

How to make the sounds in Wolof

Our goal is to speak Wolof like the Wolof, or at least to be clear in our speech so that a native Wolof speaker can listen to us easily with pleasure. This involves pronouncing the words as they do, using the same stress and intonation that the Wolof use, and also using the same syntax and way of thinking.

Every language consists of a limited number of sounds. By mastering each sound one by one, it is possible to speak a language without accent. The purpose of these pages is to provide instructions for each vowel and consonant in Wolof that might help the native English speaker in his pronunciation. You are advised to take them one by one, working on them until you can both hear and produce them with ease.

The English speaker will have greatest problems with those sounds which do not exist in English:

c [c] and j [ɟ] which one tends to replace with ch [tʃ] and j [dʒ] from English
 ñ; r; x; q; and all the nasals especially in the initial position: mp; mb; nc; nd; ng; nj; nk; nq; nt
 ŋ in the initial position

The English speaker is also likely to have problems with vowels which are similar but not the same between the two languages:

[i] is further forward than the English [i], and [u] which is further back than the English [u];
 [a] which only exists in diphthongs in some dialects of English;
 [e] and [o] which do not exist at all in English.

The task is made more difficult by the existence of minimal pairs. That is, sounds which are very similar to the ears of English speakers but used to differentiate words in Wolof:

the unreleased plosives in final position j; g; t;
 long and short vowels
 [ʌ] and [a]; [i], [e] and [ɛ]; [o] and [ɔ]; kk and q; n, nn, ñ, ññ, ŋ, ŋŋ, ng

Wolof words do not have a mixture of open and closed vowels. They will either all be open or all closed. This is particularly important with the use of suffixes. The vowel created by the suffix is determined by the other vowels in the word. e.g. julli + ag + ul = julléegul.

Explanation of phonetic symbols

: indicates a lengthening of the sound. The production of the sound is also usually more tense.

C^h indicates that the sound is modified and emphasized by the exhalation of air, called aspiration.

C^o indicates that the sound is emphasised by the addition of a very short vowel after the consonant, called gemination.

VOWELS				
letter	phonetic symbol	phonetic description	examples	notes
a	ʌ	voiced half-open central unrounded	and (incense pot) lal (bed) kaaka (turban)	As in English "butter". As in English, in Wolof there is some degree of variation in certain contexts towards [ə] or even [u]. Thus <i>man</i> (can) can be said as [mʌn], [mən] or [mun]. But <i>man</i> (myself) is always [mʌn]. It bears no relation to an English "a" as in "cat" which is [æ].
aa	a:		baaraam (finger) aada (tradition)	It exists in standard British English as part of the diphthong [a:i] (time, nine). It is different to the normal English long "a" as in star which is [ɑ:].
à	a	voiced open front unrounded	àlluwa (writing board) dàll (shoe)	This is the same as the French <i>a</i> . It exists in standard British English as part of the diphthongs [ai] (life, buy, cry); and [au] (owl).
ã	ã	voiced open central unrounded nasalised	sãs (very hot)	This is very rare. As for the <i>ain temps, gant</i> in French.

