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Youth languages and the dynamics of language change: The story of *aguu* and the Acholi youth language Leb pa Bwulu

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1. Introduction

In recent years, studying "youth languages" has become a special focus in research concerned with the impact of social dynamics on the shape and use of language. Concepts like the often-cited "anti-language", the linguistic representation of a group in opposition to the dominant society (Halliday 1978), underline this idea that these linguistic practices are expressions of special social constructs in specific relations to other forms of social formation and organization. They are distinct from other linguistic practices like jargons or argots as they are based on the extent of the manipulations of their respective base language and the expansions of contexts they are used in (Kießling & Mous 2004). This shows that they are considered to be somewhat exceptional. Their theoretical creativity as the driver for linguistic change is a key part of the language ideologies and the identities they help to construct (Kießling & Mous 2004; Storch 2011; Nassenstein & Hollington 2015). Inevitably, inventing new

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words and finding different and innovative techniques to manipulate the language carries its own worth and prestige among speakers of these variants, as it is more than just a tool for communication and, as Blommaert (2005: 72) notes, subsequently becomes a form of a "cultural commodity".

This characterization of linguistic practices which possess a strong value for constructions of identities that arise from highly dynamic social environments lead to the question as to which extent current concepts are actually capable of capturing underlying social dynamics and whether the term "youth language" is an appropriate label for these linguistic practices. To address these questions, this article describes the emergence and evolution of Leb pa Bwulu, based on qualitative field research done between 2014 and 2016.

2. Youth language practice in Gulu

Leb pa Bwulu is the name of an Acholi-based linguistic practice spoken in Gulu, the largest city of Northern Uganda. The number of speakers is yet unknown as it is still in the process of expansion. It presumably came into existence during or directly following the end of the civil war in the region in 2008 among young men and boys that were either abandoned by their families or voluntarily left their villages to come to Gulu. Over the past few years this linguistic practice was also picked up by musicians, dancers and comedians, leading to its spread throughout the town's young population. Like the name, which translates as 'language of the youth', indicates, Leb pa Bwulu can be classified as a youth language, similar to linguistic practices documented for many other cities in Africa. Speakers of this linguistic practice come

from various social backgrounds and include both genders, as it seems that their ethnic background as Acholi is the main common denominator. This perception of Acholi as a youth language misses many of the typical characteristics regarding the social backgrounds of its speakers, and its socio-pragmatic context is however not a sign of local social cohesion or a lack of discriminatory social patterns, but an expression of social change, developing urban identities, national and local power relations as well as linguistic appropriation.

3. Origins of Leb pa Bwulu

The genesis of Leb pa Bwulu as a linguistic practice is most likely connected to the decades of lasting conflict between armed rebel groups from the Acholi region and the central government in Kampala. The conflict finally ended in 2008 following the (unsuccessful) peace talks in Juba, after which the last remnants of the Lord's Resistance Army led by the Joseph R. Kony, fled towards the rainforests of the northern Congo and the Central African Republic. Previously, life in the region was dictated by the presence of the Ugandan military and nightly raids by members of rebel groups. During that time the town grew massively in size as people were forced to flee their villages to seek shelter. During that period, the population increased from 40,000 to currently over 150,000 people. Among the newcomers were many children and teenagers without family or social ties in Gulu. At the same time, it became a hotspot for international aid agencies. After the war had ended, the town retained its status as a center of international aid and development workers and many who had fled their villages from the LRA decided to stay (Branch 2008). These

social conditions became the breeding ground for Leb pa Bwulu. Among the refugees that had remained in town were many young men, often without access to education, work or local social support.

Parts of the vocabulary of Leb pa Bwulu is reflective of their life, trying to survive in this difficult environment not only during or directly following the insurgency, but also in the present time. It includes terminology about drugs, crime and alcohol – elements of which are often connected to the social reality of people in socially marginalized positions, as for instance Seddon (2006) noted. Several terms for chewing mirra or khat (like *sagga* or *gomba*) exist, a plant with amphetamine-like effects that is in Gulu mostly used by young men of low social status. It also includes words connected to criminal activities, like the terms *vunga* for 'stealing' or *dom* for 'jail'.

Besides the many words dealing with living on the street and drug use they also coined the term *aguu* as a name they gave to themselves. Roughly translating as 'hustler', it denoted someone who would do anything to get by. The term functioned as a symbol for their self-identification as outsiders and socially isolated, not only within Gulu, but also from the complex social relations of the Acholi family structures. In these, every ethnic Acholi is part of a hierarchical system in which the elders, the male heads of each family tree, have power, but also responsibility for each member of their extended family. Due to the conflict, this system was severely disrupted and incapable of providing needed support. These young men therefore positioned themselves outside these traditional structures and created their identity with their own language as its emblematic marker and representation

of their life style. This community of practice not only included the young ethnic Acholi, but also members of other ethnic groups who had found their way to Gulu, as their identity was based less on their ethnic affiliations than their social positions as young men outside the general social norms and structures. Nonetheless, due to most of them being Acholi and often also monolingual, the local language of this region has remained its base language and the source for most manipulations.

