# When language has a beat: Senegalese drum language

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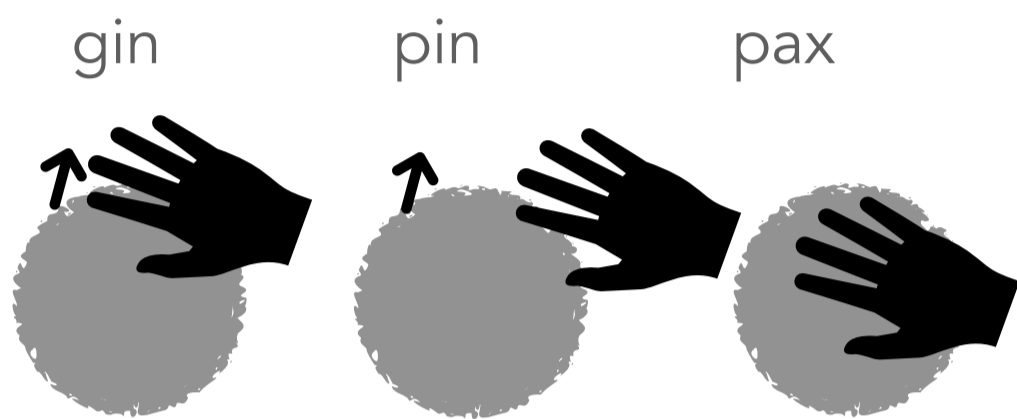
**Sabar** is a drum language used in **Senegal**. Senegalese drummers play **rhythms in correlation** to the **spoken Wolof language.** Wolof is **not a tonal language** and sabar rhythms **do not mimic** the pitch of word sounds, unlike other African drum languages.
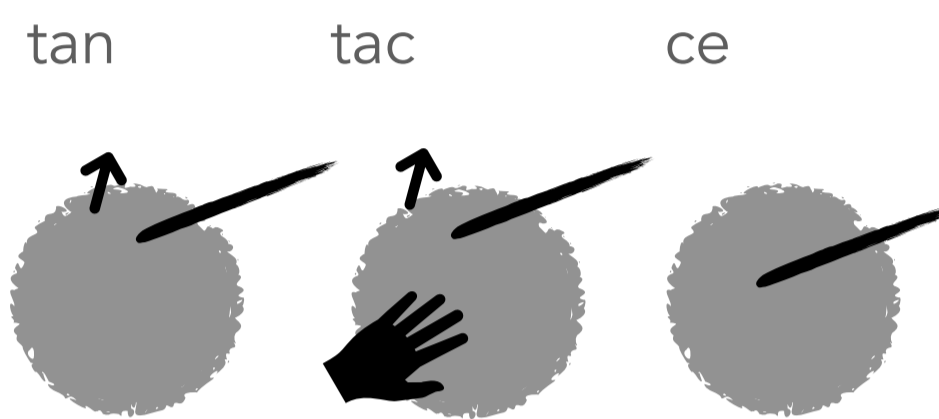**Our aim:** establish the **regularities between Wolof syllables and sabar rhythms** in the data.

## Drum strokes

### Hand strokes

gin        pin        pax



### Stick strokes

tan        tac        ce



### Hand+stick strokes

rwan = pin tan or pax tan
rwe = pax ce
drin = tan gin

## Our material

Research is based on 396 Wolof songs with corresponding rhythm, collected in live sessions with the drummers, in the years 2018-2019 in Campement Nguekhohk, Senegal. All recordings were made with the griots of the same family. Materials include bàkks (classical sabar phrases, not improvised on the spot) and sabar improvisations. We think that Sabar is productive.

## Our hypothesis

Syllable-level hypothesis: syllables in Wolof have specific drum strokes associated to them, where the nature of the correspondence depends on the phonological properties of the vowel in a syllable: length, openness and front/central/back property of a vowel.

## Our methods

Wolof words were syllabified. The texts were divided into pairs: a Wolof syllable and the corresponding stroke with its properties. We looked at how often each of the properties corresponds to each stroke and analysed the data using SPSS ($\chi$2).



xol bu baax
moo gën xol bu bon fuuf
rwan gin tan
rwan tan ta tan gin gin
(A beautiful heart
Is better than an ugly heart)



## Results

The analysis has shown the regularities between the following properties and syllables:

| Position | Openness |
|---|---|
| front - ce / tac | middle - ce / rwe / tac |
| back - gin | closed - gin |
| central - pax / rwan / tan | open - pax / rwan / tan |

This was the first attempt to uncover regularities between the drum language and atonal language.

Want to know more?