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Officilization of Bamanankan as the Language of Work in Mali:

Challenges and Perspectives

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Keywords	Bamanankan, Language of work, Language policy, Linguistic diversity, Mali.

Abstract

This study examines the officialization of Bamanankan as a working language in Mali. It marks a shift from the dominance of the French since 1960. Bamanankan, now recognized as one of the official languages in the 2023 Malian Constitution, reflects changes in national language policy. The research uses a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative data from structured interviews with 50 stakeholders. It also incorporates quantitative data from surveys of 150 civil servants, educators, and urban residents. Findings show that 68% of respondents support Bamanankan's role in enhancing national unity and inclusivity, though 45% express concerns about marginalizing smaller languages. Key challenges include language standardization, educational reform, and resource development. Educators (72%) stress the need for curriculum adaptation and teacher training. While 80% of respondents see Bamanankan as fostering communication and national identity, successful implementation requires addressing gaps in proficiency, training, and resources. Generally, the findings highlighted a positive outlook, contingent on careful planning and support.

Titre	L'officialisation du bamanankan comme langue de travail au Mali : enjeux et perspectives
Mots clés	Bamanankan, langue de travail, politique linguistique, diversité linguistique, Mali.

Résumé

Cette étude examine l'officialisation du bamanankan en tant que langue de travail au Mali. Elle marque un tournant par rapport à la domination du français depuis 1960. Le bamanankan, désormais reconnu comme l'une des langues officielles dans la Constitution malienne de 2023, reflète des changements dans la politique linguistique nationale. La recherche adopte une conception méthodologique mixte qui combine des données qualitatives issues d'entretiens structurés avec 50 parties prenantes. Elle intègre également des données quantitatives provenant d'enquêtes menées auprès de 150 fonctionnaires, éducateurs et résidents urbains. Les résultats montrent que 68 % des répondants soutiennent le rôle du bamanankan dans le renforcement de l'unité et de l'inclusivité nationales, bien que 45 % expriment des préoccupations concernant la marginalisation des langues minoritaires. Les principaux défis comprennent la standardisation de la langue, la réforme éducative et le développement des ressources. Les éducateurs (72 %) insistent sur la nécessité d'adapter les programmes scolaires et de former les enseignants. Alors que 80 % des répondants considèrent le bamanankan comme un vecteur de communication et d'identité nationale, la réussite de sa mise en œuvre dépendra de la résolution des lacunes en matière de compétences linguistiques, de formation et de ressources. De manière générale, les résultats mettent en évidence une perspective positive, conditionnée à une planification et un soutien rigoureux.

1. Introduction

The officialization of Bamanankan as a language of work in Mali marks a significant transformation in the country's linguistic and sociopolitical dynamics. Historically, French has dominated administration, education, and business due to its colonial legacy, which persisted post-independence (Skattum, 2010). However,

recognizing the need for linguistic policies that embrace cultural diversity has sparked discussions about incorporating Bamanankan, the most widely spoken language, into formal domains. Officially recognized in the 2023 Malian Constitution, this aligns with broader African efforts to promote indigenous languages, essential for decolonization and empowering local populations (Alexander, 2003).

Bamanankan, spoken by over 14 million people and functioning as a lingua franca, presents both challenges and opportunities. While promoting it can enhance inclusivity and bridge linguistic divides, its implementation requires considerable effort in language standardization, vocabulary development, and educational resources (Djité, 2008). French, deeply entrenched in sectors like law and governance, presents further hurdles, especially among elites comfortable with its use (Batibo, 2005).

Despite these obstacles, the officialization fosters cultural pride and national unity. It also makes public life more accessible to non-French speakers. Research suggests that using indigenous languages in governance and education can improve literacy, enhance learning outcomes, and stimulate socio-economic development (Heine & Kuteva, 2007). This article explores these challenges and opportunities. It draws lessons from other African nations to offer insights into Mali's path forward.

2. Research methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches to examine Bamanankan's officialization. Interviews, surveys, and document analysis provide insights into the linguistic, political, and structural challenges surrounding its implementation. Grounded in sociolinguistic theories of Language Policy and Planning (LPP) and Language Ecology, the study explores status, corpus, and acquisition planning (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997; Cooper, 1989). Data is gathered through policy documents, interviews with key stakeholders, and surveys of civil servants, educators, and urban residents. Thematic analysis and descriptive statistics are employed to analyze qualitative and quantitative data. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of public attitudes and expert perspectives.

