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More than youth language: the multiple meanings of Yabacrâne in Goma (DR Congo)

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the polysemy of the term *Yabacrâne*, which is usually seen as a Kiswahili-based youth language practice. It is used by youths in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Goma) (Nassenstein 2016) by offering a different perspective based on another concept of youth and their language.

Researching youth language practices such as *Yabacrâne*¹ led me to the question whether researchers' formal ways of analyzing and structuring youth language should solely remain as the discussion of a "linguistic product", or whether the speakers' perspectives should also be taken more seriously into consideration? In my paper I claim that, unlike other documented practices, *Yabacrâne* is more than

¹ In this paper, I would like to thank Adolph Bisimwa Mushunju for his generous help in connecting me with different *Yabacrâne* speakers. Special thanks go to Nico Nassenstein for his guidance and help. I am grateful to the reviewers' comments. Otherwise, the common disclaimers apply. I thank Kieran Taylor for proofreading the text.

just a youth language practice. Its meaning stretches far beyond this aspect and it can refer to a general way of acting or reacting towards a situation.

African youth languages have often been described as being mostly games or slangs, restricted to deviating linguistic features such as those summarized in Rudd (2017). Basic analysis of Yabacrâne has shown that it has specific features; some of which do coincide with other youth language practices in Africa and some of which do not (cf. for instance Nassenstein 2016). At first glance, Yabacrâne is a youth language practice in Goma, just as Sheng is in Nairobi. Ogechi (2005) states that Sheng is a language variety that has been in use, especially among the urban youth in Kenya, for over three decades now. However, Yabacrâne, apart from being a new urban youth language practice as stated before, has many aspects which have not yet been included in published research.

- (1) *Mitembeleyo yabacrane ile yenyé iko nayo.*
'the way of walking of Yabacrâne speakers'

The sentence in example (1) literally means 'the way of walking of Yabacrâne speakers'; which simply aims to express that the attitude someone has is suggestive of an experienced person. I would like to question the research that has been carried out for Swahili youth languages by showing that the focus has to be shifted from a researcher's view to a speaker's or artist's view, or in other terms, from an etic view to an emic view. My contribution is based on qualitative interviews with artists/musicians in 2018 in Goma and also on the analysis of some song texts and videos clips where Yabacrâne is used.

2. The city of Goma, Swahili and youth

Goma is a tourist town located between Lake Kivu and Nyiragongo volcano, in eastern DR Congo. It lies across the border from Gisenyi in Rwanda. Currently, Goma is a lake trading post with Bukavu on the other side of Lake Kivu. Around 1954 the popular Birere-Mapendo quarter (a slum of Goma where many hip hop artists are based) was built around warehouses, offices and settlers' homes. Close to Nyiragongo Volcano and Virunga National Park, this city is today home to more than one million people. Swahili came into eastern DR Congo (former Zaire) through Arab traders and missionaries from neighboring Tanzania. From the time this language entered the country, it has been exposed to several changes in morphosyntax and pragmatics due to language contact, socio-ethnic diversity and its continuous diffusion through vast parts of the country.

One factor to consider is that Kivu Swahili, a dialect of Kiswahili spoken in the eastern part of the DR Congo by more than eight million people, has not yet been extensively documented by linguists and only few studies are available, see Bose & Nassenstein (2016), Nassenstein & Bose (2016), Goyvaerts (2007), Goyvaerts & Zembele (1992), Kaji (1982, 1985, 2002). Kivu Swahili is characterized by many different styles and ways of speaking, with a broad range of ethnic and social registers (Bose & Nassenstein 2017). This gives the language a kind of "free style" of use and facilitates the creation of many new words deriving from mostly local languages and some from vehicular languages, such as French.

