03

Silencing youth

03

Silencing youth

Anne Storch
University of Cologne
astorch@uni-koeln.de

These are images of two men who wear red. To me, both seem youthful.

The man on the left patiently and nonchalantly stares right into the camera of my smart phone. He doesn't do anything else, unless he is removed for redecoration, tidying-up or closing down. The other man (on the right) happened to be there at the moment I had wanted to take a picture of a group of people. He realized he would be in my picture and made sure he would not be recognized. Because he said he doesn't like being in my pictures, I will concentrate on the man on the left.

The man on the left and all those whom I have found near him represent a complex image of the youthful. Maybe somebody like him could be called a teenager, but yet all effects of adolescence are erased from this face, the pimples and the curiosity. Nor is this a juvenile delinquent; I rather see a stereotyped image of the self-absorbed middle-class youth. The gaze is cold, a bit arrogant maybe, and the bone structure of his face is perfect. Youth is about bodies and embodiment, and youthful bodies are about beauty: "Clothed, adorned with jewels, powdered, perfumed, and shaped, their bodies also bear the scars left by the struggle for survival or the longing for 'a good life'", writes Mamadou Diouf (2003: 9) on African youth culture. This body, of course, is not African, but from elsewhere (I suspect of European manufacture, most likely Dutch, because the shop where I took him belongs to a Dutch chain). There are no visible scars on this body, but the melancholic gaze and pouting mouth suggest that his struggle was such that it left scars inside. Youth is nostalgic, of course, and temperamental and foolish. He even is dressed as a fool. There is a good reason for this, because he actually stands in a large department shop that exclusively sells carnival costumes. This fits rather nicely, because youth is about the carnivalesque, and about inversion, losing it entirely and going berserk. Perhaps he is tired, because of all the partying.

*****

While young people and youthful bodies have been viewed as being particular in many societies and in different historical settings (e.g. Savage 2007), the invention of a youth culture that might be represented by the left man most likely has to be located in contexts of commodifiable cultural practices and consumer culture of late modernity. Even though we seem inclined to speak about youth culture mostly as protest, resistance, and subversion, this is also a discussion of practices, attitudes and concepts that are very much about the ubiquity of liminality and non-places (Augé 1992, Roberts 2016) on the one hand, and about the representation of desirable social prestige and privilege (e.g. Mintz 2015) on the other. Andreas Reckwitz, writing about the invention of creativity (2012), argues that the constant (re)making of the Self and its representation is very much a project of late modernity that bears in itself the contradictory notion that we are supposed to desire what we also are forced to: we want to be creative and we ought to be creative, in the ways we furnish our lives and design our bodies, for example. From this point of view, youth culture with all its creativity and yet also its consumerism is not something that belongs to young people, but a desirable form of representation for people of different ages.

This contribution is about what youth languages might be, and what they might not be. It is concerned with silences, tough and sweet words, with stereotyped imageries of young people and with the presences of those whose practices and appearances differ from commodified youth culture. It is concerned with the fear of decay and debris, and with gestures of colonial violence. By doing so, this text concentrates on African youth languages and the ways they tend to be presented and rationalized. Because of this particular interest, the urban character of youth language is put into the focus. Even though young people outside large cities share specific language practices – such as initiation languages and certain in-group codes (Hollington & Nassenstein 2015a, Storch 2016) – the phenomenon of youth language has been much associated with the urban, a concept that today seems rather unhelpful in explaining non-European social history (e.g. Kopytoff 1987). It does explain, however, much of the social history of the European archive on these practices and phenomena, as we shall see further below.

As a consequence, I seek to present an alternative take on communicative practices in African urban spaces, as practices that do not put societal norms and values into question as such but are seen as a form of representation of postcolonial experiences, firmly placed in an arena where deconstruction as a social stance can also be conceptualized as desirable and productive. From such alternative points of view, the topic of the discussion itself – (urban) youth language – is a problematic concept. It bases on ideas about YOUTH, LANGUAGE, and DIVERSITY that have been developed in linguistics by scholars based at metropolitan universities and research labs, and largely refer to the social environments of precisely these people. My contribution is concerned with how our own identity constructions as academics working on a particular topic and in a particular environment are relevant for the ways in which we fail to consider such representations and conceptualizations. It is therefore also concerned with issues of ownership and of participation, as well as with questions of positionality, of the researchers and the researched.

*****

(Urban) youth language is a language-that-isn't: incomprehensible to adults, broken, fast, strange. This metapragmatic narrative permeates much of the available linguistic work on how young people in Africa speak, and has only recently produced critical comments. In their introduction to the volume on *Youth Language Practices in Africa and Beyond* (2015a), Andrea Hollington and Nico Nassenstein provide an overview of what has been in the focus of the linguistics of urban youth languages in the past twenty years, and what seems problematic and unsatisfactory. Together with Klaus Beyer's essay on research on 'Youth language practices in Africa', in the same volume, and Eyo Mensah's (2016) article on the dynamics of African youth language, this text is one of the recent contributions that present a substantial portrayal of the state of the art in this field (outdating the pioneering and influential paper by Kießling & Mous 2004) and also raise critical issues. Hollington & Nassenstein observe, in spite of the substantial work they discuss, "a lack of recognition of and academic interest in these linguistic varieties, which can be associated with an often prevailing stigmatization of youth languages within society" (2015a: 1). This stigmatization most likely prevails in the young speakers' environments, as linguists working on these languages have developed a quite different attitude towards youth language: both the strong impact of variationist approaches (as in the stupendous reception of Labov's work) on descriptive and historical linguistics and the many case studies of individual urban youth languages attest for a strong interest shared among linguists in studying these practices, very often in order to come to a better understanding of innovation, agency in language change and its pace (also Hollington & Nassenstein 2015b). Yet, as these authors point out, such pre-existing approaches had in common that they were largely embedded in epistemes in linguistics that have been critiqued as limiting, eurocentric and rooted in power inequalities deriving from colonial contexts (e.g. Deumert & Storch forthcoming).