é	e	voiced half-close front unrounded (cardinal 2)	béy (goat) dég (thorn)	Same as French <i>é</i> or the German <i>e</i> . In normal Wolof, there is some variation in pronunciation with drift towards [ə] or [ɪ]. In German as in <i>edikt</i> .
ée	e:		téeñ (cloth for carrying on head) séer (skirt)	
e	ɛ	voiced half-open front unrounded (cardinal 3)	dem (to go) fen (lie) estomaa (stomach)	Same as the English <i>e</i> in <i>bed</i> or the French <i>è</i> as in <i>père</i> . This is the <i>ä</i> of German as in <i>fällen</i> , or <i>e</i> as in <i>Teller</i> .
ee	ɛ:		seede (testimony) jeex (to be finished)	ä as in the German word <i>gähnen</i> .
ë	ə	voiced half-close central unrounded	kër (house) ëmb (pregnant) ëf (to blow)	Same as the French <i>e</i> as in <i>démain</i> . In normal speech this sound may replace [a], [ʌ], [ɛ], [e], [u], or [o] especially when they occur at the end of a word. This is the <i>e</i> of German, as in <i>hacke</i> . It is more closed than the German <i>ö</i> .
ëe	ə:			As in English <i>bird</i> .
i	i	voiced closed front unrounded (cardinal 1)	cin (cooking pot) Iblīs (Satan) bukki (hyena)	The tongue is humped as far forward as possible and as near to the palate as possible without causing any friction. This is like the French “ <i>i</i> ” rather than the English short “ <i>i</i> ” [ɪ]. That is in comparison with [ɪ], the lips are less rounded (more spread) and the tongue is more humped, further forward and nearer the palate.
ii	i:		biir (stomach)	As in English <i>beat</i> .
o	ɔ	voiced half-open back rounded (cardinal 6)	bopp (head) golo (monkey) oto (car)	Same as in English <i>pot</i> , <i>hot</i> , <i>not</i> , and the open French <i>o</i> as in <i>pomme</i> . Same as in German <i>doch</i> , <i>offen</i> .
oo	ɔ:		boot (carry on back) oom (abundant) andando (to go together)	As in the English <i>port</i> , or <i>bought</i> . Hence the English word <i>bought</i> is phonetically the same as the Wolof word <i>boot</i> (carry someone on one's back) and the English word <i>your</i> is said the same as the Wolof <i>yoo</i> (mosquito).
ó	o	voiced half-close back rounded (cardinal 7)	jóge (to come from) sóm̄bi (rice porridge)	Same as the closed French <i>o</i> as in <i>beau</i> , <i>chose</i> . Does not exist in English. Sometimes this sound will be interchanged with [u], but when it differentiates between [ɔ] or [o:] it is invariable.
óo	o:		wóom (knee) bóom (to murder)	As in the German word <i>not</i> , <i>Bote</i> , <i>Sohle</i>
u	u	voiced close back rounded (cardinal 8)	bukki (hyena) ubbi (to open) toxu (to relocate)	It is the same as the French <i>ou</i> as in <i>vous</i> or the German <i>u</i> as in <i>Mut</i> . Similar to the English [u] in <i>book</i> , except that it is closer, rounder and stronger. The tongue is as far back as possible and as near to the roof as possible so that the opening between the tongue and the palate is as narrow as possible. The lips are heavily rounded.
uu	u:		buur (king)	

CONSONANTS

letter	symbol	phonetic description	examples	notes
b	b	voiced bilabial plosive	bakkan (nose) feeb̄ar (sickness) xob (leaf)	When it occurs at the end of a word preceded by a vowel it is unreleased and often voiceless ([p]), or may be produced as an implosive.

