choose to speak in French. Yet, the use of Bamanankan is still persistent among them as 20% of service managers made it known.

**administration?**

Table05: The choice of language to be used at work

Based on the clarification comments, the level of education is a determining factor in the choice of the language used in office. Indeed, the 30% of staff workers and 10% of service managers who have not gone far in their studies (Table01) are the most users of Bamanankan in administration. As it can be understood from some comments, many use Bamanankan most often because they struggle to express

There is a clear correlation between the most used language in public administration by service managers and the language they think should be used at work. The 60% who think only French should be spoken in administration argue that all the workers are supposed to have a good level of proficiency in it. They recalled that French is the official language and that all the documents are written in it. One respondent—showed his discontent with the use of Bamanankan in ministries, yet he stated that it could be tolerated in other government departments

<sup>1</sup> The frequent use of Bambara by visitors (75%) when addressing staff workers can be related to

the fact they find them communicating in Bambara as well (70%)

like police stations. He argued that workers in these departments are not required to have a certain level of education. Those who think Bamanankan should be used at work (20%) claim it is the national language<sup>2</sup>, therefore, spoken by all. One of them totally disagree with the claim that workers must have a good mastery of the official language. According to Table06: Criticisms for using Bamanankan

	Yes	NO
<i>Staff workers</i>	20%	80%

The responses from 80% of staff workers indicate that Bamanankan is well accepted at work even though a large number of service managers think that French should be the language of communication. It can also be assumed that even if some people are against the use of Bamanankan in administration, they rarely complain about it. Only a small number (20%) said that they were criticized for speaking in Bamanankan at work, and the criticism was manifested through reminders such as: “We don’t speak Bamanankan here”. A participant noted that the native speakers of other dominant languages (Songhay, Fulfulde) are the

<sup>2</sup>It is worth mentioning that there are thirteen officially accepted national languages in Mali. Bambara is the most dominant and is used as lingua franca in the southern part of the country.

her, French is a complicated language, so it should be normal to use Bamanankan to facilitate communication. Another 20% think both languages should be used.

Section two: The perception of Bamanankan by workers and users of public services

Are service workers and users criticized for using Bamanankan at work?

quickest to criticize the use of Bamanankan in service. The others, however, see no problem in it, he added. Another respondent who received critics said, “People think we have to speak only in French, or in reality we are not obliged to”.

Should Bamanankan be the only language used at work?

Table07: Decisions on making Bamanankan the work language

However, as you go up north, its influence decreases considerably. Other languages such as Fulfulde and Songhay are most used there.

	Yes, always	Sometimes	N°, never
<i>Service managers</i>	10%	30%	60%
<i>Staff workers</i>	35%	65%	00%

Here, it is worth noting the logic in the responses provided by the participants: the same number of service managers (60%) who think only French should be spoken at work also believe that Bamanankan should never be used in administration. There were two main justifications: first, not everyone speaks Bamanankan; the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the country do not allow such a choice. Second, it is illogic or impossible to have documents written in French while workers communicate only in Bambara. On the contrary, none of the staff workers would

Can French continue to be used in public services?

like French to be the only language of communication at work. 35% of them strongly believe that Bamanankan should be the only language of communication at work. They argued that a country cannot develop without using its own language. They believe Bamanankan is the right choice since it is spoken by the majority of the population. 65% of staff workers and 30% of service managers would like to use Bamanankan now and then specifically when dealing with service users who do not speak the official language.

Table08: The use of French in administration in the future

	Yes	No
<i>Service managers</i>	40%	60%
<i>Staff workers</i>	20%	80%

The findings from this question revealed that while 60% of service managers think Bamanankan should not be used at work, they are also less optimistic about the future of French in Malian public services. 80% of staff workers also believe that French does not have

a bright future in administration. They noted that, compared to the past twenty years, people are more and more uninhibited with the use of national languages. The national languages are occupying a more preponderant place in the affairs of the state. Now, to better

communicate with the population, the government issues press releases in Bamanankan and in other national languages, so it should not be a surprise if French loses its status in public administration in the future. One respondent mentioned the case of Algeria where the government recently decided to turn the back on the French language<sup>3</sup>. Two others also think that English might take over as official language in Mali as it has been the case in Uganda.

