The Leverhulme funded Crossroads Multilingualism project at SOAS is investigating multilingualism and contact among languages spoken at the "crossroads": three villages situated at a literal crossroads in the Casamance region of Senegal, West Africa. Each of the villages is identified with one language, Jóola Kujireray spoken in Brin, Bainounk Gubëheer spoken in Djibonker, and Jóola Eegimaa spoken in Essyl, and the three languages are more or less genetically related and are in close contact. However, the reality of the situation is that people speak an upwards of ten, in many cases completely unrelated, languages on a daily basis. Although it is not uncommon for speakers in West African communities to be proficient in numerous languages, the fact that the crossroads’ speakers converse fluently and move fluidly through such a multitude of languages within a single speech event is extraordinary.

On the other hand, the primary crossroads languages have a high degree of overlap. The villages in which the two Jóola languages are spoken, Brin and Essyl, at a distance of six kilometres, are geographically farther away from each other than Brin and Djibonker, the Bainounk-speaking village, a mere one kilometre away, but they share a more closely common ancestor. All of the languages have nominal classification markers in the form of prefixes. Verb morphology is essentially agglutinating among the crossroads languages with subject prefixes and derivational and inflectional suffixes. The languages share many vocabulary items. Most likely due to diachronic reasons, at the phonemic level, the consonant and vowel inventories of the languages are the same.

And yet there are boundaries. Each of the villages’ speakers has a way of keeping his or her collective identity intact within its own sphere. From the outset of a speech event between a newcomer and a resident, a distinction is portrayed as being one of outsider or insider. Subtle as it may appear, the difference between [k] and [ɡ] indicates the origin of the speaker as being from Brin or Essyl in the initial greeting, “peace”, [kɛ-ssum-aj] or [ɡɛ-ssum-aj], respectively.

While much of current sociophonetic research is directed at determining dialectal differences, this study seeks to define the limits of a so-called “foreign” accent. The term “foreign” seems misleading when the languages are spoken in such close proximity yet it still applies in that the pronunciation of a word indicates whether a person is a “foreigner”, an outsider, or an insider. In other words, this paper illustrates the phonetic correlates of an identity expressed through language.