As a consequence, the above-cited authors (among an increasing number of others) highlight the necessity of coming to a more holistic understanding of language in general, rather seeing it as practice instead of structure, and including forms of expression such as clothing, music, gestures and placement (for an African[ist] perspective see e.g., Lüpke & Storch 2013). Moreover, language is seen as fluid, dynamic and not as an isolated thing, but as a part of changing repertoires. Hollington & Nassenstein (2015a: 2 ff.) furthermore write about the need to understand these language practices as ways of making secrecy, as a device of stylizing and constructing identity, challenging social norms and restrictions, and claiming agency against others. Even though such perspectives on language practice have now been adopted by a relatively large group of critical sociolinguists, most of the relevant theoretical work deals with practices shared by people in the global north, with only few contributions on African urban spaces (Deumert 2014, among others), and even less in relation to rural spaces (Mietzner & Storch 2015).

Critical work on issues such as naming languages, linguistics' ideologies, data mining practices, and linguists using binary concepts of YOUTH and ADULTHOOD, NORM and DEVIATION, CENTER and MARGIN would be a timely task in order to turn the geo-epistemological bias in (youth) linguistics into a productive debate.

Unless such a debate *also* leads to a reflected evaluation of linguists' practices of producing knowledge about urban youth languages – documenting, describing, analyzing them – these contributions remain helpful only to a certain extent. As Beyer (2015: 24 f.) mentions, the field is underwhelming in terms of its epistemological productivity (meaning with regards of both theory and methodology) as long as it relies on mostly Western-oriented frameworks.

There is, in all these attempts to define and critique, a curious moment of negation – language practices of the urban and the young are what they are not. They are socially undesirable, anti-normative, not existing like other languages but crossing borders more quickly, and they are not theorized adequately as other languages are claimed to be. This can perhaps be seen most clearly from continuously repeated observations about (urban) youth languages as language practices that change quickly, both in terms of structure and their social semiotics. The dynamics in which words and meanings change are usually taken as a core feature of these language practices as opposed to the seemingly slow, or non-existant, change in normal languages (which have linguistic standards). There is a notion of language change being out of control, anarchy and disorderly linguistic processes. Youth and the life on the street seem to shine through here, as if the uncontrollable creativity, multimodality, and fast pace of change could stand for the unruliness of lives lived in the edgelands of society – an image that is part of youthful performance as well as its representations. Gerrit Dimmendaal (2011: 249), very much to the point, suggests that this is precisely how (urban) youth languages and other language practices differ, namely in terms of the consciousness and deliberate engineering on the side of the speakers, which ultimately affect the pace and mode of change:

> In all these register-like languages, conscious language engineering appears to be involved, i.e. the speakers are controlling the language. These speech varieties contain special vocabulary, and phonological features that are emblematic of non-conformity to social norms in a community. [...] The function of the youth language itself is to defy the linguistic norm; yet the way this is established is by rapid and continuous renewal of antinorms, and so there is a paradox of norms.

Yet, these social semiotics seem to quickly and repeatedly change as well, as language practices such as Sheng and Naija were first conceptualized as (urban) youth language and urban vernacular respectively in linguistic work, and now have turned into their former opposites: Sheng is presently constructed as a new vernacular, which awaits standardization and incorporation into a national linguistic canon in Kenya, while Naija, through a different form of enregisterment, is suddenly presented as a language of the youth (Storch 2018).

And many African linguists suddenly find themselves in a very odd situation: raised in a norm-oriented and normative tradition, they now become standardizers of the ultimate non-standard. There is a historical context of all this, of both linguists' appraisals of the relevant language practices, and of the practices themselves. This context is colonialism, and the social uncertainty, disruption, and racialized injustice associated with it. The historical tableau in which the first accounts of urban youth languages have been depicted is one of colonial cities (Nassenstein 2014), colonial trade

networks (Storch 2018), European and American popular culture (Deumert & Mabandla 2015), and the colonial geographies of power inequality and racialized difference. Speaking disorderly in such contexts meant not simply to perform anti-identities in order to challenge the norms of one's parents and the repressive, corrupt, and self-righteous society they represented, as in postwar European-American youth culture, but served as a means of speaking back to colonial players. There is in these early performances a form of colonial mimesis that rather bluntly refers to hegemonic cultural practice of Europe; this is not about being anti-social, but about not even being part of the social system. Young people turned into marginalized street gangs, analphabets, into nameless people competing for few and badly-payed jobs, living in segregated townships, poor quarters, pitied, othered, and feared, are an experience made in colonial contexts and continue to be associated with the postcolony[1].