bb	b: b:^ə	voiced aspirated bilabial plosive	jubbanti (to straighten) mbubb (gown)	Length is 1½ times short b. “Geminated” in final position, that is emphasised by the addition of a short vowel.
c	c	voiceless unaspirated palantal plosive	caq (necklace) caabi (key) mooco (head of femur)	The middle of the tongue makes contact with the hard palate. The tip is usually held down. The lips are not rounded ([tʃ] is rounded). This is <u>not</u> the same as “ch” [tʃ] in English, which is an aspirated grooved affricate. It is approximately the same as the French “ti” in “ <i>tiens</i> ”. The mechanism of production lies between [t] and [k]. Try saying [ta] [ca] [ka] [qa]; [tə] [cə] [kə]; [tu] [cu] [ku]; [tɛ] [cɛ] [kɛ]; [ti] [ci] [ki]; where, for each series, the only part that moves is the point of contact of the tongue with the roof of the mouth. It does not occur as a single consonant at the end of a word, but note that j in final position preceded by a vowel is usually voiceless (i.e [c]).
cc	c:^h		racctal (slip knot) nàcc (to bleed)	Length is 1½ times short c. “Geminated” in final position.
d	d	unreleased voiced tip alveolar plosive	dáll (shoe) raadu (level the ground after planting peanuts)	It does not occur as a single consonant preceded by a vowel at the end of a word.
dd	d: d:^ə	voiced aspirated tip alveolar plosive	kuddu (spoon) gudd (long)	Length is 1½ times short d. “Geminated” in final position.
f	f	voiceless labio-dental fricative	fetal (gun) foofu (over there) laaf (wing)	Same as English.
g	g	voiced back velar plosive	garab (tree) digal (to order) dugub (millet) jasig (crocodile)	When it occurs at the end of a word preceded by a vowel it is unreleased and often voiceless ([k]), or may be produced as an implosive.
gg	g: g:^ə	voiced aspirated back velar plosive	àggale (to complete) digg (centre)	Length is 1½ times short g. “Geminated” in final position.
j	ɟ	voiced unaspirated palantal plosive	jant (sun) jaan (snake) Kajoor (region of Senegal) léjum (vegetable) xaj (dog)	When it occurs at the end of a word preceded by a vowel it is unreleased and often voiceless ([c]), or may be produced as an implosive. The middle of the tongue makes contact with the hard palate. The tip is usually held down. The lips are <u>not</u> rounded ([ɟ] is rounded). It is approximately the same sound as the French “dʀ” in “ <i>Dieu</i> ”. This is <u>not</u> the same as “j” [dʒ] of judge in English, which is an aspirated grooved affricate. The mechanism of production lies between [d] and [g]. Try saying [da] [ja] [ga]; [dɔ] [jɔ] [gɔ]; [du] [ju] [gu]; [dɛ] [jɛ] [gɛ]; [di] [ji] [gi]; where, for each series of three, the only part that moves is the point of contact of the tongue with the roof of the mouth.
jj	ɟ:^h		béjjén (horn of animal) kajj (harpoon)	Length is 1½ times short j. “Geminated” in final position.
k	k	voiceless back velar plosive	kër (house) asaka (tithe) seku (parrot)	It does not occur as a single consonant at the end of a word, but note that g in final position preceded by a vowel is usually voiceless (i.e [k]).
kk	k: k:^h	voiceless aspirated back velar geminated plosive	bakkan (nose) ëkk (tree stump)	Length is 1½ times short k. “Geminated” in final position.

l	l, ɫ	clear voiced alveolar lateral, dark voiced alveolar lateral	lam (bracelet) xaalis (money) armeel (cemetery)	English has 3 alveolar laterals depending on the surrounding letters. The back of the tongue when you say “lee” is higher than when you say “law”. “Legal” uses both. These are referred to as clear and dark laterals, and both exist and function in much the same way in Wolof. Dark laterals are really velarised. Incidentally, the third l in English in the non-voiced l in words like “play”.
ll	l:, ɫ:°		jullit (Moslem) säll (beak of bird)	In final position, ll is a geminated dark l.
m	m	bilabial nasal	matt (firewood) jumaa (mosque) baaraam (finger)	Same as English
mm	m: m:°		bammeel (tomb) samm (to shepherd)	Geminated in final position.
mb	^mb ^mb°	prenasalised voiced bilabial plosive	mboq (corn) gumba (blind man) demb (yesterday)	A prenasalised sound begins as a nasal with the air stream escaping through the nose, but the velum rises to close the velic passage just as the articulation in the mouth begins, so that there is effectively a very short nasal onset to the oral sound. These two letters represent a single consonant and when in the initial position must be said without adding a vowel in front. One should not say “em-bay”, but simply mb + ay. Samba is not said Sam-ba, but rather Sa-mba.
mp	^mp ^mp^h	prenasalised voiceless bilabial plosive	samp (to establish) sampal (to establish for someone)	
n	n	apico-dental nasal	néeg (house, room) coono (fatigue) bakkan (nose)	The English n is an alveolar nasal. In Wolof it is an apico-dental nasal.
nn	n: n:°		junni (1,000) bënn (hole) kenn (someone)	Length is 1½ times the length of the short n.
nc	ⁿc ⁿc^h	prenasalised voiceless aspirated palantal plosive	dencal (keep for someone) conco (elbow) pénc (meeting place)	A prenasalised sound begins as a nasal with the air stream escaping through the nose, but the velum rises to close the velic passage just as the articulation in the mouth begins, so that there is effectively a very short nasal onset to the oral sound. These two letters represent a single consonant and when in the initial position must be said without adding a vowel in front. One should not say “en-dey”, but simply nd + ey. In final position the consonant is geminated. Note “n” before the consonants k, g, q is phonetically [ŋ], bank = [bɔŋk] in Wolof or [bæŋk] in English.
nd	ⁿd ⁿd°	prenasalised voiced tip alveolar plosive	ndaa (water pot) bindu (subscribe) pënd (dust)	
ng	^ŋg ^ŋg°	prenasalised voiced back velar plosive	ngemb (lin cloth, nappy) jàngal (to teach) song (to attack)	
nj	ⁿj ⁿj°	prenasalised voiced palantal plosive	njombor (rabbit) junjuŋ (Sereer drum) jànj (termite mound)	
nk	^ŋk ^ŋk^h	prenasalised voiceless back velar plosive	ponkal (giant) tànk (leg)	
nq	^ŋq ^ŋq^h	prenasalised voiceless uvular plosive	sanqal (millet semolina) janq (young girl)	
nt	ⁿt ⁿt^h	prenasalised voiceless tip alveolar stop	santaane (command) jant (sun) bunt (do or)	

