Linguistic Marginalia: A Special Issue on African Urban Youth Language (AUYL) Practices

Philip W Rudd
Pittsburg State University

Correspondence to:
prudd@pittstate.edu

Abstract

This introduction to the *Multilingual Margins* special issue on "African Urban and Youth Language (AUYL) Practices" is divided into five parts. The first part presents an overview of urban and youth language practices in Africa, with particular attention paid to the symbolism of youth and urban identity, multilingual composition, and a sample of commons names for AUYL. The second part of the introduction provides an overview of the history of colonial monolingualism and metropolitan infrastructures that created a niche or third space for the multitude of speakers who lacked access to housing, services, and colonial standard languages. The third part of the introduction overviews how the exclusionary policies of colonialism created a marginalization that spawned an informal sector of business, replete with a language of solidarity for the people on the periphery. The fourth part of the introduction discusses how the speakers of AUYL practices are not vicitms or imperial debris, rather they have become agents to localize the global and globalize the local by being fluid enough to renegotiate the colonial with the traditional and engender a reconceptualization of what it means to be globalized and cosmopolitan. Finally, in the fifth part, the introduction presents the eight articles that constitute the special issue.

Keywords: AUYL, agency, globalization, marginalization, multilingualism, post-colonialism

INTRODUCTION

This special issue consists of articles on language practices across Africa from Nigeria and Cameroun in the west to Uganda and Kenya in the east. The discussions are necessarily interdisciplinary, referencing research from the disciplines of anthropology, drama, history, linguistics, psychology, and sociology. The original spark ignited as a workshop convened on a Kenyan university campus by an American linguist who had observed

youthful language practices in Africa for many years and had noticed that even within the discipline of linguistics itself there were limiting and marginalizing perceptions of language practices in Africa incongruous with his own experiences (Rudd 2018). This special issue is the outcome of that workshop and a call for papers from afar. Local Kenyan linguists, agreed to assist with the volume, as they, like Rudd, foresaw future work that could develop a bedrock of positive perspectives from likeminded scholars. Besides being backed by theory, the assortment here is empirical with the aim of accurately describing language practices in Africa.

AFRICAN URBAN YOUTH LANGUAGE (AUYL)

Language in practice enables speakers to vary, examine and understand their social world. This linguistic 'constellation of meanings' (Eckert 2008: 464) permits a variety of ideologies from which to position socially. Frequent reinterpretation makes speakers readjust daily in social encounters and gives new meaning to variables, and new combinations allow new positions and styles (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Across the African continent, youthful ways of speaking have become 'fluid and unsteady' emblems of status (Beyer 2015: 230). As young urbanites are successfully mixing traditional values with modern identities, and bridging the old to the new, these language practices have been called, among other terms, African Urban Youth Language (AUYL), an acronym more easily pronounced via transposition of its syllables as [əjul] and one first coined at the first namesake conference in Cape Town in 2013. The "youth" appellation refers not to the speakers themselves actually being young but to the general rebelliousness and linguistic deviation often linked to youthfulness. These language practices derive from the vocabulary and grammar of other local languages in the reformulation of identify in the constant grip of globalization.

Though neither only young nor only urban, speakers who are most noticed are young city dwellers who balance on a tightrope between adherence to the language of tradition, culture, and ethnicity and engagement with the language and culture of the new, urbane, and modern. As a consequence of competitive and selective interactions, dynamic manifestations of globalization, colonization and tradition have spawned many stylish, new language repertoires. Examples include Nouchi in Abidjan, Ivory Coast; Camfranglais in Douala and Younde, Cameroon; Indoubil in Bukavu, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); Lingala in Congo-Brazzaville and Congo-Kinshasa; Sheng in Nairobi, Kenya; and Tsotsitaal and Isicamtho in Johannesburg, South Africa (SA).