3. Results

The following subsections analyze, interpret, and discuss the findings from the research. They incorporate perspectives from policymakers, linguists, educators, and community leaders based on the interview data, along with insights from the survey, which includes a demographic overview, language proficiency and usage, perceived benefits, challenges and concerns, expectations and support for implementation, and overall attitudes. The section concludes with a discussion of the findings and culminates in conclusions and recommendations.

3.1. Findings from interview

The perspectives of various stakeholders on the officialization of Bamanankan revealed a complex interplay of benefits and challenges. Policymakers advocated for this change as a means to enhance inclusivity and national unity, believing it would allow more citizens to engage with the government in a familiar language. Linguists supported the initiative, emphasizing Bamanankan's role as a lingua franca that bridges communication across diverse ethnic groups, while also acknowledging the need for standardization amidst the language's regional variations. Educators emphasized the need for a comprehensive curriculum overhaul to effectively integrate Bamanankan into the educational system. They recognized that this change could lead to improved student engagement and understanding. However, they also stressed the importance of providing adequate training and resources to support this transition.

3.1.1. Policymakers' perspective

Policymakers view the officialization of Bamanankan as an opportunity to promote inclusivity and national unity. They believe that recognizing the widespread use of Bamanankan would enable more citizens to engage with the government in a language they understand, fostering a stronger national identity. As one policymaker noted, "Bamanankan's officialization would strengthen national pride and create a more unified society." This move is seen as a way to bridge linguistic divides, making governance more accessible to the broader population.

However, the process comes with significant challenges. Politically, there is resistance from elites who view the French as a symbol of progress. Socially, the diverse linguistic landscape of Mali requires careful consideration to avoid marginalizing non-Bamanankan speakers, such as those who speak Fulfulde, Songhay, or Soninké. Economically, the implementation would demand considerable investment, including retraining civil servants, developing educational materials, and translating official documents. One official emphasized, "This process will require significant financial commitment, from textbooks to retraining."

Despite these obstacles, policymakers believe the benefits outweigh the challenges. They see Bamanankan's use in official capacities as a way to enhance government transparency and accessibility, particularly for those struggling with French. To succeed, the process would require standardizing Bamanankan, reforming education, and ensuring a multilingual approach that respects Mali's linguistic diversity. As one official noted, "We are not aiming to replace French, but to ensure Bamanankan coexists with other local languages, reflecting our diversity."

3.1.2 Linguists' perspective

Linguists highlight several factors that make Bamanankan a strong candidate for official status in Mali, particularly its widespread use and linguistic flexibility. It serves as a lingua franca, bridging communication among different ethnic groups, especially in urban centers like Bamako. Bamanankan's adaptability, with its ability to incorporate new words and ideas, is seen as ideal for integration into education, government, and media. One linguist emphasized its linguistic flexibility, noting, "Bamanankan can evolve without losing its essence, making it suitable for official purposes."

However, the process of standardizing Bamanankan presents challenges, especially given the diversity of dialects across the country. Linguists stress the need to balance regional variations without alienating speakers of non-standard forms. Additionally, the lack of academic resources, such as textbooks and legal terminology in Bamanankan, complicates its implementation in formal settings. Creating a unified standard for educational and legal contexts will require substantial effort in developing new materials and vocabulary. These obstacles reflect the complex task of preparing Bamanankan for official use.

Culturally, Bamanankan's officialization is viewed as a unifying force, potentially fostering a shared linguistic identity. However, linguists caution that smaller languages could be marginalized as the focus shifts to promoting Bamanankan. Some fear that languages like Soninke or Bomu may lose institutional support. To address this, a balanced approach is recommended, where Bamanankan is promoted alongside efforts to preserve Mali's rich linguistic diversity. Linguists see their role as essential in developing resources and training educators to ensure Bamanankan's smooth transition while protecting the country's linguistic heritage.