ñ	ñ	voiced palatal nasal	ñey (elephant) roñu (to move location) mbañeel (hate) lãmmiñ (tongue)	Say “canno n.” Now say “canyon.” Lengthen the nasal sounds in the middle of these two words, so you can feel what you are doing. Now as you say “canyon,” concentrate on holding the tip of your tongue down and the blade up as you say the sound spelled “ny”. The sound is [ɲ]. Practice “[aña] [oño] [uñu], [ña] [ño] [ñu], [añ] [oñ] [uñ].” As you practice, be sure you are saying ñ with your tongue tip down behind your lower teeth. The point of contact of the tongue is the same as for the plosive [c].
ññ	ñ: ñ:^o		wãññi (to reduce) waññ (to count)	Geminated in final position.
ŋ	ŋ	voiced velar nasal	ŋaam (jaw) ŋëb (fist) diŋat (to disagree with something) joŋante (to compete) kaaŋ (skull) basaŋ (mat)	The closure is made by the back of the tongue against the velum, in the same place where the sound [g] is made. It appears in English as the “ng” of “sing” or in German as in singen. Since it does not occur in English or German at the beginning of a word, speakers want to put a vowel before it when it starts a word in Wolof. To master beginning a word with this sound practice as follows: repeat the word “longing”; Leave off the “l” and continue repeating “onging”; Now, pause after the first vowel, so you are now saying “[o-ŋiŋ]”; Now leave off the first vowel and say “[ŋiŋ]”. Practice saying it with different vowels.
ŋŋ	ŋ: ŋ:^a		ëŋŋësle (stubborn) ràŋŋati (to throw into a panic) waŋŋeetu (to kick out) doŋŋ (only)	Geminated in final position.
p	p	voiceless bilabial plosive	paaka (knife) piipaw (caftan with wide sleeves)	It does not occur as a single consonant at the end of a word, but note that b in final position preceded by a vowel is usually voiceless (i.e [p]).
pp	p: p:^h	voiceless aspirated bilabial plosive	koppin (turkey) bopp (head)	Length is 1½ times short p. Aspirated strongly in final position.
q	q	voiceless unaspirated uvular plosive	bëqët (backwardly) làqu (to hide oneself) mboq (corn) séq (rooster)	The tongue back is drawn upwards and backwards to make contact with the uvula.
r	r	rolled linguo-alveolar vibrant	ràbb (to knit, weave) reen (root) baaraam (finger) biir (stomach)	The Spanish r. The Wolof [r] is articulated as an alveolar vibrant: the tip of the tongue taps against the teeth ridge to give a series of occlusions. The main body of the tongue is neither concave or convex, nor contracted, but loose. It makes no particular effort. All the sound is produced at the apex. The number of vibrations in the only thing varying from one lingual vibration to five or even more. When r is in the initial position there is only one tap with the tip of the tongue concave and the air passing freely through a narrow passage between the concave tip and the teeth-ridge. The Wolof r is normally voiced but may occasionally be unvoiced when at the end of a word. Occasionally [r] is interchanged with [l] or [w]. The Wolof r bears no resemblance at all to an English r [ɹ]. Some English speakers can produce the sound by saying “grrr”. It can be mastered by opposition of English and Wolof r's in the following words: English rare [ɹæə] rub [ɹʌb] rat [ɹæt] rye [ɹai] Wolof reer [ɹɛ:r] (dinner) rab [ɹʌp] (beast) rat [ɹʌt] (a sort of plant) raay [ɹa:i] (caress)
rr	r:		jérr (superlative of tang)	

