Youth language in Africa: Introduction to the special issue

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Abstract: This article introduces this special issue of Linguistics Vanguard which focuses on youth language practices in Africa. The study of youth language and the linguistic practices of youth in the African continent is a rich field that has been expanding and deepening in recent years. This special issue emerged from a collection of papers presented at a workshop during the International Congress of Linguists (ICL20) in Cape Town, July 2018. The articles that come together in this special collection showcase some of the most productive and fascinating aspects of youth language in Africa and demonstrate why this field is particularly relevant for sociolinguistics today. This introduction describes some of the key subfields in African Youth Language research. It also introduces the articles in the special issue, in relation to three main themes: the linguistic analysis of youth language; the relationship between youth language and identity; and individual creativity and stylistic choice.

Keywords: youth language, African language, language variation, identity, masculinity, style, indexicality, metaphor

The study of youth language and the linguistic practices of youth in the African continent is a rich field that has been expanding and deepening in recent years. The articles that come together in this special collection showcase some of the most productive and fascinating aspects of youth language in Africa, and demonstrate why this field is particularly relevant for sociolinguistics today. The currency of topics such as language in virtual space or computer-mediated communication, creativity and indexicality, and the interface between language, socio-cultural practices and identity, means they are all critical concerns of contemporary sociolinguistic research.

This special issue emerged from a collection of papers presented at a workshop during the International Congress of Linguists (ICL20) in Cape Town, July 2018. The ICL forum is intended to display current developments in linguistics, and the conference in Cape Town marked the first time the ICL had been held in the African continent. Speakers and topics were from a wide international pool, but the conference also took the opportunity to showcase African language research. In this pursuit, the topics covered not only core linguistics, but also applied linguistic areas of research of importance to the African continent and the 21st century in general. The workshop on African youth language addressed one of these areas by bringing together African and international scholars working on various forms of youth language, as this has been a key field in recent years, driven by emerging scholars from Africa and beyond.

While there is a danger of thinking of African youth language research in terms of area studies, what many researchers in the field collectively acknowledge is that something is taking place in Africa that is notably different from youth language dynamics observed in contexts in the global north. Manifesting unique and notable practices within contexts which are already very diverse and multilingual, young people appear to be doing a lot of the “moving and shaking” (Eckert 1997: 52) that leads to language variation and change. Research on African youth language reflects a fluid linguistic context in African countries intersected by the linguistic legacies of colonialism, the opportunities of the establishment of national identities, and the
complexities of multilingualism in nations which struggle with, and negotiate, the roles of different languages and their various statuses and usages.

There are a number of subfields developing in African youth language research. For example, named ‘urban’ youth varieties such as Sheng in Kenya, Tsotsitaal in South Africa, Camfranglais in Cameroon and Nouchi in Cote D’Ivoire constitute a key area of investigation in relation to: descriptions of grammatical structure and the relation to vernaculars, official and indigenous languages as well as the impact of youth styles on language change; the investigation of lexical etymologies and manipulation strategies such as metaphor, semantic and phonological shift; and the role of youth language in social and peer contexts. Maarten Mous and Roland Kiessling established this comparative field in 2004 with their article ‘Urban Youth Languages in Africa’ in Anthropological Linguistics. These named phenomena have since been variously described as antilanguages (Kiessling and Mous 2004), emerging vernaculars (McLaughlin 2009: 9), styles or registers (Hurst and Mesthrie 2013), new languages (Kioko 2015: 125), and decolonial languages (Hurst-Harosh 2019). These language forms are also often linked to other related semiotic practices such as gesture (Brookes 2004; Hurst and Buthelezi 2014), performance and sub-cultural styles (Brookes 2014; Hurst 2009).

There is also an expanding literature on the use of youth language in social media and digital communications throughout the African continent, as well as the language of youth in music (notably hip hop and related forms), performance poetry, film and other creative endeavours (Hurst-Harosh and Kanana 2018; Williams 2017). These studies also raise interesting questions about the use of African languages by youth in the diaspora (Machetti and Siebetcheu 2013; Nassenstein and Tchokothe 2017); and global influences on African youth language practices and vice versa (Hollington 2020).

Gendered language styles, LGBTQ linguistics, and the relation of youth language to gender constructions such as masculinity, is a further important concern in recent research in the field (Githinji 2008; Hurst-Harosh 2020: Ch. 5; Rudwick et al. 2006), as are considerations of the practices of youth in rural and peri-urban settings (Schmied and Oloruntoba-Oju 2019). While the former pushes back against typifications of slang as masculine, the latter research moves away from the assumption that multilingualism and experimental language practices are restricted to highly ‘networked’ centres, a notion that is spurious in a continent which has high mobile technology usage and significant urban-rural commuting and circular migration. Rural and peri-urban areas are connected in ways they have not been historically, and notwithstanding these connections, youth in rural areas also have notable youth language practices (Blench and Longtau 2016).

There is a current push towards investigating practices such as style-shifting and indexicality, as well as pragmatic approaches to the study of African youth language (Hurst-Harosh and Nassenstein forthcoming) in a move away from an emphasis on the better-known named varieties and towards a more holistic understanding of how youth use language to achieve certain social, political, and agentive purposes. This field of African youth language research is also critically important for understanding language change in African contexts. Many of the studies and subfields have in some way looked at language change in relation to: contact in multilingual contexts; globalization and the impact of international youth forms; social media and communities of practice in online social spaces; and by comparing the linguistic structures and lexicons of youth with other languages in a community of practice, and considering the reciprocal impact of these forms.