3.1.3. Educators' perspective

Educators stress that integrating Bamanankan as an official language in the educational system would require a complete curriculum overhaul. One educator noted that adapting the curriculum would involve more than just translation, calling for new pedagogical approaches to teach core subjects in Bamanankan. This shift would align teaching methods with the linguistic and cultural context of the language. Additionally, culturally relevant instruction could strengthen students' connection to their heritage, enhancing their motivation and understanding. As one educator explained, "Teaching in Bamanankan allows students to connect more deeply with their heritage, potentially improving their engagement."

However, a major challenge lies in teacher training, as most programs are conducted in French, and resources for instructing in Bamanankan are limited. Educators raised concerns about the lack of standardized technical terminology in subjects like science and mathematics, making it difficult to teach complex topics. One educator pointed out that teachers would need extensive training to develop subject-specific expertise in Bamanankan. This gap highlights the need for comprehensive training programs and resources to prepare teachers for effective instruction in the language.

Despite these challenges, educators believe teaching in Bamanankan could positively influence student engagement and comprehension, particularly in the early years of education. Learning in their native language would make students more comfortable and confident, leading to stronger foundational skills. However, the scarcity of educational resources in Bamanankan, especially for secondary and higher education, poses a significant hurdle. Educators also emphasized the need for equity, suggesting a multilingual approach to ensure that students from other linguistic backgrounds are not disadvantaged. A balanced policy that promotes Bamanankan while supporting other local languages would ensure inclusivity and fairness in education.

3.1.4. Community leaders' perspectives

Community leaders expressed mixed views on the potential officialization of Bamanankan, with urban areas like Bamako showing more support than rural regions. In cities, many see Bamanankan as a unifying language that could strengthen national unity, particularly across different ethnic groups. One leader from Bamako emphasized, "Many people see this as a step toward greater national unity." However, rural leaders voiced concerns about the marginalization of smaller local languages. A rural leader explained, "In rural areas where other languages are more dominant, there's the worry that officializing Bamanankan might diminish the importance of their local language."

The potential impact on cultural identity was another key issue raised by the leaders. Many believed that making Bamanankan official could foster a shared national identity, especially in urban centers. However, rural leaders were worried that this move could weaken local cultural traditions. One rural participant warned, "In areas where Bamanankan is not the primary language, making it official could be seen as an imposition and might weaken local traditions." These contrasting views reflect the tension between promoting a unified national identity and preserving local linguistic and cultural diversity.

Social inclusion was also a concern. While Bamanankan's officialization could enhance the inclusion of Bamanankan-speaking communities in government and public life, non-Bamanankan speakers, especially in rural areas, might feel excluded. Leaders noted that officializing the language could marginalize those who do not speak it, affecting their access to education, government services, and social interactions. To address this, several leaders advocated for policies that balance the promotion of Bamanankan with the protection of smaller languages to ensure no community is left behind. This balanced approach was seen as crucial for preserving linguistic diversity while fostering national cohesion.

3.2 Findings from the survey

The survey findings encompass a demographic overview, language proficiency and usage, perceived benefits, challenges and concerns, and expectations and implementation support. These results are followed by a discussion section that analyzes the data in depth. The study concludes with recommendations based on the overall attitudes observed.

3.2.1. Demographic overview

The demographic section highlights how openness to using Bamanankan as a working language varies by age. Younger respondents (18–30) make up the largest group (32%) and are noted to be more receptive to the idea. One civil servant mentioned, "Younger respondents are more open to the idea of using Bamanankan in official settings," suggesting that generational factors may influence language preferences in formal contexts. Conversely, older age groups may present a more cautious stance toward change.

Professionally, civil servants (40%) and educators (35%) are the most represented groups, with educators acknowledging potential benefits but highlighting the need for additional resources. One educator noted, "Using Bamanankan could facilitate instruction, but we need more resources." This illustrates the perception that Bamanankan may improve teaching but requires significant infrastructure, particularly in the education sector.

3.2.2. Language proficiency and usage

Proficiency in speaking Bamanankan is relatively high, with 60% of respondents reporting advanced or fluent skills. However, the writing proficiency is

much lower, with only 5% fluent and 40% at a beginner level. As an educator remarked, "Writing skills in Bamanankan are much weaker, which will be a challenge in official work." This disparity between spoken and written skills suggests that while Bamanankan is widely spoken, its use in formal and technical contexts may be hampered by insufficient literacy in the language.