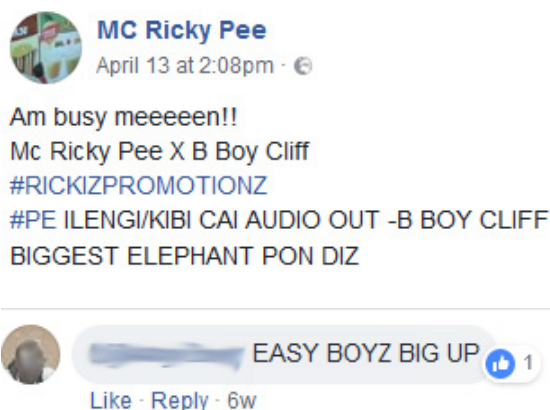## 4. Social change, urban growth and re-branding

Following the end of the conflict, international development agencies and NGOs established local support networks which were dedicated to victims of the insurgence. For many of the young people living in the streets this meant access to housing and education through aid programs. At the same time, traditional family networks managed to recover to the point that social support was again available to the previously isolated. This not only led to the core group of Leb pa Bwulu speakers shrinking in numbers, but also to the language entering the circles of education and higher prestige as former members of this marginalized group gained access to other networks.

The former street kids retained their linguistic practices, leading to the language spreading into other social circles and the expansion of its vocabulary. Instead of representing the social reality of living on the streets, it became a signifier of urban youth culture in general. This new, expanded group of speakers also included musicians and other artists, who made use of the creative potential of Leb pa Bwulu. Hip-Hop artist Judas was

one of the front runners of this development. A former street child himself, he created rap songs which heavily featured the use of youth language vocabulary, capturing their identities and attitudes.

The creative nature of Leb pa Bwulu also inspired competition among musicians on who could introduce new words into the language. For musicians like Judas or Small Pin Charger, this was a central motive when writing lyrics and also during their performances, as they tried to increase their prestige within the community. This overall development also shows in the vocabulary of many Leb pa Bwulu speakers who are not living in the street and have access to education and other linguistic resources. The vocabulary shows strong influences from English and other globally recognized languages such as Jamaican Patois, as the process of linguistic innovation differs from the process initially employed by the first speakers. Thus, terms like *wagwan*, meaning 'how are you doing' or 'what is going on?', *big up* as an expression of support, or *pon* for 'on' find their place within linguistic practices under the label of Leb pa Bwulu.

Fig. 1. Facebook post by musician MC Ricky Pee and a reply from one of his followers

MC Ricky Pee
April 13 at 2:08pm · 🌐

Am busy meeeeen!!
Mc Ricky Pee X B Boy Cliff
#RICKIZPROMOTIONZ
#PE ILENGI/KIBI CAI AUDIO OUT -B BOY CLIFF
BIGGEST ELEPHANT PON DIZ

EASY BOYZ BIG UP 👍 1
Like · Reply · 6w

Global media, including music and TV have left clear marks in the linguistic practices of many young people and also left imprints on local youth language practices. These changes of who the speakers of Leb pa Bwulu are, how the vocabulary is constructed and in which ways it is used also came with changes in expressed identities and ideologies. Previously, ethnic elements were not of major importance, but they now became a central part for many of the speakers. As a reflection of the conflict between the Acholi and other ethnic groups from central and southwestern Uganda, Leb pa Bwulu was put in opposition to Luganda and Luyaaye, the Luganda-based youth language variety spoken in Kampala. By expressing a sense of "northerness," it functions as an "anti-language" towards the perceived political and cultural dominance of the capital. It has also largely reduced its male dominance, as girls and young women are just as likely as boys and men to make use of this linguistic practice. Words that denote criminal activities such as the aforementioned *dom* for 'jail' or vunga for 'stealing' are usually not part of the speakers' repertoires in this case. Another word, however has found new prominence and meaning among this new, larger group of speakers; the term *aguu*. Instead of using it to identify someone who is street smart and knows how to survive, it now means 'thief' or 'prostitute'. It is used as a derogatory term denoting those that don't belong and would do things outside the general norms for money.