Mamadou Diouf, writing on postcolonial cultures, African youth and public spaces (2003), suggests that the predominantly "youthful population of Africa" (2003: 2) is portrayed in public discourse in a fundamentally contradictory way:

> Particularly in light of the failure of the nationalist political enterprise, which had set itself the double objective of economic development and social justice, African societies increasingly are looking to young people as instruments of change. The sense that they are uniquely positioned to speak a language of both universal rights and specific African cultures has led to continual redefinitions of their role in the social sphere. At the same time, however, the dramatic irruption of young people in the public and domestic spaces seems to have resulted in the construction of African youth as a threat, and to have provoked, within society as a whole, a panic that is simultaneously moral and civic. (Diouf 2003: 2-3)

The crisis of the nationalist project, Diouf further observes, persists since the 1970s, precisely the era of the youth revolution in the West, and has – in a transnational discursive formation – resulted in a replacement of a concept of youth as the "hope of the world" (Diouf 2003: 2) by a concept of the dangerous and decadent youth. This youth may make use of "spaces deserted by political power and outside the communities and their dominant cultures, to the advantage of the margins and the unoccupied areas in which emptiness and indetermination are dominant [...]" (Diouf 2003: 5), but this does not result in remaking society, or in a revolution. Rather, Diouf observes, a different form of 'doing youth' emerges (or happens), namely one in which opportunities emerge there where others didn't seem to want any:

> [The streets, suburbs, frontier regions and prohibited zones are] also a geography of possible developments outside the conventional images of success. Erasing the national territory and its histories, it offers African youth opportunities for entry onto the world stage, though usually in pain, tumult, and violence. As migrant or clandestine workers, or sometimes as musicians, artists, and "Golden Boys," they become actors

[1] This term is used in the sense of Mbembe (2001), who highlights the grotesque, contradictory, obscene, vulgar and carnivalesque as crucial experiences of those whose lives are led in a postcolonial world.

> in the theater of globalization, resolved to make their way into the world market's economy of desires and consumption. [...] The world that, paradoxically, is both inhabited by young Africans and escapes them is one of opportunity and abundance, in which they are perpetually on the margins and the borderlines of the increasingly xenophobic West. (Diouf 2003: 5–6)

There is a significant difference between discourse on young people as led in Europe, for example, and the discourse on postcolonial cultures as presented by Diouf; these young people do not move out of mainstream society but never were part of it, and their creativity and revolutionary gestures point at a nation that will not bear them anyway; this is not about a revolt against establishment, but about nothingness to deal with.

Ann L. Stoler and her colleagues (2013) see this as crucial and central for any understanding of the meanings of marginality, hybridity, messiness and disruption in postcolonial settings. And this produces distorted pictures that are equally destructive: the 'African youth' being left without a 'real language', but speaking a 'register' that emerges out of the conscious tattering of languages, maiming words and sounds, performing otherness as a form of linguistic cannibalism, are representations of key concepts of postcolonial thinking. They are embedded in an entire array of ambiguous representations and performed mimicry of the experience of the separation of the civilised and the savage, of language and jargon, and of development and poverty.

In an ironic way, the continuous dissociation of young people from society, or rather, bourgeois and rural classes alike produces ambivalent images, namely 'Western modernity' and 'African primitivism' merged – a strangely unabashed way of using colonial imagery and thought. Like tropical moss overgrowing colonial buildings, humidity wearing down architecture, (urban) youth languages here turn out to be imperial debris, rubble piling up. And this debris needs to be controlled, or removed, as debris and rubble are reminders of the destructiveness of the present; making them visible will "contribute to a collective awakening from the nightmare of the bourgeois dream world" (Gordillo 2014: 27). Hence, this language that isn't, speech ruined and made into rubble, in order to symbolize anti-ness, or rather: nothingness, evokes precisely what Gastón R. Gordillo calls the "fear of the crack":

> The void that the fetish of the ruin seeks to conceal from mainstream sensibilities is the perceived nothingness of rubble and, in general, of the haunting of a space devoid of the positivity cherished by the cult of full objects: skyscapers, cars, malls, monuments, gadgets. This fear acquires its most micriscopic expression in the fear of the crack, an attitude that sees the ruination of modern places "as the enemy of human beings" (Ginsberg 2004, 287). The scholarship on ruins has examined the modernist anxiety about ruins from multiple perspectives, yet its class components are often overlooked. Berman wrote that one of the features that distinguishes the bourgeoisie as a class is that it "cannot bear" to look into the moral, social, and physical "abyss" created by its own destructiveness (1982, 100–101). The fetishization of ruins is one of the ways in which the rubble created by capitalist and imperial expansion, and thereby the abyss generated by their destruction of space, is deflected and disregarded. (Gordillo 2014: 254)

As the afterlife of colonial destruction and imperial ruination, language becomes its own negation. And while this is an experience, and a creative practice, that is shared by people of different age and different class, it is young people who are most associated with the role of the linguistic cannibal, the wretched and obscene annihilator of norm and order. This is the most ironic and yet the most profitable twist in the story – silenced youth, disfigured and expelled from society. There is, this seems to suggest, no future left, with the youth turning formerly lively spaces and practices into nothingness.

Why, one then might want to ask, is the image of youth languages such a successful one? What makes it appealing and why should so many different communities in postcolonial settings make use of various urban youth languages, which are visible, named, audible and semiotically salient? In his essay on the constructedness of adolescent language, Crispin Thurlow seeks an explanation. Rather than affirming the assumption that there is, after all, such a thing like 'youth language', Thurlow points at the multitude of ways of speaking and cultural practices that can be meaningful to young people:

> Although it is still very common to hear reference to phrases like youth culture, many contemporary scholars [...] now reject the tendency to present young people a uniformly oppositional and monolithic in terms of their social norms and cultural values. From this more critical perspective, it is acknowledged that adolescent 'development' and 'trajectories' can only ever be described as patterned generalizations; that for every young person whose life is marked by the proverbial sex, drugs and rock and roll, there are countless others whose lives do not feature unwanted pregnancies, substance misuses and criminal activities. (Thurlow 2005: 2)

