France’s colonial ventures since the 17th century in the Americas and the Indian Ocean and since the 19th century in Africa has resulted in contrasted linguistic outcomes, with French being spoken as a vernacular language in Quebec (and to some extent in the Indian Ocean and in parts of the Caribbean and in Guyane, albeit as creoles), whereas it has functioned only as a second or third language, typically a lingua franca, for the majority of often too-hastily called ‘Francophone Africans’. Mufwene’s (2001) ecological/socio-historical approach articulates the contrasting features of in the present case two types of colonization, with settlement colonies such as Quebec leading to appropriation of French as a vernacular, whereas exploitation colonies such as in sub-Saharan Africa fostering its appropriation as an elite lingua franca spoken by a small segment of the national population. In this presentation, I wish to explain why the fate of French in Francophone Africa is hardly any better than it is in Louisiana and perhaps Quebec itself, although scholars such as Chaudenson claim that the future of French as a world language lies in Africa. Although French has evolved differently on the African continent due to the social, political and linguistic ecologies in which it was inserted, a few transnational patterns can be pointed out: 1) it remains a language primarily learned and practiced at school; 2) it is losing its ethnographic ground to other major African vehicular languages such as Wolof in Dakar, Lingala in Kinshasa or Kinyarwanda in Rwanda; 3) it has been indigenized by its speakers to the extent that some scholars such as Dumont have called it an AFRICAN LANGUAGE.

In my presentation I first analyze the socio-historical conditions of the introduction of French to former Belgian and French African colonies in order to highlight the ethnographic functions it played in the then colonies and the ecological factors that prevented its wider spread within local populations. Turning to a more recent period, I address the issue of French’s slow decline even in institutions traditionally associated with it such as the government. The reasons include the decline of the education system, owing to States’ lack of funding and to the increasing pauperization of populations who no longer see any economic reward in learning French. In addition, new patterns of mobility to English-speaking countries such as South Africa or Canada mainly, due to the harshening of European immigration laws, have contributed to reshaping linguistic ideologies in Francophone Africa: command of French is no longer seen as being crucial for a better life abroad.