A THIRD SPACE

With colonialism unraveling in the twentieth century, governments began looking for paths to stabilize indigenous populations. The solution was to create heirs to the colonial throne, an African middle class on whom they could bequeath power. In Kenya, this feat was accomplished by creating an educated class of white-collar Africans who 'developed a so-called "karani complex" (*karani* = clerk)' that distinguished them as 'educated (*asomi*)' (Odhiambo 2002: 255). These new elites began to dislike Swahili as the parlance of the uneducated (Laitin and Eastman 1989: 52) and prefer English as it was required for higher-level civil service positions. It should be

remembered that Nairobi was designed as a non-African city to meet the needs of the European. All of the Africans regardless of education had to live in the 'native locations', which is where most of the urban growth occurred. Africans continued migrating from the rural areas as a result of economic hardship and/or the lure of perceived urban opportunities. That the city was beyond 'the orbit of customary law' enticed even women to come and live free and independent lives (Bujra 1975: 220). However, no housing was developed for families until 1957.[1] Therefore, the first half century of African housing in Nairobi had been for bachelors. Racism, corruption, and poor planning were the causes for the substandard housing. Larger and larger informal settlements grew on the outskirts of the city, and a class society among indigenous Kenyans emerged with the white-collar elite at the top, positioned to take control at independence.

Shortly after Independence in the 1960s, only three percent of urbanites were native born to Nairobi (Lonsdale 2002: 211). Most everyone straddled between home in the country and work in the city. However, despite post-Independence Nairobi's population seeing an annual 5.8% increase, housing continued unmet, causing Kenya's capital to become an island town engulfed by a sea of shanties (Anderson 2002: 154). More and more residents became stranded in the no man's land of the informal settlements.

Similarly, all across Africa indigenous peoples were migrating to cities in the latter half of the twentieth century. Tarver (1994) elucidates that though only an approximate 15% of populations up to 1950 were city dwellers, by 1990 about 6.75 times that amount (i.e., some 185 million) were

dwelling in African urban areas—an accelerated urban growth that must be acknowledged as the greatest migration on the planet! 'Only the city, in Africa at least,' contends Mufwene (2008), 'has come close to reducing… [ethnic languages and identities], acting like sugarcane plantations and rice fields of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean settlement colonies' (217). Becoming urban entails successfully adopting 'a new identity' (Makoni et al. 2007: 44), and urban survival requires language improvisation (McLaughlin 2001). Therefore, new AUYL repertoires emerge from a shared postcolonial African urban experience that was effectively neither oppressed by the imperial nor constrained by the traditional. Speakers seized agency to design their own destinies (Rudd 2018) outside of language ideology and cultural commonsense. This outsideness results in their being dismissed as 'invisible' (Irvine and Gal 2001: 38). Behind this dynamic linguistic process is the 'invisible hand' setting speakers as 'unwitting agents' of language change (Mufwene 2001: 14-18) in an 'invisible niche' (Rudd 2018b) that enables speakers to create and share a postcolonial, social experience of living in what can be called a third hybridized space (Karanja 2010: 2).

THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Sheng, and by extension each AUYL, is 'the vernacular of the informal sector' (Githiora 2016: 5) in the economy. Portes et al. (1989) explain how the formal sector creates the informal sector, providing an illuminating analog for how the concept of the standard language spawns the emergence of the non-standard language. As Milroy (2001) outlines, the institutionalized variety of a language is orbited by various non-standard satellites

of informal usage. Rudd (2018) traces the path that leads to the informalization of more common language usage. Of course, how the process in each post-Independence nation proceeded varied due to individual histories and ecosystems. However, the particular case of Kenya serves to illuminate the path for AUYL in general.

Step one was when the new African legislature officially institutionalized the colonial language as the national language, thus shunting more common language varieties aside. For instance, though Kenya Pidgin Swahili (KPS) in Kenya had been the common language of wider communication, parliamentary action illegitimated the previous informal norm.[2] Next the ex-colonial language was institutionalized as the preferred and therefore required code in universities, the civil service, and business, granting the ex-colonial tongue a leg up over indigenous African languages for the best jobs and education, condemning citizens without the preferred linguistic knowledge to the periphery in low-wage positions of labor. The last step is that the parliament imposed formal restrictions, opening a marketplace for corruption. Citizens who could not afford *kitu kidogo* 'a little something' as a bribe to bureaucrats had to resign themselves to the fact that official ears heard only the voices of persons with money and education. Therefore, even though at the present the public appear to refuse standard and official languages, the catalyst was originally a lack of access, an outright consequence of formal regulation.