Regardless of which label is used in order to make young people look uniform ('youth', 'adolescents', 'teenagers') and what is seen as defining criterion in terms of the particularity of young people in terms of appearance, activities, attitudes, and so forth, Thurlow argues, there are so many differences, speaking of individual persons, that any generalization becomes problematic at one point of the discussion. Moreover, not much of what young people seem to share amongst peers is an exclusive feature of the youth. Even the search for identity, being one of the prime arguments for young people's need for anti-language and other such registers, is a lifelong project and not one of our earlier years. Hence, we will need to rethink youth as a label and a period in a lifespan in order to come to a better understanding of whose practices are actually portrayed in descriptions of urban youth languages. The problem of using particular labels and presenting a particular group in a particular way is, in short, that this almost necessarily results in

> overcategoriz[ing] people and, in this case, to exaggerate social distances between young people and other people. In terms of social identity theory, we know that this is often all that is needed for adults to construe and experience their communication with young people as a form of intergroup or even intercultural communication. (Thurlow 2005: 4)

This asks, I assume, for a change of the topic of our discussions, and for thinking more about context and contact, conversation

and confusion. Adulthood, Thurlow (2005: 5) suggests, can also be understood, in a less hegemonic way, as ruination and cracks hidden under paint and concealed, with the fear of rubble lingering on underneath the surface: "That we, as adults, learn to feel it in silence – or rather feel it silenced – is another matter. We simply learn to be 'grown up' about our uncertainty and confusion in the struggle to tell a meaningful, coherent story about ourselves." To take this serious as part of our ideologized demand to categorize others, to negate the constant change and decay which we produce ourselves, and dust and rubble emerging from our lifes and work, helps considerably to find new ways of deconstructing received stereotypes, such as those of young urban African people and ourselves as experts who look at them, using a bird's eye perspective that helps us to ignore the fact that we look at individual people. Our fear of cracks, decay and ruination, Thurlow writes, translates into the construction of "scapegoat generations", young people who do not know any longer about doing things right:

> [...] young people (and especially young men and boys) are too often defined as inadequate communicators or language users and it is not infrequently that one hears the exaggerated folk-linguistic complaint, 'I just can't understand what teenagers are saying these days – it's like a different language!' [...] communication between young people and adults is thus all too frequently construed in both public and academic discourse as *intergroup* communication. (Thurlow 2005: 7)

Yet, there is a strange persistence of the discourse on the idea of a generation gap. Thurlow, among others, argues that the media and the popular entertainment industry play a significant role here. Moreover, in an intensively semioticized world and in postmodern contexts, design, labels and imagery have become more important than the actual objects themselves. The commodification of the idea of a generation gap, of youth as a separate part of society and of overemphasized practices of young people here is a politically and economically profitable strategy, which is used both in media representations and in other contexts, such as advertisements and other means of disciplining people. And youth in such commodifying contexts is stereotyped as an attack on adulthood, the inability to speak (properly), unidimensionally negative and different. Moreover, youth as the Other, a being unfinished but in transition and not yet integrated in society is here constructed as yet another ambiguous foil – one that appeals to our hidden desires of breaking free from social constraints, shedding received humilation and disciplining.

Thus, the dominant picture of young people in African cities in this particular discourse of academic approaches and commodification shows tough hip hoppers, street boys, sex workers, ganja smokers, people hanging around at bars and as revolutionary students on campuses. This stands indeed in considerable contrast to other available representations of young people in urban contexts, either constructed by the pictured young people themselves, or by the media. These alternative pictures show a kind of urban normal life that does not seem so interesting for music producers, film makers, linguists and others. It seems as if we miss out that what is not so easily commodifiable, not so salient. Instead, we seem to reproduce, in a semiotically complex way, notions of 'anti-language' and revolt

as part of the parcel of commodification: this is, in the end, something that does not tell us much about young people and their habits of speaking, but about linguists' stylizing themselves, trying to be cool, to collect some very colorful bugs and butterflies – this is, as part of the 'great tradition', a form of orientalism and exoticism in linguistics.

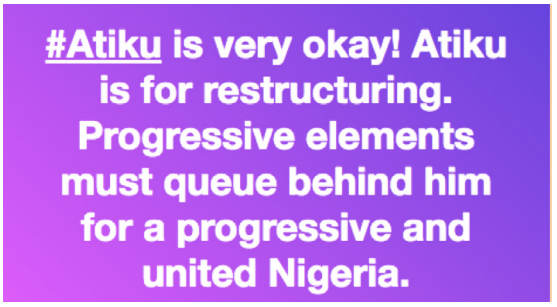
What we might miss altogether is that what Diouf suggests as an utterly real new language of the African youth:

> Thus they are defining new modalities of action and proposing a new language in their musical, iconographic, and military expressions, and sometimes in political, economic, and religious life [...]. The best illustration of these youthful gestures of self-creation is the extraordinary vitality of "born-again" Christian movements and sects, in particular Pentecostalism, and the reform-minded efforts of indigenous Muslims or the subversive form of Islam that is often called "fundamentalist". (Diouf 2003: 7)

Not, in other words, language practices that help to construct super-virile 'boys', as well as either oversexed or invisible 'girls', counter-bourgeois attitudes and anti-identity, but language that is part of religious practices and thought. Yet, the discussion among those who seek self-creation often is about how one is seen by others – as decadent and obscene for example: creativity and self-authorship require a look at the mirror and a gaze at the monstrous Other. This gaze is not without any gain. It produces solutions, which however seem far from what professionally drawn images of the young in Africa tend to show. This has not been unoticed though, as a large number of contributions on the language of Pentecostal songs and services and other communicative practices situated in religiously inspired self-creation illustrate (e.g. Tranberg Hansen 2015, Ugot & Offiong 2013, among others). This work is often presented by linguists who work at African universities and who do not claim to explicitely work on youth language – academic work dedicated to the study of African youth languages and work on young Africans' new language (in the sense of Diouf) seem to be two different genres.