On the other hand, 40% of service managers and 20% of staff workers strongly believe that French will continue to be used in administration. They argued that French was chosen as official language by the fathers of Malian independence because it brings the nation together. In addition, French allows the country to make its voice heard easily at the international level. Therefore, as long as

Table09: The place of Bamanankan in Malian public services

	Yes	No
<i>Service managers</i>	90%	10%

Even though 60% of service managers (table04) said that they use French most often in administration, they are also aware of the

<sup>3</sup>It is worth mentioning that Mali still has a long way to go in terms of language planning. Having thirteen national languages is quite an obstacle to the promotion of one or the other in administration.

French remains the medium of instruction at school and the official language, it will continue to be used in administration and will be the first factor for employment in public services.

Indeed, despite their use in primary education and, nowadays, in press releases, it is still safe to maintain that there is still a real lack of political will to promote the national languages. France, through the summit of Francophonie, is taking measures to maintain its language. “La langue est un ...élément de prise de conscience de soi-même. Aussi, en nous privant de nos langues, le système colonial entendait-il assurer à jamais sa mainmise sur nos esprits<sup>4</sup> (S. Lafage, 1985, p.88).

Is Bamanankan taking over as language of interaction in Malian public services?

fact that a large number of service agents and users communicate regularly in Bamanankan. 90% of service managers noticed that, in

<sup>4</sup>Language is an element of self-awareness. Also, by depriving us of our languages, the colonial system intended to ensure its hold on our minds forever.



general, Bamanankan is replacing French as a language of communication in administration. A blind statistic about Bamanankan users among staff workers provided by a respondent corresponds exactly with the findings in table04 (70%). Only 20% maintain that French is not threatened by Bambara in administration. It is, then, safe to say that those respondents are less informed about the general language attitudes of public service

Table09: the impact of the permanent use of Bamanankan on French

	Yes	No
<i>Service managers</i>	70%	30%

An increasing number of Malians are less at ease when they have to express themselves in French. The reason is not only related to the quality of education but mainly to the fact that despite the privileged status of the French language, it is practically excluded from all situations which require expressing and communicating ideas. Besides, Malians in general, have negative attitudes towards permanent French users, especially in nonacademic situations. Thus, outside the classrooms, students and teachers have recourse to their mother tongues, whatever their competence in French.

agents and users. In fact, for occupational reasons, some managers are distant from the service agents, thus not always aware of certain habits behind the doors of their offices.

**Section three:** The effect of the use of Bamanankan on the level of proficiency in French by public service workers

**Could the continuous use of Bamanankan have a negative impact on service workers' level of proficiency in French?**

This reluctance to speak in French is manifest in public services as well. The previous results indicate that Bamanankan is taking over French as language of communication in Malian administration, specifically among staff workers. 70% of service managers think that this constant use of Bamanankan can affect negatively the agents' mastery of the official language. One of them said, "C'est en forgeant qu'on devient forgeron<sup>5</sup>". 60% of service managers confessed that staff workers have difficulties expressing themselves in French and believe this difficulty is due to the permanent use of Bamanankan at work. On the other hand, 30%

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<sup>5</sup>Practice makes perfect

of the respondents think that the regular use of Bamanankan at work is irrelevant to the level of mastery of French by service agents. They argued that the mastery of French is a prerequisite for employability as civil servant (white collar worker) in Mali. They believe the

Table10: Writing difficulties

	Yes	No
<i>Service managers</i>	80%	20%

Table10 reveals that in order to produce writings, Malian public service agents have difficulties directly linked to the language. The difficulties are more precisely linked to the spelling of words and grammar rules. 80% of service managers mentioned this problem. O. Sangho (2018) also made a similar remark:

In the Malian context, the low level of proficiency in French can also be explained by the devotion of Malians to their indigenous languages, making them generally attached to bamanakan, which is the most widely spoken language in Mali. Despite the fact that French stands as the “official language”, it still drags behind. Civil servants, teachers, lecturers and physicians, cited as examples, converse and exchange in bamanakan, to the detriment of French which is used only in case of necessity (p. 41).