Being marginalized and kept on the periphery of the formal sector and receiving no institutional or legal acknowledgement led to an association with criminality (Rudd 2018a). Language use labeled as argotic or underworldly,

however, belies AUYL's true existence. Despite denial of acceptance by institutions and governmental policy, repertoires have popped up from the ghettoes of the cities and spread to the rural settings of distant provinces. Saturation of domain usage (Hollington and Nassenstein 2017; Githiora 2016) is utterly thorough---from hawkers in the street to politicians on the campaign. As a result, advertising for corporations (Kanana Erastus and Hurst-Harosh 2020; Mutonya 2018; Kariuki et al. 2015) happily and ironically employ AUYL in preference to standard and traditional languages.

AGENTS OF GLOBALIZATION

The aftermath of colonization may have been worldwide economic globalization, but Africa has neither been utterly Westernized nor Americanized nor McDonaldized. The language of speakers of AUYL has not been linguistically or culturally homogenized either. It was the socioeconomic elite who were affected the most by Westernization as they had a desire to preserve the system of colonial exploitation (Mufwene and Vigouroux 2008:23) by perpetuating the entitlement of the ex-colonial language (see Laitin and Eastman 1989: 52 for Kenya). The greater proportion of the African populace then had been both literally and figuratively on the periphery of worldwide globalization.[3] Still 'all politics is local' goes an old aphorism, meaning that all globalization is local as well (Rudd 2018b). Despite elites in this postcolonial global game taking decisions with little regard for the wants and needs of common folk, a model of interrelatedness obtains in which all speakers operating in such

a complex economic system have to communicate, using 'a general means of urban communication' (Beyer 2015: 34), or 'an urban language practice' (Hollington and Nassenstein 2017: 402). The global becomes local.

Speakers in the slums should not be viewed as victims; on the contrary, they are now actually the 'agents of globalization' (Kanana Erastus and Hurst-Harosh 2020: 31). The blind spot of much research is that it canvases only the bourgeoisie, not the overwhelming proletarian majorities that make up Africa's métropoles. This fact appears to be the reason much research displays little appreciation for the accomplishment of the speakers. Despite continuing to be subjected to the exploitation of upper, ruling classes, see the Pandora Papers (Tharoor 2021) for instance, these participants fight exploitation by being agents of change. Granted, it may appear 'absurd' that youth languages could be expanding as first languages (Brookes and Kouassi: 405). However, neither the simple fact that middle-class white boys in America appropriate slang from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to signal toughness and coolness nor the truism that the scions of the bourgeoisie in Nairobi stylize an air of cosmopolitanism by employing words and phrases from Sheng is evidence that native speakers are nonexistent. Moreover, 'the history of the world,' writes Mufwene (2004: 206), 'shows that languages of the powerless often have been more resilient, or demonstrated more vitality, than those of the powerful.' Nonetheless, it may well be that Sheng and other AUYL have never truly been just 'youth languages' (Hollington and Nassenstein 2017: 396). The symbolic value of AUYL across all social strata as consequences of commodification by musicians and advertisers broadens and diversifies these repertoires to reveal that 'mainstream' AUYL and 'deep' AUYL have become 'mutually constitutive', thus justifying viewing them as 'globalized repertoires' (Hollington and Nassenstein 2017: 395). With an ever-changing and fluid nature that has expanded into most every social domain and merged into mainstream discourse, AUYL is a reflection not so much of an opposition to the standard and the colonial but more of a mutually reconstituted and reconceptualized urban embodiment and globalized cosmopolitanism.

FOREGROUNDING THE MARGINALIA OF GLOCALIZATION

As an outcome of these considerations, this special issue seeks not to argue from an underlying ideology that exoticizes the otherness of the peripheral phenomena of African urban and youth language practices. Rather the focus is on the consequences of the third-space motive that appears key to 'developing a new speech form' because even 'with the most exotic mixtures, we find parallels in processes that are widely attested kinds of linguistic behavior' (Thomason 1995: 30). The present volume includes eight articles that take our understanding of African urban and youth language practices to new levels of appreciation. In terms of work on written manifestations, the first three articles are primarily concerned with education, orthography, and non-standard usage, and the next five address Sheng in particular. The articles involve languages spoken in Cameroon, Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya; in the issues that they raise, they are reflective of language practices in Africa more generally.