A closer look at expressions of self-creation elsewhere shows how the gaze into the objectifying mirror produces constant counter-images. The "hope of the world" who had turned into the abjected inhabitants of non-places in the representations of the young are frequently, in various contexts, turned into new hope – of the state, global politics, and so on. This year, in Abuja, Nigeria's capital, the youth are, in a nation-wide movement, portrayed as *young professionals*, Golden Boys and Girls throughout, who are representations of a new form of an elite, who stand behind a future president. The *Atikulate* movement emerged out of the campaign of the politician Atiku Abubakar. After having left his former party and joining the People's Democratic Party (PDP), Atiku relatively quickly turned into a figure that symbolized new ideals and futures to many. His name soon was used to coin the emblematic term *Atikulate*, which is now not only used in context of the 2019 election campaigns, but also signifies anything "positive" and "change" in relation to an aspiring youth:

> [...] a youth movement, 'IamAtikulated2019' emerged in Abuja with the sole objective of drumming support 'For the candidacy of Atiku Abubakar as President of the Federal Republic



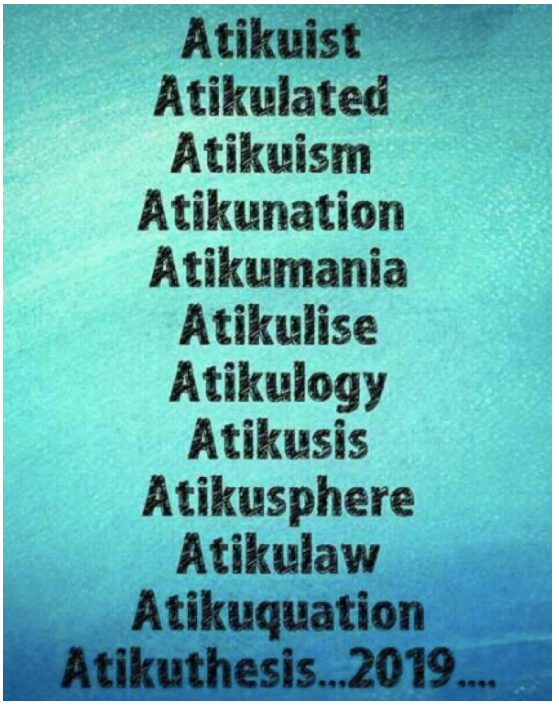


Fig. 1–3: Atikulated posts[3]

> of Nigeria come 2019.' [...] To this group of young employed youths, the term, 'Atikulated' connotes sundry layers of meanings. According to the national coordinator of the movement, Ike Bishop Okoronkwo, the term is synonymous with excellence, honesty, capacity, the chosen one, unifier, bridge builder among others. [...] Thus, while introducing themselves, members revealed the depth of their belief in the former Vice President by prefixing their names with the new political buzzword. 'My name is Atikulated Ike Bishop Okoronkwo' he said as another gave his as Atikulated Gbenga Akanji. (Yakubu 2018[2])

This image of the youth contradicts those representations of young Africans that are usually relevant in youth language research. These people happen to be young, but they are integrated (for example in a populist movement, in power structures at the metropoles), employed, not members of the anti-society, no artists and hip hoppers. These are forms of representation that rather fundamentally challenge the cool and Western images of African youth, and yet the imagery that unfolds around the movement strikingly resembles stereotyped images of youthful presences among the wild publics of the web, youths' communication strategies and creativity: there is the meme and hashtag, the motto t-shirt and the linguistic creativity, all circulated on social media.

The boundaries between what might be 'real' and what might be a performance for

[2] See [https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/02/atikulated-new-political-buzzword/].

[3] 1,2:[https://www.facebook.com/ATIKU-Youths-FORUM-2019-285933035083831/, 3: https://twitter.com/The-Atikulates/status/886888880175271936].

the campaign are blurred; perhaps they are not even relevant to those who play with the new words that are brought into circulation here. Rather, I think that this is part of a much larger representation game – something that creates meaning out of itself, by placing oneself in a particular discursive environment, by stylizing one's communicative and physical presences with emblematic words and clothes, and by positioning oneself in the vicinity of critique (on government, coloniality, populism, etc.). In other words, the forms of the signs that mark or announce a particular communicative event are already invested with so much meaning themselves so that rather than being semiotically transparent they create representative excess. Representation is so strong here that positionality and emblematicity seem to do the work of conveying what is actually said – about the youth as the hope of the world and as its renewers. An author who calls himself *Comr[ade] Eddy* has written more extensively about these meanings of 'youth' in a blog that is dedicated to the *Atikulate* movement. In a post on the meanings of youth, he suggests that the term and its semiotic context are fundamentally underspecified: "let me quickly drop in this stanza that, Youth is that clay which can be moulded in either shape one wants. In my belief, this is the sole reason for both exploitation and utilization of youth in the destruction and construction of any nation respectively".[4]

Why, one seems in urge to ask, is this translucent construct represented in a particular uniform way that now seems to be almost canonic in sociolinguistics and descriptive work on youth languages? What is so convincing in portraying youthful speakers as being foremost interested in sexist gendered talk (the wordlists of sexist misogynic terminology in youth languages are legion, cf. Hollington & Nassenstein 2015a and other recent work for overviews)? What makes them speak 'anti-languages' when there is so much meaning in representation itself, and so much play with positionality? It has fequently been observed that the rapid change of linguistic construction strategies, words and styles might be the most striking and the most characteristic feature of urban youth languages. This has often been explained with the linguistic creativity that is associated with young people, the norm-breaking of adolescents, and the necessity of keeping secrets among peers. However, sociolinguistic approaches to different aspects of linguistic creativity demonstrate that this is not a privilege of young people, but has to do with specific contexts, power relations, as well as with notions of linguistic ownership and control.