Daily usage of Bamanankan is strong, with 70% of respondents using it often or always. One resident shared, "It is the language I use to communicate with most people, especially in informal settings." This reflects the prevalence of Bamanankan in daily interactions, yet its informal dominance contrasts with the challenges of adapting it for formal use in government and professional environments.

3.2.3. Perceived benefits

The survey results reveal strong perceived benefits of using Bamanankan in official settings. 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it would improve communication in these environments. A civil servant commented, "Communication would become easier for many people who don't speak French well," emphasizing Bamanankan's potential to bridge language gaps, especially for non-French speakers. Similarly, the role of Bamanankan in fostering national identity was highly regarded, with 80% in agreement. This suggests that promoting Bamanankan could enhance a sense of national cohesion.

Moreover, respondents highlighted that using Bamanankan could increase access to public services for non-French speakers, with 80% agreeing. One participant noted, "Bamanankan could bridge the gap for people left out of services due to language barriers." This reinforces the idea that language plays a pivotal role in equitable service delivery, particularly in multilingual societies.

3.2.4. Challenges and concerns

Despite the enthusiasm for Bamanankan's officialization, several challenges were raised. The most significant concern is the lack of standardized vocabulary, cited by 65% of respondents. An educator explained, "The absence of technical terms in Bamanankan is a major issue for formal use." This aligns with concerns about potential miscommunication in specialized fields, such as law or medicine, where 55% of respondents anticipated issues.

Additionally, limited proficiency among workers (55%) and insufficient training resources (50%) were seen as barriers. This reflects the need for extensive language education and training before Bamanankan can be effectively used in government and professional sectors. One civil servant remarked, "Specialized fields

like law or medicine would struggle with vocabulary gaps," highlighting the technical difficulties in adapting Bamanankan for complex, specialized work.

Confidence in adequate training for civil servants is relatively low, with only 10% expressing strong confidence. This indicates a significant gap between the current workforce's language skills and the requirements for using Bamanankan in official capacities. Moreover, 45% of respondents believe that the implementation of Bamanankan would not lead to a significant reduction in the use of French, underscoring the necessity of maintaining bilingual capabilities in formal settings. A Bamako resident summarized this sentiment, saying, "French is still needed for international relations and higher education."

3.2.5. Expectations and support for implementation

Respondents were divided on the timeline for the widespread use of Bamanankan, with 45% expecting it to take more than five years to implement. This suggests a cautious approach to the transition, reflecting the complexity of integrating Bamanankan into official domains. One civil servant remarked, "It will take years to implement this effectively across all sectors," emphasizing the need for long-term planning.

In terms of necessary support, 70% of respondents identified language training programs as essential, while 60% emphasized the development of official documents in Bamanankan. One educator pointed out, "Government backing is essential for this to succeed," indicating that institutional support is crucial for the initiative to progress. There is also broad recognition of the importance of maintaining French, with 75% considering it important or very important to continue using it alongside Bamanankan.

3.2.6. Overall attitudes

The overall attitude toward the officialization of Bamanankan is positive, with 70% of respondents supporting or strongly supporting the idea. However, only 5% strongly opposed the move, indicating that while there is significant backing, there is also a minority that remains skeptical. An educator summarized the general sentiment, "There is strong support, but the transition will need careful planning."

On the whole, the survey findings suggest that there is substantial support for the use of Bamanankan as a working language, particularly for improving communication and fostering national identity. However, the challenges of limited literacy, lack of standardized vocabulary, and the need for extensive training are significant hurdles that must be addressed. While Bamanankan holds the potential to

enhance inclusivity and access to public services, French remains vital for international relations and higher education. The road to officializing Bamanankan will require careful planning, long-term commitment, and significant investment in language training and resource development.

3.3. Discussion

The findings from this study offer important insights into the perspectives of various stakeholders regarding the potential officialization of Bamanankan in Mali. Each group—policymakers, linguists, educators, and community leaders—presents a nuanced view of the opportunities and challenges associated with this language policy. These perspectives align with existing research on language policy and linguistic diversity, emphasizing themes such as inclusivity, national identity, and the tension between promoting a national language and preserving local languages. In particular, the findings resonate with research that highlights the role of language in nation-building and the need for inclusive policies that respect linguistic diversity (Ricento, 2006; Crystal, 2000).