Augustin Emmanuel Ebongue's

article focuses on an analysis of written Camfranglais. Differences in syntax, morphosyntax, and spellings vary in relation to the speaker's knowledge of French, English, and Pidgin English in Cameroon. Lesser educated writers spell what they say, and so the phonological rules of the languages known best to them dominate. Not knowing the rules of the codified standards releases the constraints on what can be done, allowing AUYL to be more spontaneous and more creative (and perhaps subversive). Such salient social variation demonstrates that written Camfranglais can be viewed paradoxically as a usage of the hierarchically marginalized and as a counter hegemonic and decolonial stratagem of unindoctrinated Africans.

Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju's contribution examines the precarious multilinguality among the socioeconomic and socio-political 'precariati' in Nigeria. From the view that access to codified language is wealth and power and the lack shunts one aside to a peripheral existence, the linguistic precarity prominent in Nigeria is a result of the mismanagement of social structures, echoing Banda and Mwanza's (2020) assertion that coloniality and standard language ideologies have infiltrated post-independent African states and societies to a point that is linguistically exclusionary. The limiting of multiple forms of non-standard languages, an everyday feature of a majority of the peoples, disenfranchises speakers of a path to communicate clearly and efficiently. The local linguistic landscape is filled with misperceived spellings on billboards, back-street walls, transport vehicals, façades of guest houses, and ubiquitous posters. Unable to avoid the dilemma of precarious diglossia, even members of the political class at times fail to escape the ignominy of non-mastery of a colonial language.

Dogged determination in the face of a people's inability to use 'correctly' the standard language may symbolize resistance to the unjustified power of the ex-colonial language. If decoloniality demands untethering from the dark side of modern epistemic systems, one way to accomplish that is through a multilingual capability to make meaning in the hybridity of language usage. In the present case, the situation might well be that linguistic precarity is but a harbinger of the fissures in walled structures of hierarchical hegemonic language policies.

Gerald Heusing's article draws on the history of the north-south migration of a Nilotic pastoral people in the 15th century that ended in the subjugation of a group of Bantu farmers into a hierarchy that ultimately led to the political elite relinquishing their identity and most of their language, except for six semantic categories of secret names. Though it is a given that Empaako is not a tidy fit for our concept of AUYL, the historical theme parallels 'the widely attested… linguistic behaviour' Thomason (1995) and Mufwene (2004) suggest obtains. Let a Luo businessman in Kenya serve as an instantiation. He can simultaneously reject Swahili as the tribalistic language policy of a postcolonial, Gikuyu administration (Beck 2010: 31) and avoid the appearance of tribalism himself by refraining from speaking Dholuo. The accomplishment is attained by happily conducting business in Sheng. To be clear, it is the AUYL that is creating 'a safe haven on the social ground and encouraging a postcolonial identity to emerge' (Rudd 2019: 82). Be that as it may, the six categories of Empaako in these modern times have diminished to four, and numbers of Batooro and Banyoro families are increasingly straying away from traditional naming.

Notwithstanding a European style of naming with the clan serving as surname and a given name deriving from either Islam or Christianity, the use of Empaako remains communicatively required to demonstrate respect, show intimacy, and avoid taboo violation in their community.

Peter Githinji's contribution examines the strategies for identifying what counts as Sheng, an AUYL prominent in Kenya. As he demonstrates, the markedness theory from the Prague school of linguistics is ideal for identifying what constitutes Sheng as compared to Swahili, the standard African language that was part and parcel to the colonial enterprise of East Africa. His paper illustrates especially how phonetic, phonological, and morphosyntactic features innovate Sheng and deviate from the codified standard. The work makes two points clear. One, the preoccupation of educational practices to marginalize speakers by passing judgment on the inauthenticity of Sheng is an unjustified performance of power. Two, the vitality of this AUYL is its 'greatest strength'. Not only does its ever-changing character maintain its appeal amongst its speakers, but it may also symbolize the breaches and cracks through which the marginalized are overcoming the inequalities in social structures.