Despite the fact that Yabacrâne is mostly understood as a new urban youth language

practice, it can also be seen as an evolution of the *Kinyume* language game (mainly spoken by small kids), since most speakers of Yabacrâne were also speakers of Kinyume. Around 2000, *Kinyume* came into existence in the Birere, Office and Virunga quarters as a youth language practice based on reversing the syllables of Kivu Swahili words. Rules of *Kinyume* may differ according to the nature of the word (as follows). These rules show that, even if one might see this language practice only as slang shared among marginalized adolescents, there is a sort of linguistic expertise and specific knowledge there.

1st rule: In the case that there is a single word, not in a sentence, this follows the main rule, i.e.

nyumba becomes *mbanyu* 'house'
masomo becomes *mosoma* 'school'
mbuzi becomes *zimbu* 'goat'
giza becomes *zagi* 'darkness'

2nd rule: For verbs the prefix *ku-* is not affected but the rest of the word is reversed,² i.e.

kuuza becomes *kuzau* 'to buy'
kuenda becomes *kundae* 'to go'
kunawa becomes *kuwana* 'to bathe'
kuiba becomes *kubai* 'to robe'

3rd rule: For sentences, the subject prefix on the verb does not change and the reverse is applied to the remaining elements, but according to their preceding order, i.e.

inafanana mbuzi become *inananafa zimbu* 'it looks like a goat'

mu giza becomes *mu zagi* 'in darkness'
ni nyumba becomes *ni mbanyu* 'it is a house'
sitarudiya kesho becomes *sitayadiru shoke* 'I will not come back tomorrow'
Est-ce que atauzisha samaki? becomes *Est-ce que atashaziu kimasa?* 'Will (s)he sell fish?'

3. Hip hop artists' voices on Yabacrâne

Hip hop artists have a different perspective on youth language practices, compared to researchers who are mainly focused on analysis, phonology and grammatical structures. By interviewing some of the youth of Birere, Ndosho and Himbi (quarters of Goma where Yabacrâne has an alleged high number of speakers) on this matter, we gathered some explanations on what they feel Yabacrâne represents.

According to Jackson Mushekuru, who is a member of the group *B13*, their name was taken from the French movie *Banlieue 13*, a popular movie that inspired them. *B13* is a predominantly male group founded by two brothers, Aubin and Hubert, in 2010 in the Katoyi quarter. It was originally a weightlifting and training center for barmen, security guards and others who liked to exercise and is currently based in the Ndosho quarter. Yabacrâne has two meanings; it relates either to a positive aspect or a negative one. Yabacrâne speakers are often known as *crâne* or *kankala*, the terms used for one individual, and/or *bacrâne* or *bakankala* for a group. The positive aspect of being called a *crâne* (lit. 'skull') is that it means the person has some local knowledge on a given situation even though (s)he might not know nor speak the language (Yabacrâne).

² This also exists in Chibende, a Zimbabwean play language (see Hollington, this volume).

For example, a foreigner who goes to a shop without being assisted by a local person and manages to get items at normal 'local' prices, practices in this case Yabacrâne, not as a youth language practice, but as a style. Here, Yabacrâne is more of a style of being fearless and brave to do and/or go to a new place without being assisted and manage not to be cheated. The negative aspect to be recognized as *crâne* is that it can be related to a tough "street image" and specific violent behavior. The positive aspect belongs to an in-group perspective, while the out-group perspective is negative; a prestige that youths conceptualize differently from others. In order to differentiate this second (negative) aspect with the first (positive) one, the *crânes* are further referred to as *djogos* 'violent crâne/thief'. A *mayibobo* or *mike* (term used for 'street kids' in Goma) may be used, for example, to talk to his buddies about their secret or illegal deals.

Nelb Bonheur, a local hip hop musician and rapper says Yabacrâne is "the way of living without fear, a strategy to express your feelings despite the political impact that it can create" (in an interview from 2018). In his song *Tumetchoka*, which is like an open letter to the leading government and in particular to the current President, he is advocating against many injustices and desires a swift response from his fellow citizens.