5. The left-behind

Despite the efforts of social workers and the re-establishment of traditional social networks, the number of young men and women

living on the streets has not dropped to zero. There are still many people, mostly young men in Gulu, that are either homeless or living under precarious conditions without local support networks. They perform unskilled work in low paying jobs such as construction work, car-washing, delivery boys or are engaged in illegal activities such as theft, dealing drugs or prostitution. This group is still isolated from traditional networks, as they are either outcast due to their criminal history or their drug addictions, or they prefer living on the streets in Gulu to the living conditions in their home villages. Some of them were part of an education program for some time or had returned to their villages, but inevitably ended up back on the streets. Others joined them later, attracted by the growing and developing urban center, trying to leave the monotone life in the rural areas that not only meant a lack of entertainment and strict hierarchical structures, but also the absence of economic opportunity combined with wide-spread alcoholism. For this group, Leb pa Bwulu has retained its meaning as a multiethnic code representing the life and struggles of living on the streets. Instead of it being just an auxiliary part of a larger linguistic repertoire, speaking this youth language also remains an integral and regular part of their everyday communication. As demonstrated by the change in meaning of *aguu*, they have, however, lost ownership over the language that originated in this community and whose own word has become an insult directed towards them. Their construction of identity, of which Leb pa Bwulu remains an important form of expression, is still that of outsiders within their own wider community and an opposition towards other ethnic groups is not a part of it. Their voice is barely noticeable in the general

discourse regarding language ideologies and identities expressed by Leb pa Bwulu as other more powerful social groups claim authority over that part of this linguistic practice. Nonetheless, they are still actors within the creative process and an integral part of the Leb pa Bwulu speaking community. The creation of new words and the development of language carries great value within their group as they remain some of the most creative innovators. In this role they are however also used by others, such as the musicians mentioned previously who are looking to promote their own image as innovators and leaders in the wider community. Invited to sit-ins or visited in the back alleys, they share their newest creations and discuss current innovation techniques in exchange for participation, attention, alcohol and cigarettes, as their creative process and its products become valuable commodities for others.

6. Systemic power and the spread of linguistic innovation

The social dynamics involved in the process of linguistic innovation observed among the speakers of Leb pa Bwulu puts into question the usefulness of general models and theories regarding the dynamics of linguistic innovation and change for youth language practices. For instance, Aitchinson (2001), proposes a model, which differentiates between four steps which lead to widespread acceptance of new linguistic elements. In the first two steps, a group of speakers creates innovation to differentiate themselves from another social group, which is in turn then adopted by others out of admiration. In this case however, the steps of innovation and the adoption by another

social group are mediated through a third step, in which individual influencers, who are simultaneously members of both social groups are responsible for the dispersion of linguistic innovation. In this function, they tie together the different networks of people that are in some from part of the same community of speakers (or identify themselves as speakers) without being part of the same social group. They create the link between innovation made in one group and the demand for innovation in the other social group, shifting the admiration from the innovators to themselves. Instead of street kids gaining positive attitudes for products of their creative process, it is the musicians who benefit not only intangibly, but also in material form, as they leverage their gained popularity into bigger audiences at their concerts. To alternatively call these influencers 'early adopters' would fail in recognizing their specific role and the power relations involved in this process as they take on the persona of an innovator once they engage with other networks. Instead, they appear as 'brokers' who in the sense of Eckert and Wenger (2005: 587) are "not simply […] purveyors of linguistic goods, but […] personality types who are likely to have heightened styles"; a matching description for the musicians in this case. Unlike Eckert and Wenger however, who struggle to identify the immediate and material benefit for the 'brokers' in their examples of linguistic innovation, the tangible advantage for these musicians is visible and calculated. Some of the street kids were very aware of these unbalanced and exploitive relationships, as they expressed anger over the fact that others were using their linguistic innovations for their own gain and presented them as original creations. Due to the conditions of their social

situation and the lack of access to facilities and relevant networks, they were however unable to change the situation. The different positions within the various social networks were thus key elements in the power relations between the 'brokers' and the innovators, enabling the 'brokers' to act as innovators themselves. Regarding the four steps of innovation proposed by Aitchinson (2001) this leads to the question on how to incorporate the role that these 'brokers' have in the process of linguistic innovation. They take on multiple functions at once, being early adopters within one network and innovators within another one, using the lack of access by members of the first network and a gap in knowledge among members of the second one. As such, they stand between step (1) and step (2) in this process. Granted, this example of linguistic innovation and spread of language change differs from processes described in many other studies and models. In those particular cases, the lack of knowledge is not tied to membership in specific networks and the access to means of publication is not as restricted, making the commodified linguistic object less valuable.

However, it is also possible that the value is in other cases just more obscure, not as emblematic and tangible as in this case and thus the role of the 'broker' less important or attractive; possibly even to the point of non-existence. Alternatively, however, it might also be possible that these 'brokers' are simply less visible because they don't appear as people with "heightened styles". They might not even be identifiable as individual people, but come in the form of institutions, media or linguistic landscapes, and questions of access, membership and power have to be located and studied within these shapes and forms.