s	s	voiceless alveolar grooved fricative	saan (worm) basaj (mat) sas (task)	Same as English.
t	t	voiceless tip alveolar stop	tànk (leg) fetal (gun) baat (neck) jiit (scorpion)	When it occurs at the end of a word preceded by a vowel it is unreleased.
tt	t: t:^h	voiceless tip alveolar aspirated stop	fàtte (to forget) butti (to gut) matt (firewood)	Length is 1½ times short t. “Geminated” in final position.
w	w	voiced labio-velar semi-vowel	Wolof kewél (deer) daw (to run)	Same as English
ww	w:		tawwi (to stretch something elastic) fàww (must)	w and ww are contrasting minimal pairs. The doubled letter needs to be articulated with strength and insistence to avoid giving the contrary meaning eg xewi (going to be in fashion some day) xewwi (out of fashion)
x	x	voiceless back-velar fricative	xeej (spear) loxo (hand) bataaxal (letter) sax (sprout)	The tongue back rises to wards the u vula, but does not make contact. The sound is produced in quite a relaxed manner and the friction is often not very strong. In German, it is the ch sound as in <i>Dach, Loch, Buch</i> .
y	j	voiced unrounded palatal semi-vowel	yax (bone) caaya (traditional pants) yaay (mother) baay (father)	Same as English
yy			guyy (superlative of sedd) làyyi (to justify on eself)	y and yy are contrasting minimal pairs. The doubled letter needs to be articulated with strength and insistence to avoid giving the contrary meaning,

Diphthongs:

Wolof has a large number of diphthongs as does English. These include [ai] nay; [ei] béy; [ɛi] tey; [ɔi] doy; [əi] xëy; [ui] duy; [ɛu] sew; [iu] diw; [au] daw; [ɔw] sow; [a:i] baay; [e:i] féey; [ɛ:i] teey; [ɔ:i] nooy; [o:i] tóoy; [u:i] fuuy; [e:u] réew; [ɛ:u] reew; [i:u] siw; [a:u] baaw; [ɔ:w] soow;

Unlike English the duration of the vowel is important to differentiate minimal pairs such as *bay* (to cultivate) and *baay* (father); *béy* (goat) and *béey* (whitlow). Other minimal pairs include words like *réew* (country) and *reew* (impolite).

As in English the glide is always of the falling type (open vowel moving toward a more closed one).

Because Wolof differentiates length of diphthongs while English doesn't the length of an English diphthong tends to be between a long and short Wolof diphthong. Thus the English speaker needs to shorten how he would say *doy* [doi] or *woy* [wɔi] in relation to how he says *boy* [bɔi] which is closer to how the Wolof would say *booy* [bɔ:i] or *nooy* [nɔ:i].

Read also:

Aspirated and unaspirated stops (plosives) LAMP p256-258

“ch” in English LAMP p265, last paragraph.

“j” in English LAMP p266, second paragraph.

Nasals LAMP p269-270

For an explanation of the three kinds of “l”s in English and Wolof LAMP p271-272

The various kinds of “r”s LAMP p273

References:

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