I assume that there are two things that come into play here, and both have to do with the positionality of the researchers and linguists themselves, who work on young people's language practices in a particular way. One point is, as already suggested above, that topics can be 'cool' and 'sexy', and youth languages and cultures are such topics, for a number of reasons. For example, they might be easy to promote and market because they are so closely connected to mainstream popular discourse and are connected to cultural practices that seem attractive anyway, such as music and clubbing. But first and foremost, youthful language practices are what we all know

[4] [https://headlinetracks.wixsite.com/news/single-post/2018/02/02/Role-of-Youths-In-Nation-Building-The-Atikulated-Perspective].

already and what we do ourselves – however, usually outside academic spaces, at home or when we are with friends. Youth language, in other words, is also a description of our other linguistic Self, and us before our professional lives. To invest professional interest in youth languages therefore might not be so much about giving *them* a voice, but about giving *ourselves* a voice. This is about 'data' that suddenly relates to personal experiences, and about faintly making our real voices heard that exist somewhere underneath the nicely composed academic text. If this is a reason for the ways in which youth languages are presented in academic work, it feels legitimate and necessary – writing about transgression within a hierarchic and restricting environment is liberating, I think, and reflected.

Yet, I assume there is another, less transparent motivation for the ways in which youth language is constructed as particular and peculiar. What strikes me is that so many contributions do not only highlight the gendering and transgression in youth language, but also the creativity correlated to it. Even though language practice as such is increasingly understood as fundamentally creative in sociolinguistics (e.g. Swann & Deumert 2017), youth language practices tend to be seen as extraordinary in terms of the creativity invested in them. Moreover, there is anti-ness in such an unusual creativity (e.g. Maribe & Brookes 2014, Brookes & Lekgoro 2014), as well artistry and urban-ness (e.g. Mose 2013, Milu 2015). The latter, I suppose, is the actual feature ascribed to youth language that is crucial for its sociohistorical emergence as DIFFERENT, REMARKABLE and AMUSING, yet also DISTRESSING and OBSCURE. The city as the site of youth and youth language has its very particular semiotics in the European context, in which these imageries are still situated.

Cities are not only highly semiotized spaces, where linguistic landscapes turn into a form of symbolic architecture that partly exists detached from built environment. Saskia Sassen, in her essay 'Does the city have speech' (2013), argues that cities are also places where social and political processes can take place as detached from the institutions and control of the nation state. Cities, she argues, have speech in a particular way: they speak back. In another text, Sassen discusses how urban subjects are made in these spaces. In global cities, this happens in different ways than before, she observes:

> Cities are one of the key sites where new norms and new identities are *made*. They have been such sites at various times and places, and under diverse conditions. This role can become strategic in particular times and places, as is the case today in global cities. Current conditions in these cities are creating not only new structurations of power but also operational and rhetorical openings for new political actors who may long have been invisible or without voice. A key element of the argument here is that the localization of strategic components of globalization in these cities means that the disadvantaged can engender new forms of contesting globalized corporate power, including right there in their neighborhoods. Critical in this process is the capability of urban space to produce difference: that being powerless does not necessarily mean being invisible or impotent. The disadvantaged, especially in global cities, can gain "presence" in their engagement with power but also vis-à-vis each other. (Sassen 2017: 37 f.)

The production of presence as a key political practice may well serve as a crucial moment of linking the visibility of the powerless in global cities with the availability of stereotyped images and means of commodification of young people and their social, linguistic and cultural practices. Cities on the one hand have the capacity to "generate norms and subjects that can escape the constraints of dominant power systems – such as the nation-state, the War on Terror, the growing weight of racism in a national political culture" (Sassen 2017: 43), but they also are arenas where presence and attention turn into valuable currencies that help to remake these new subjects into commodifiable objects. Hence, any performance of youth identity, urban youth language, counter culture, and so on, is filled with multiple meanings, as a semiotically complex action and event (Mose 2013). It expresses postcolonial continuities and experiences, constructions and ascriptions by linguists and players of the media and culture industry alike, gestures of subordination and revolt of individual performers and speakers, ideas about how the imageries of others can be made useful for one's own constructions of identity.

But these semiotic connotations of the urban have a social history. The meanings attributed to the city also relate to, and emanate from, a much larger canon of texts – than, for example, is suggested by the work cited in the references sections of sociolinguistic studies. These meanings and their sources are less obvious, because they are partly based on texts that are now beginning to fall out of the canon, such as literary work of the 19th century. In other words, the textual weaving from which these imageries of the creative urban youth emerge is one that is now bleaching a bit, not only because the language of these much older texts begins to exhaust us with all its unfamiliar words and symbols, but also because today, we suffer from different diseases than those described in these texts.