## 2.2. Findings from the observation data analysis

Language attitude researchers (R. C. Ferrer & D. Sankoff, 2003, S. Presser, 1996, F. Perry, 2005) warned that data elicited from

difficulties met by certain agents in expressing themselves in French cannot be explained by their current use of Bamanankan.

Do service workers have difficulty writing in French?

written responses of the informants may not always correlate exactly with the possibly unconscious attitudes which are revealed by more indirect methods of investigation. Thus, in order to ascertain the participants’ responses to the questionnaires, the researchers observed them in their work place. The observation took place in five blocks in the ministerial city. The researchers entered at least three times in thirty-one public offices while distributing and collecting the questionnaires. Staff workers were numerous in office and were always communicating. The researchers thus took this occasion to collect most of the observational data. However, it was hard to tell what language some service managers use most often in office as they were alone. In two cases, the researchers did not have access to the office of service managers. They had to leave the questionnaire with the secretaries.

An additional day was also devoted to observing and, when possible, conversing with the participants in the corridors. Public service agents and users were discretely followed up and down the stairs and in elevators to collect more data. The researchers spent a minimum of one hour in each bloc. The findings are discussed below.

### **2.2.1. The language that is most often heard**

At the main entrance, the security agents giving the visitor's pass and service users asking for direction were all speaking in Bamanankan. In the thirty-one offices visited, the agents were very often communicating in Bamanankan as well. On rare occasions, some agents could be heard speaking in French; however, they would immediately switch back to Bamanankan. Indeed, for topical reasons, code switching was a manifest phenomenon.

### **Do service workers reply in the language used by visitors?**

Based on the observation, Malian public office workers reply in the same language they are addressed to by service users. Some visitors greet in French, but continue the communication in Bamanankan, and the agents respond accordingly. The researchers also noticed that service agents are friendlier when Bamanankan is used with them while they remain on the defensive and

speak less when they are spoken to in French. When the researchers switched to French after using Bamanankan, more than the majority of the addressees continued the communication in Bamanankan. These remarks are indications of the fact that Bamanankan is the favorite language of communication in Malian public offices. Another way to interpret this is that they are less comfortable speaking in French.

### **2.2.2. Attitudes towards Bamanankan**

The previous observational data already indicate that there are positive attitudes towards the use of Bamanankan in public offices. In order to better recognize service agents' attitudes towards the use of Bamanankan, the researchers asked: *Is it ok, if we talk in Bamanankan here?* Except from one person who happens to be a Fulani native speaker, there were no negative answer to the question. The interlocutors always seemed glad that the question was asked. One of them said, "W all speak in Bamanankan here". Another one said that even the ministers speak in Bamanankan. As a matter of fact, they are very rarely criticized for speaking in Bamanankan.

### **Conclusion**

The data obtained through this study indicate that workers in Malian public administration have positive attitudes towards

the use of Bamanankan in office. A large number of staff workers communicate regularly in Bamanankan. On the other hand, service managers follow the common sense which requires the use of the official language in office, yet they rarely criticize the habitual use of Bamanankan. A large number of service agents are also in favor of the promotion of Bamanankan as official language despite the difficulties that stand on this way. In general, the Malian population is calling for the government to take that decisive step. During the national meeting held in December 2021, there was a unanimous agreement among southern participants to use Bamanankan in public affairs and as medium of instruction. The argument provided by most of them involved considering the level of linguistic competence in French which is necessary before it is possible to learn effectively through it. French creates a barrier for most Malian learners.

Those from poor backgrounds and rural areas are most vulnerable. Not all will succeed in mastering French well enough to gain the benefits it offers. This problem is common to most African francophone countries. Essizewa (2007) for example, makes the case known in Togo. According to him, the use of French as a medium of instruction is inefficient. However, the counter argument is that materials are already available in French for teaching, and it will clearly be cheaper to use these than to develop materials in Bamanamkan (M. Minkailou, 2020). In addition, French gives students access to a wider information base. Nevertheless, if Bamanankan is to be chosen as official language and the language of instruction, politicians and linguists will have to work hand in hand.

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