- (2) tunaitaji haki, aahhh
 'we need justice
- you must go (4x)
- hatuna democratia
 we do not have democracy

kuchinjwa kama nyama
 being killed liked animals

madaraka shindwa acha
 you have failed to rule please step out

lengo yake utunyanyasa (2x)
 your objective is to destroy us

acha masikiyo wazi
 to watch this situation

na waze wapi tunaelekeya
 and you will know where we are heading

apa ni viliyo ana vita tuianze
 more often we are mourning

tuna wengine batapoteya
 there is war and many are dying

shida zinaongezeka kama ...
 and our situations is worsening ...'

This song represents what the artist calls Yabacrâne. These political statements can be found in socially-critical music in large parts of the world, also in Africa and the African diaspora (hip hop, reggae/dancehall, etc.). Fiston Oleko, a local and member of the *B13* group, mentions that since Yabacrâne is the most commonly known youth language practice, some other youth language practices are also mistaken to be Yabacrâne and this brings the confusion that almost all youth language practices in that area are called Yabacrâne. From this perspective, the *djogos* mainly use what they call *Kinyume* (a ludling that consists of reversing the syllables of a word, see Section 2) as their Yabacrâne and sometimes also appro-

appropriate usual Yabacrâne words to very different contexts and meanings; a practice commonly presented as “youth language”. An example of this is that a *djogo* will either use the word *mbee* or *ngabu* (a metathesis of *bunga* ‘flour’) to stand for ‘money’ in their own kind of Yabacrâne (in Standard Swahili this does not exist). The confusion arises as most people confuse the *djogo* language to be Yabacrâne; hence the *djogo* language, which is not the common Yabacrâne (Nassenstein 2016), is actually also labeled Yabacrâne. The term *djogo* is mainly utilized for robbers, rastas and anyone who uses drugs (or who is associated with drug abuse). Most Yabacrâne speakers fall into dialect categories which are ‘positively viewed’ (in-group perspective) as this is one of the ways to be safe from *badjogo* ‘robbers’, because, when someone uses Yabacrâne the hard way, (s)he can be attacked by *djogos*. This can be seen as one of a multitude of reasons why the number of Yabacrâne speakers is gradually increasing.

Figure 1 represents the characteristics of what some interviewees called the Yabacrâne

aspect or ‘Yabacrâne look’. It shows that Yabacrâne is not only a language, but also mutual solidarity and much more.

Self-representation in pictures serves as a photographic form of solidarity, local knowledge and art. This picture was taken in around November 2017, after the *B13* group (mentioned above) was returning from a weightlifting competition in town, against different groups. They also participate in community work, to show that they are not a band of gangsters but rather a helpful group to society. There are many advantages to their group solidarity, including; in the case that any of their members has a party, they are the ones to be in charge of the security; or if one of the members loses a relative, they take charge of digging the grave and other necessary preparations, and specifically, all free of charge.

4. Further outlook

This paper has sought to express the multiple meanings of Yabacrâne as a name and as a practice; which had previously merely been described as the new urban youth language in Goma (DR Congo) (Nassenstein 2016). It also criticizes the fact that other youth language practices are mainly viewed with a very simple, negative approach that refers largely to gangsters and



Fig. 1. “Yabacrâne aspect” and the *B13* group (P.B.B. 2017)

violence.³ The word Yabacrâne has gone far beyond the label of a youth language practice to being considered as a sort of general behavior and/or style that people have, regardless of their social group. Yabacrâne can now be used to mean much more than simply its novel grammatical structure; as with other youth language practices. Yabacrâne has therefore also entered everyday speech and older speakers may also use expressions such as *ile idée ni Yabacrâne* ('that is a very good idea'). Considering that forthcoming research is still needed to bring to light more detailed insights, especially from an artistic perspective, this brief overview has stressed that Yabacrâne refers to much more than just youth language, as usually described by linguists.

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³ More recent (and critical) contributions (see this volume, among others), see youth language in more diverse ways.