This deserves, I assume, a closer look. The young urban creative, whose creativity (or talent, or creative potential) stands out and ultimately results in change that affects others – consider, for example the *saccadic leader* (Labov 2001) – is (even though the young creative appears contemporary, a figure of late modernity) a concept of the nineteenth century. The 'innovative youth' has a social history too, and the intellectual text production and ideology surrounding this figure has its sociohistorical context as well. This is what the inherently static sociolinguistics of variation appears to ignore – that linguistic variants, saccadic leaders, urban spaces, etc. are concepts that form part of very dynamic ideologies and thought that must be historicized in order to be productive topics of a discussion. And, as I will suggest further below, the stereotyped image of the young urban creative is, like the dehumanizing images of the Black Other that form part of colonial constructs and phantasies, a form of alterity, albeit one that is directed at the *Other within* and not at the Other elsewhere. In his work on the unreflected and unquestioned epistemic violence that continues to produce monstrous Others, Frantz Fanon suggested to "reexamine the question of cerebral reality, the brain mass of humanity" (2004 [1963]: 237), and by asking for a reexamination of collective consciousness, and its deconstruction, Fanon was directing the gaze to what that actually was. I find it very inspiring to think about the semiotic connotations of youth, namely being excessively creative, decadent, criminal, and

distressing, along the lines of Fanon's postcolonial critique. Interestingly, these constructions have much to do with the social change that affected Europeans by the time the colonial project was firmly afoot. In Europe's fast growing urban environments of the 19th century, configurations of the Other were increasingly informed by concepts and ideologies of the disciplinary state (Foucault 1972 & 1975) and the transgressive individual as othered, expectorated and medicalized. There is a remarkable twist in the representation of the genius by that time; before, the trangressive ingenious artist was conceptualized as being outside the grasp of moral normativity and the state – now, the notion of the ingenue was that of the *sick* transgressive. And precisely this concept of ingenious creatives turned into a narrative that formed part of the classic canon of the subsequent generations of bourgeois audiences. Everybody who became acquainted with the string quartet *Der Tod und das Mädchen* by Franz Schubert would also have learned about the circumstances under which the composer worked when he finished the piece in 1824: suffering from syphilis in its advanced stages, Schubert's physical conditions must have been pitiful, and yet he was able to do intellectual and creative work in an unparalleled way, in terms of its originality as well as its dimensions, before he finally succumbed to the disease (Winkle 1997). The trope of the fatally sick artist who, suffering from a disease acquired at the margins of society (in brothels and on the street), achieves the height of his (almost never her) creative power before perishing, was both romanticized and turned into a subversive text. The poetic work of Lautréamont, Baudelaire, Zola, Flaubert, Keats, Poe, among many others, bases on the experience of ingeniuty as the result of the veneral disease or treats motifs that relate to them. Later, Thomas Mann in *Doktor Faustus* (1947), would create a hero – Adrian Leverkühn – who craves an infection with syphilis in order to turn into a genius.

I assume that the novels of Baudelaire or Mann are now less known to middle-class audiences then they were before; however, the motifs of such work continue to shape collective consciousnesses, as do representations of creative people (musicians, hip hop artists, etc.) as people who live their hyper-intensive lives on the margins of society, as ingenious or saccadic or whatever leaders of change. The concept of urban youth languages is one of languages spoken by members of street gangs and prostitutes, as anti-languages, and as languages that are excessive in the creativity that shapes them, that refer to secrecy and gender inequality, and that emerge out of African cities that – in the same collective consciousness – resemble the European cities of *then* (cities that are not yet fully electrified, sanitized, tarred). This concept, that underlies a large body of academic work on African youth languages, strikingly parallels those bourgeois narratives on the syphilitic genius: YOUTH LANGUAGE here is SICK LANGUAGE, beautiful and iriscident but fading quickly, each giving way to the next spectacular one. It seems that the urban and the sick belong to each other in this imagery, because we faintly remember those bohemians of times long gone by. The urban as a space that is thought as being destructive and as removing roots, health, safety, and so on, is the location of language that is connected to sick, self-destroying youth whose legacy, however, is what Mary Louise Pratt (1991) calls the sublime – the unexpected, novel, emotionally moving and particular in cultural production.

And while working away with our unconscious collective brain mass, we continue to construct such figures, who are no longer fading away because of an infection with syphilis, but because of deadly drug addictions and bipolar conditions. And perhaps, we become infected as well – with a linguists' virus that makes us search frantically for yet more spectacular languages of the young and broken.

The *Atikulated* young urban professionals in Abuja and the youthful members of religious movements do not fit in here. The historical context and colonial experience on which the language practices shared by urban people are *also* based, the processes of ruination that affect, as a consequence of this experience, individual lives, and the continuing removal, through commodification and consumerism, of control over resources and strategies that would help in finding a solution may as well suggest that language practices change so fast in order to escape precisely this, the control and violence executed by others. Speaking in a different way is therefore not only a matter of not being understood by others, but also one of not being owned by them.

The multitude of meanings emerging out of the excessive labeling and play with representation, and the meanings associated with performances of postcolonial experiences are part of a huge number of possibilities and ascriptions – ambiguous, diverse and confusing. This is a noisy concert, which silences the voices of individual young people to the ears of those who do not share their lives.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Nico Nassenstein and Andrea Hollington for their many helpful comments and for sharing their ideas with me, to the participants of the Critical Youth Language Workshop, to Angi Mietzner and Chris Bongartz for their constant input, and to Penelope Allsobrook for her many ideas and suggestions.

References

Augé, Marc. 1992. *Non-lieux*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.

Beyer, Klaus. 2015. Youth language practices in Africa: achievements and challenges. In: Nassenstein, Nico & Andrea Hollington, (eds.), *Youth Language Practices in Africa and Beyond*, pp. 23–49. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Brookes, Heather & Tshepiso Lekgoro. 2014. A social history of urban male youth varieties in Stirtonville and Vosloorus, South Africa. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 32.2: 149–159.