The element most difficult to identify and describe is that of power, as demonstrated by the reluctance of many researchers to include it as part of a model of linguistic change (Milroy & Milroy 1985; Eckert & Wenger 2005). In this case, the power relations are not only made visible, but they also show that they must be considered when trying to capture the systematics of innovation and language change in the context of youth languages spreading across social groups. The 'brokers' decide which linguistic elements are spread beyond this 'core' group of speakers into the larger community and what meanings they have, for instance by presenting these words in specific contexts within their music. The changed meaning of *aguu*, from a positive term for people surviving in difficult conditions into a derogatory insult meaning 'thief' or 'prostitute' is only possible through the elimination of the original context and juxtaposing the word into a new context where the innovators of the term have no control and their perspective is unknown or not considered important. The position of the 'broker' facilitates this transposition by acting as the innovators themselves, giving authenticity and authority to the new meaning. As "youth languages" are in parts defined by their tendency to transcend social groups and restrictedness to very limited contexts, the process described here for Leb pa Bwulu is usually not atypical for the spread of youth languages in general. Thus, it seems also questionable whether the concept of 'community of practice' and the way that power is integrated there, is capable of providing the model for their dynamics of language change. Eckert and Wenger (2005) argue that power relations are implied in their concept of 'community of practice', because "practice always involves

the maintenance of the community – and therefore of its power structure" (p. 83), but as this example demonstrates, is it rather difficult to characterize the youth language speakers in a way that fits this ideal. The community of speakers is too heterogenous to identify them as a single, homogenous community, as it is much rather a collection of closely or loosely connected 'communities of practice' with various socio-economic backgrounds and different ideas about the meaning of this language. They are nonetheless connected as the speakers use the same words, often also with the same or similar meanings, they also share some demographic characteristics, usually being adolescents or young adults, sometimes gender, and they are generally from the same place as these linguistic practices are often bound to specific areas, like a city, or a part of a city. The commonalities within demographics are significant. They are also in some way linked through networks, whether they are through social contact, or through some forms of media; both connection types present in the example of Leb pa Bwulu.

Since this simultaneity of heterogeneity and connectedness cannot be addressed with the 'community of practice' model, it is necessary to employ a different theoretical approach to these processes, similar to the proposal by Davies (2005) in her critique to the application of Wenger's (1998) concept on language change. Instead it seems necessary to incorporate ideas of power in language as they were stated by Bourdieu, who placed the evaluation of linguistic signs and their "symbolic capital" into a specific "market" where the values are negotiated at (Bourdieu 1991: 68–89). Blommaert's work (2005), which identifies the complex ideas surrounding language as "the locus and

instrument of power, of inequality, of permanent struggles between those who control it and those who (believe they) need it" in his work on language and discourse (Blommaert 2005: 186) can also be applied. Getting back to the critique of Davies (2005) on 'community of practice', it might also be necessary to incorporate principles from network theory, in order to properly address the power relations arising from differences in access, authority and legitimacy, which are tied to the way people are connected across the various social networks within the community of speakers. In a similar sense, the notion of networks was also a part of the critique towards the 'community of practice' concept by Tusting (2005). This includes Fairclough's (2003) argument that recognizing the connectedness of social practices through 'orders of discourse' is crucial to understanding the production of meaning within social groups. It also points towards the failure of the 'community of practice' model to connect social practices in these smaller social groups to larger social constructs. However, whereas Tusting (2005) uses the term 'network' mainly to refer to discursive elements that are tied to the production of meaning, the case of Leb pa Bwulu shows that it also carries value as a concept of social structure. Since these two approaches to networks are certainly not exclusive to each other, a model that tries to capture the dynamics of these linguistic practices subsumed under the term "youth language" should be capable of including them both. Regardless how such a model would look like in the end, the issue of power will have to be an explicit part of it and a sense for the complexity and heterogeneity of the people involved with them must be incorporated.

Furthermore, it seems that the term youth language is misleading under these described conditions, with regards to the people who make use of these linguistic practices. The underlying social conditions in the rise and following popularity of Leb pa Bwulu do not indicate age as a key factor in the formation of common identities or in the usage of this linguistic practice in general. Other factors took clear precedent, for example, the experience of real or perceived social marginalization; firstly, by the assumed creators of this linguistic practice within their own local community and their traditional social structure; and subsequently by the larger community of Leb pa Bwulu speakers in relation to their perceived status in national political and social discourses. Thus, it seems necessary to explore whether this observation can be extended to other prominent examples of supposed African 'youth languages' like Sheng, Tsootsitaal or Nouchi and determine if these linguistic practices should be re-labeled.

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