The articles in this collection promise to revisit some of these subfields and consider questions previously raised. They also introduce some new linguistic and sociolinguistic analyses, new data, and some new comparisons, while applying different lenses and theoretical tools to the understanding of these contexts.

1 The articles in this issue

The articles included in this special collection represent a wide range of countries in Africa, with an emphasis on Anglophone contexts, including Ethiopia, the Gambia, Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda, South Africa, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe, and, as a Francophone context, DR Congo. In many ways this collection showcases the main
threads of African youth language research as it has developed particularly in relation to the following three main themes:

- The linguistic analysis of youth language – lexical, pragmatic and grammatical features of youth language, the relation between youth language and other registers and vernaculars, including implications for language variation.
- The relationship between youth language and identity, including expressions of identity such as youth cultural practices (music, dress, hair styles etc.) and the indexicality of youth language in relation to urban, modern, streetwise and hybrid local-global identities, and on the reverse side of this, commodification and appropriation of youth forms by media and advertising.
- Individual creativity and stylistic choice particularly in relation to metaphor, in the innovation of new terms in dialogue with popular culture, and in multimodal forms in virtual spaces.

The articles by Tomei and Hollington and Nassenstein and Bose represent two comparative papers looking at linguistic elements in comparable or related youth languages. Tomei and Hollington provide a global perspective on African youth practices as they reveal the impact of Jamaican language on youth languages in Kenya, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Ethiopia, South Africa and the Gambia. They discuss the incorporation of lexical, grammatical and pragmatic elements from Jamaican by youth for individual creativity and stylistic choice. They demonstrate how this is associated with Reggae and Dancehall music and how linguistic elements in youth practice can be embedded in cultural practices such as music, dress and hair styles of users of Jamaican. Nassenstein and Bose meanwhile analyse morphological features of Kiswahili youth languages from Kenya, Tanzania and DR Congo, to provide an illustration of the commonalities and divergences of youth language in these different national contexts and their relation to regional varieties of Kiswahili. They suggest that parallel developments in remote settings could be triggered by use in the media, music and youth culture; while at the same time they could follow general patterns of linguistic simplification. These two comparative papers provide a linguistic understanding of youth language and some of the strategies employed by youth in differentiating their speech.

Some of the themes which arise in the contribution by Tomei and Hollington around individual creativity, stylistic choice, and linguistic elements embedded in cultural practices are picked up again in the contribution by Adjirakor who looks at English and its status in hip hop in Tanzania. Adjirakor demonstrates how English as a youth language is an indication of status and internationality, in the performances of hip hop in English amongst Tanzanian youth. She argues that English is perceived as cosmopolitan and urban, and that it embodies another type of Tanzanian identity, in juxtaposition with a nationalistic discourse which places Kiswahili as the authentic marker of national identity.

Oloruntoba-Oju in his contribution also focuses on identity in relation to indexicality in multimodal performances in Nigerian virtual space. In consonance with Adjirakor’s argument, he notes the indexicalisation of what he calls hybrid identities which combine foreign/indigenous identities and languages. These are realized through multimodal means, and he considers the affordances of multimodality in virtual space, which he argues can facilitate an alter-ego, subversive identity. He also highlights communicative usages that appear distinctively African compared with the global north. Ndlovu stays in the virtual space in his analysis of the use of numericals in Zimbabwean Computer Mediated Communication. With an emphasis on metaphors, drawing on both social media data and interview verification, he considers numerical glyphs as phonemic metaphors, metaphorical numerical shapes, and cross-domain mappings of numerals in his analysis. He concludes that these are key strategies for relexicalization in contemporary youth language in Zimbabwe.

Hurst-Harosh and Kanana, continuing with the theme of relexicalization and metaphors, look at the innovation and circulation of terms, and how terms arise out of what they call ‘mini narratives’ within popular culture. Drawing on data from South Africa and Kenya, they show that generational peer groups and contemporary pop culture are central in the production of metaphors which are circulated and ultimately conventionalized in youth language forms. This language becomes indexical of the urban, modern, streetwise, youth(fulness) which is reified by a particular generation.
Mensah also focuses on metaphors, but specifically in relation to the construction of masculinity. Considering a particular community of practice in Nigeria, he explores slang and metaphors associated with alcohol consumption, the social and symbolic uses of alcohol, and shows how alcohol is a marker of masculinity within this community of practice. He highlights that drinking amongst the youth in his study is a rule-governed and culture-regulated social activity. He furthermore suggests that the discursive enactment of identity and the construction of authentic social selves through creative agency in language is mediated by shared ethnic, linguistic, social, and cultural attributes among in-group members.

Finally Nassenstein focuses on examples from Lingala youth language in DR Congo, and considers how such innovative terms as those described by Ndlovu as well as Hurst-Harosh and Kanana, can be commodified and used in media and advertising – and how youth language itself can be commodified and its indexicality appropriated for promotional purposes. Once terms are conventionalized and commodified, this then necessitates their replacement, leading to the innovation of fresh terms, an aspect of youth language that is often cited (although less often evidenced, see Hurst 2016, who argues that terms are often recycled and less often innovated). He points to a correlation between processes of appropriation or popularization of youth language and the pace of linguistic change.

References