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**war** von April 2020 bis September 2020
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# Rethinking African Youth Languages
## Structures and Theories

The study of African youth languages (also AYLs) has seen a few conceptual shifts and portrayals—reflecting their dynamicity, fluidity, and diversity. The array of portrayals is reminiscent of a folkloric visit of ants to an elephant—each of which saw the elephant, but left with differing accounts of what it looked like.

My Krupp research project, in part, committed to prospecting for a broader conceptualization of African youth linguistic practices, and the exploration of how the use of colonial languages among young Africans might be read as speaking back to structuring frames of linguistic normativeness, thus mitigated by sundry forms of nativization or indigenized processes. My work is thus oriented towards re-theorizing the AYL phenomenon—its linguistic features, sociopragmatic roles, and ideological embeddings.

*African youth languages are distinct ways of speaking among predominantly young population across the continent.*

Overall, they manifest wide-ranging commonalities and are markers of urbanity. They consist of extra-linguistic styles and wider communicative strategies which serve to communicate modern, streetwise identities. Although they are referred to as languages, they are framed by the grammar of more mainstream languages, and are defined mainly by a diversity of innovative linguistic repertoires. The majority of youth languages have names which in most cases were given by non-primary speakers or the sociolinguists exploring them.

### The structure of AYLs

My first publication (No.1) on the project explored the ecology of African youth languages, looking specifically at diverse strands. With reference to Nigeria (where most of my data came from), these may be subsumed under two broad categories: Pidgin-based and non-Pidgin varieties. The former involves hybrid of features mainly from English structure and occasionally from the indigenous languages, while the other exhibits a preponderance of indigenous features and very less of English. Overall, they involve slanging, crypticism, semantic ambiguity, and a range of linguistic strategies which altogether feed into the evasive nature of youth languages. Although there are commonalities, the non-Pidgin strands are less prone to code-

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**» Ethnicity, Identity and Speaking Back: Discoursing African Youth Languages**

What constitute youth languages? How do they evolve, and to what end are they deployed? In regard to Africa, youth languages are not merely marginal, exotic, or metropolitan, but also conventional, native, and constitutively rural—and in diverse ways, resound with the decolonial project of "speaking back" (i.e., imbued with the perpetuation of authentic self in the wake of globalized identities and nativization of colonial languages). My research explores African youth linguistic practices in local and diasporic contexts—to illuminate their layers of creativity, identity construction, emancipatory quests, and structuring sway on ethnic boundaries. More broadly, I prospect for a view of African youth languages as not so much a (post-)imperial contact phenomenon, but as mitigated by indigenized processes, and also, interrogate the established epistemologies of geo-linear trajectories in cultural flows and the nature of youth languages in multi-ethnic spaces.

switching/mixing, and are marked by syntactic deviation and phonotactic Anglicism. They consist of meta-pragmatic practices—the use of metaphors, expletives, formulaic eulogia, and a host of non-pathologic laryngeal and gestural behaviors.

For adequate characterization, the paper deems them as a constellation of linguistic or/ and paralinguistic behaviors, mainly defined by speaker-groups, contexts, registers and other indexical features, regardless of the base languages (i.e., whether English, Pidgin or the local languages). They are generally discernible and represent new forms of ethno-lingual communities, which means that though they may come from different linguistic systems or relate to diverse user-groups, they exhibit common features of "youth languages," i.e., registers that generally index youth identity. Registers are discourse-bound, hence indexical. An indexical view of youth languages implies the various linguistic strategies which over time have become linked to youth identity—and could be useful for explaining those instances of youth languages that are embedded in disparate frames or used in different contexts.

## Theorizing the youth language phenomenon

My second paper on the project (No.2) centers more on the sociolinguistic theorization of the African youth language phenomenon. The effort was towards appreciating their dynamicity; and the fact that even though they are deemed as marginal practices, they are inherently fluid and consist of features which are also present in the mainstream languages. While consist of indexical elements that mark them off from more conventional practices, they are not too far removed from the conventions. Rather, what we see are mostly range of codes of known (and unknown) sources, instilled with new meanings or assigned new grammatical status for the purpose of index-

ing streets-slickness, urbanity, and for phatic communion. Contemporary AYLs comprise layers of linguistic novelty and glocalized repertoires. They are mutually fluid—in the sense that their features often intermingle with those of mainstream languages, thus becoming absorbed into wider communities of practices. In terms of socio-pragmatic functions, they confer covert prestige and peer supremacy on speakers—which might indeed explain the growing expansion in their speaker-demographics and spheres of practices—as evinced by the participation of female speakers in contemporary youth languages.

Further in the paper, I critique the concepts of antilanguages and the often-deployed notions of code-mixing and switching, and instead, recommend the concepts of polylanguaging and metrolingualism as more subsumptive of contemporary AYLs. More concretely, I explain how the typicalities of linguistic creativity, phatic expressions, transethnic practices, and strategies of identity construction all coincide with the notions of metrolingualism and polylanguaging. Metrolingualism orients us to the fluidity of youth language practices, and as symbiotic with everyday linguistic practices rather than as restricted to ingroup interactions or marginal identities. A metrolingual view of AYLs intersects with polylanguaging, especially with regard to the fluid use of multiple linguistic features, the speakers' emic awareness of so doing, and more broadly, the transethnic dimension of youth languages in multi-ethnic spaces. I make clear the fact that while code-switching might suggest a corresponding competence in the "switched" languages, cases are in which speakers draw freely from the mix of repertoires that are available to them, including those in which they lack competence. In the context of close interactions between languages, a prolonged pattern of switching could fossilize, thereby blurring lan-

guage borders and yielding what are no longer perceived as code-switching, but as everyday ways of speaking. For youth languages in such contexts, code-switching/mixing is least phenomenal, but merely mirroring the multilingual ecology, or where it has become an entrenched practice or a stylized way of sounding de-ethnic and cool.

I argue that while the use of certain codes can be socially meaningful or might encode specific social information about the speaker, this is not often the case. As my samples revealed, a speaker may draw from features associated with a particular ethnic group or a community of practice without necessarily being a member. It seems rather innate for them to cross both linguistic and cultural boundaries, or fleetingly play with different languages without lasting commitments. This way of speaking clearly represents a new transethnic, transnational means of identity-formation, rendering the idea of specific ethnic ascriptions tricky. It reflects metrolingual identities, especially those of youths who employ diverse language features in ways that translocate them beyond ethnolingual boundaries. The speakers do not only switch or mix languages, but also draw on subcultural elements that derive from the languages, thus oriented towards trans-ethnic (or metro-ethnic) identities.

Across Africa, the majority of youth languages have evolved against the backdrop of social exclusion and colonial legacy of linguistic hegemony. They consist of features and practices that affront the predominance of colonial languages and tend towards inclusion of those excluded by Western normativity or epistemic norms. They can thus be seen as performative acts of "speaking back", and as assault on coloniality. The attribution of universality to Western linguistic normativity has for long been challenged in a host of postcolonial African literature, mostly via abrogation and appropriation. Abrogation entails linguistic rebellion, or the refusal to heed the rules of standardized European languages while appropriation involves the reconstitution or remolding of colonial languages to new usages.

*The majority of youth languages consist of structural defiance and linguistic reconstitution in ways that coincide with decolonial intents and emancipatory practices. They simultaneously challenge the linguistic normativity of colonial urbanity, and the indigenous notions of linguistic purity.*

Isiaka, L. Adeiza. 2020. A Tale of Many Tongues: Conceptualising Nigerian Youth Languages. Language Matters: Studies in Languages of Africa 51 (2): 68-89.

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Am Kolleg entstandene Veröffentlichungen