Esther K Mbithi's article focuses on the lexical and syntactic 'cultural peculiarity' of English as the colonial language of instruction at the level of university in the Kenyan educational system. Her work emphasizes, like that of Bamgbose (2000) and Chimbutane (2020), the primary cause of failure for students in the post-colonial context is the enduring singular use of the erstwhile language of colonialism. Mbithi recommends a decolonial pedagogy that involves translanguaging (Banda 2018) as a counter to the hegemonic,

monolingual denaturalization of African languages that survives as a colonial hangover and constitutes the concept of Western modernity. The paper identifies the source of marginalization, documents the particular problem of colonial monolingualism, and directly confronts the inequalities that must be overcome to remake education in Africa.

The concept of the permeability of the rural-and-urban dichotomy and social class on interactive media platforms of new (social) media via Internet-capable cell phones in Kenya is addressed by Fridah Kanana Erastus, Ochieng' Orwenjo, and Margaret Gathigia Nguru who examine the linguistic practices of social media users on primarily public Instagram, Youtube, and Facebook pages. They show how Kenyan urban youth are exploiting new digital media language trends, such as emojis, memes, and laughter acronyms, to unify rural and urban language practices. Far from being victims of the online linguistic space or of global and imperial ruination, rural African youth share in and instantiate the change. As agents of glocalization, they harness digital dialects to localize global and urban cultures and link daily experiences not only to transcend traditional spaces and boundaries but also to blur, negotiate, and counter negative perceptions of social class.

In his contribution, Nico Nassenstein captures the asymmetrical power and partial acquisition patterns of the emerging translanguaging practices found in encounters between African beach vendors and tourists from European countries, such as Germany, Italy, and France. Mass package tourism has seen an increase in sex tourism along Kenya's coast. Older European female customers of lower social strata seek out beach boys, young Kenyan

males of mostly Mijikenda and lower socioeconomic background, to cater to their sexual demands and fantasies. Though both travelers and tourist workers are liminal peoples, the young men are dominated economically, linguistically, and sexually. Nassenstein explains how 'beach operators' go through a brutal, painful, and ruthless domination and exploitation in the 'beach academy,' a process of language acquisition and language practice in the tourist sex trade. The dark side of coastal languaging entails the boys, experiencing a relentless and violent linguistic production of exclusion and marginality, while they acquire pejorative terminology. However, surviving the degradation and misery means finally having the linguistic capability to reclaim agency, renegotiate the 'trans-semiotic system' to resist and dismantle the linguistic dominance in order to speak back.

Karin A. Waidley's contribution draws on a theatrical transaction that became a locus of knowledge and ideological interaction. Her project was to devise with her drama students on the campus of Kenyatta University a performance of how the youth of Kenya deploy Sheng to construct personae and identities to negotiate the interstices and the intersectionality amongst social categories, like age, ethnicity, gender, and social class. Waidley found that despite differences in terms of education, ethnicity, and social background, AUYL speakers do not see Sheng as only the resource of the 'negatively connoted underbelly' of society but as an example of the powerful semiotic resources that African peoples employ to disrupt colonial enterprise and the Western conception of modernity. Sheng's intersection with theatre shows a 'compatible ambiguity'

in that the theatrical artist surrenders epistemological authority to students who as actors (agents) embrace 'artistic citizenship' as an exercise in linguistic citizenship (cf. Stroud 2001, 2015). Based on her analysis, Waidley suggests that performance allows AUYL to display its true colours as a 'grammar of knowing' and as a tool to negotiate class relations and to create a responsibility or 'response-ability' to reverse and counteract marginalization.

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ENDNOTES

1 Developments, later called Maringo, Jerusalem, and Jericho, were built in honor of Ambrose Ofafa, Treasurer of the East African Luo Union (EALU), the oldest tribal association in Kenya, who was murdered in Nairobi in 1954 (Hake 1977).

2 However, parliament later raised standardized Swahili to co-official status in 2010.

3 Not until after the departure of the colonials did Nairobi slums, for instance, become greatly 'enlarged, densified and proliferated' reaching 60% of the urban population in 2006 (Githira 2016: 2-3). In fact, 924 million residents live in the world's urban slums (71.9% in sub-Saharan Africa), and it is projected that total will rise to 2 billion by 2030 (UN-HABITAT 2003).