Deumert, Ana. 2014. *Sociolinguistics and Mobile Communication*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Deumert, Ana & Nkululeko Mabandla. 2015. Heritage as dust – minuscule, mobile and multiple. Paper presented at the Conference on *Heritage in Practice – Conflicting Concepts and Changing Power Relations*, Cologne.

Deumert, Ana & Anne Storch. Forthcoming. Colonial Linguistics – Then and Now. In Deumert, Ana, Nick Shepherd & Anne Storch (eds.), *Colonial Linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dimmendaal, Gerrit J. 2011. *Historical Linguistics and the Comparative Study of African Languages*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.

Diouf, Mamadou. 2003. Engaging postcolonial cultures: African youth and public space. *African Studies Review* 46.2: 1–12.

Fanon, Frantz. 2004 [1963]. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove.

Foucault, Michel. 1972. *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*. Paris: Gallimard.

Foucault, Michel. 1975. *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Gallimard.

Gordillo, Gastón R. 2014. *Rubble. The Afterlife of Destruction*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Hollington, Andrea & Nico Nassenstein. 2015a. Youth language practices in Africa as creative manifestations of fluid repertoires and markers of speakers' social identity. In Nassenstein, Nico & Andrea Hollington (eds.), *Youth Language Practices in Africa and Beyond*, pp. 1–22. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Hollington, Andrea & Nico Nassenstein. 2015b. Conclusion and outlook: taking new directions in the study of youth language practices. In Nassenstein, Nico & Andrea Hollington (eds.), *Youth Language Practices in Africa and Beyond*, pp. 345–356. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Kießling, Roland & Maarten Mous. 2004. Urban youth languages in Africa. *Anthropological Linguistics* 46.3: 303–341.

Kopytoff, Igor (ed.). 1987. *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Labov, William. 2001. *Principles of Linguistic Change* (Language in Society). Oxford: Blackwell.

Lüpke, Friederike & Anne Storch. 2013. *Repertoires and Choices in African Languages*. Boston/Berlin: Mouton De Gruyter.

Mann, Thomas. 1947. *Doktor Faustus*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Maribe, Tebogo & Heather Brookes. 2014. Male youth talk in the construction of black lesbian identities. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 32.2: 199–214.

Mbembe, Achille 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Mensah, Eyo. 2016. The dynamics of youth language in africa: an introduction. *Sociolinguistic Studies* 10.1-2: 1–14.

Mietzner, Angelika & Anne Storch. 2015. A multilingual standard: On super-diverse repertoires in rural Uganda. Paper presented at the conference *The Sociolinguistics of Globalization: (De)centring and (De)standardization*, University of Hong Kong, 3–6 June 2015.

Milu, Esther. 2015. Translingual practice as a strategic construction of identity: the case of three Kenyan hip-hop artists. Paper presented at the *2nd African Urban*

and Youth Language Conference, Nairobi, 11–13 December 2015.

Mintz, Steven. 2015. *The Prime of Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Mose, Caroline. 2013. 'Swag' and 'cred': representing hip-hop in the African city. *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6.3: 106–132.

Nassenstein, Nico. 2014. *A Grammatical Study of the Youth Language Yanké.* Munich: LINCOM.

Pratt, Mary Louise, 1991. Arts of the contact zone. *Profession*: 33–40.

Reckwitz, Andreas. 2012. *Die Erfindung der Kreativität - Zum Prozess gesellschaftlicher Ästhetisierung.* Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

Roberts, Les. 2016. Inhabiting the Edge: Trickserism and Radical Liminality. *The Double Negative.* [http://www.thedoublenegative.co.uk/]

Sassen, Saskia. 2013. Does the city have speech? *Public Culture* 25.2: 209–221.

Sassen, Saskia. 2017. Beyond differences of race, religion, class: making urban subjects. In Mostafavi, Mohsen (ed.), *Ethics of the Urban*, pp. 35–46. Zurich: Lars Müller.

Savage, Jon. 2007. *Teenage: The Creation of Youth Culture*. London: Viking.

Stoler, Anne Laura (ed.). 2013. *Imperial Debris*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Storch, Anne. 2016. Communicative Repertoires in African Languages. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Linguistics.* [http://linguistics.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199384655.001.0001/acrefore-9780199384655-e-155].

Storch, Anne. 2018. Ruination and amusement – dialect, youth and revolution in Naija. In Bassiouney, Reem (ed.), *Identity and Dialect Performance*, pp. 303–320. Oxon/New York: Routledge.

Swann, Joan & Ana Deumert (eds.). 2017. Sociolinguistics and Language Creativity. Special Issue of *Language Sciences*.

Thurlow, Crispin. 2005. Deconstructing adolescent communication. In Williams, Angie & Crispin Thurlow (eds.), *Talking Adolescence: Perspectives on Communication in the Teenage Years*, pp. 53–72. New York: Peter Lang.

Tranberg Hansen, Karen. 2015. Cities of youth: post-millenial cases of mobility and sociality. In Ressnick, Danielle & James Thurlow (eds.), *African Youth and the Persistence of Marginalization*, pp. 67–84. Abingdon/New York: Routledge.

Ugot, Mercy I. & Offiong Ani Offiong. 2013. Language and communication in the Pentecostal church of Nigeria: the Calabar axis. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 3.1: 148–154.

Winkle, Stefan. 1997. *Geißeln der Menschheit – Kulturgeschichte der Seuchen.* Düsseldorf/Zurich: Artemis & Winkler.