Policymakers see the officialization of Bamanankan as a way to enhance national unity and inclusivity, echoing previous studies that demonstrate the role of language in fostering social cohesion (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). They believe that Bamanankan's use in governance could increase public engagement, making government services more accessible. However, resistance from French-speaking elites underscores a recurring issue in language policy debates: the conflict between colonial languages and local languages (De Swaan, 2001). Moreover, the financial and logistical challenges of implementing such a policy are consistent with findings by Heller (2007), which emphasize the economic considerations involved in language decisions.

Linguists advocate for Bamanankan's suitability as an official language due to its widespread use and its potential to unify diverse ethnic groups (Mufwene, 2001). However, concerns about the standardization of dialects and the need for a unified language policy reflect issues previously identified by Gumperz and Hymes (1972). They also emphasize the importance of safeguarding smaller languages from marginalization, a concern that aligns with the work of Krauss (2007) on linguistic diversity. Educators express similar concerns, particularly regarding the need for a curriculum overhaul to accommodate Bamanankan. This is echoed in García and Wei's (2014) research, which highlights the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy in multilingual contexts. The need for standardized terminology in subjects like science and mathematics remains a critical challenge, as noted by Benson (2005),

who argues that the absence of educational resources can hinder local language instruction.

Educators also highlight the potential benefits of teaching students in their native language, pointing to research that shows improved academic performance in mother-tongue instruction (Thomas & Collier, 2002). However, equity is a key concern. The call for multilingual approaches to education, which support students from various linguistic backgrounds, aligns with growing recognition in language policy research that emphasizes inclusivity (May, 2014). Community leaders, meanwhile, reflect on the tension between promoting national unity through Bamanankan and preserving local cultural identities. Their mixed reactions mirror Fishman's (1972) and Edelman and Dussias's (2012) findings, which suggest that regional disparities in language attitudes are common when implementing national language policies.

The findings also indicate that Bamanankan could play a significant role in fostering national identity, particularly in urban areas where it is widely spoken. This is consistent with research by Prah (2009), who highlights the importance of local languages in nation-building. However, the fear of marginalization among rural communities and non-Bamanankan speakers emphasizes the need for policies that balance national cohesion with the protection of smaller languages. Linguists and educators alike point to the importance of developing resources and standardized terminology to ensure the effective use of Bamanankan in official and educational settings (Hornberger, 2002).

The study further reveals generational differences in attitudes toward Bamanankan's officialization. Younger respondents are more supportive of the move, reflecting findings from Eldridge (1993) and Baker (2011), which indicate that younger generations are often more open to the use of local languages in official contexts. The survey also shows that while proficiency in spoken Bamanankan is high, writing skills lag behind, a trend consistent with Alidou et al. (2006) who found that oral traditions dominate in many African languages. The need for targeted educational programs to improve literacy in Bamanankan is crucial, as Makoni (2003) argues that developing literacy in local languages is essential for their viability in formal contexts.

Altogether, the findings reveal a largely positive attitude toward Bamanankan's officialization, though there are concerns about its impact on smaller languages and cultural identities. This duality reflects the complexity of language policy in multilingual contexts, as noted by Fishman (1991). Moving forward, it will

be important to strike a balance between promoting Bamanankan and safeguarding linguistic diversity, ensuring that any policy is inclusive and respects Mali's rich cultural heritage.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The officialization of Bamanankan as a working language in Mali offers both opportunities and challenges. Stakeholders, including policymakers, linguists, educators, and community leaders, agree that this move could promote inclusivity and strengthen national unity by improving access to government services and reinforcing national identity. Educators highlight the potential for better student engagement through instruction in a familiar language, while linguists emphasize Bamanankan's cultural significance and its role in unifying Mali's diverse linguistic landscape.

However, challenges remain. Political resistance from French-speaking elites and concerns about marginalizing non-Bamanankan speakers must be addressed. Additionally, significant investments in educational resources, civil servant training, and language standardization are required. The risk of marginalizing smaller languages calls for a balanced approach that respects linguistic diversity and preserves local cultural identities.

To ensure the successful officialization of Bamanankan, careful planning, and inclusive strategies are essential. Collaboration between policymakers, linguists, educators, and community leaders will help navigate the complexities, fostering social cohesion. Long-term investments in language education and government support are crucial to overcoming challenges and creating an inclusive linguistic environment that benefits all Malians.

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