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New perspectives on morphosyntactic variation in African youth language practices

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Abstract: Recent years have seen an increase in scholarly attention paid to youth language practices in Africa, with studies examining a range of linguistic phenomena. A parallel development has seen the emergence of work studying morphosyntactic microvariation in Bantu languages, with a view to better understanding structural variation in closely related languages or varieties. This special collection brings together those working in the fields of youth language practices and morphosyntactic variation in Bantu, with a view to exploring the synergies in these areas, as well as moving this domain of inquiry forward. The contributions are united by the authors' commitment to addressing specific morphosyntactic phenomena which may have otherwise gone unnoticed, or which are less documented in the existing literature – in particular, in the scholarship on the respective base language or dominant language. We hope that the collection of papers both contributes to this body of work and inspires others to take up some of these issues in future research.

Keywords: morphosyntax; youth language practices; African languages; variation; Bantu languages

1 Diverse perspectives on African youth language practices

Over the past two decades, research on African youth language practices has produced a vast body of literature with diverse perspectives, building on different research traditions, and with divergent foci.

Scholars have approached youth language practices from sociolinguistic perspectives, focusing on linguistic manipulation and conscious language change, the construction of youth identity, and resistance to the mainstream (Yannuar et al. 2022). Others have adopted approaches from anthropological linguistics, examining sociocultural practices from ethnographic perspectives, considering young people's "ways of speaking", and language as a cultural resource. There have also been postcolonial and decolonial approaches, addressing the complex historical entanglements of youth language practices with colonial and postcolonial contexts and realities. And finally, there are an increasing number of studies that address and examine structural features of youth language practices. In a sense, all these studies complement each other, adding to our understanding of a complex, emerging picture represented by youth language practices.

Studying the available works, it quickly becomes clear that youth language in (predominantly urban) Africa is a complex phenomenon which, in addition to an understanding of the sociological or anthropological levels that impact language use, also requires in-depth linguistic documentation of its features, whether highly salient or more peripheral. In many of the studies to date, this has been pursued with a focus on deliberate manipulative strategies, that is, the creative modification of existing forms and structures, often accompanied by semantic changes.

This is where this special collection comes in. The current work aims to contribute to current debates and issues by highlighting morphosyntactic features in youth language whose occurrence often goes unnoticed or appears to be less salient or emblematic for speakers, especially within their linguistic ecological context. This also includes features which do not necessarily contribute to the social identity of a youth group; in the words

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of Irvine and Gal (2000), these features are less “iconized” and also less indexical of a specific youth identity. In many cases, these developments seem to reflect more general processes of language change or are structures which are found in African languages more widely. We see the effect of these developments in the verbal and nominal domains, as well as at the broader level of clausal syntax.

As a result, in some instances, the line between youth language practices and other (e.g., urban) language practices appears to be blurred, showing that everything is part of a complex sociolinguistic scenario or continuum that cannot easily be delimited to specific varieties, styles, or “ways of speaking”. It also shows that many speakers combine the manifold linguistic resources of their repertoires without clear boundaries between socially constructed “varieties”.

We suggest that it is likely that not only may a (young) speaker’s awareness of some of these processes be less pronounced, but that the study of these phenomena has – as a result – featured less prominently among (socio)linguistic studies. This may be due to the fact that scholars interested in youth language have often focused on the “deviant”, the amusing expressions and constructions, the “titillating” or taboo terms; in short, on the seemingly exotic and transgressive linguistic features that have been said to make up youth language practices. However, our microvariationist approach also aims at contributing to a better understanding of the complex sociolinguistic scenarios of which youth language practices are a part. Studying morphosyntactic phenomena that are common not only in youth language practices but also in the linguistic ecologies surrounding and encompassing them also sheds light on the dynamics between language practices of various groups of people, communities of practice, and social spheres that share time and space.

As editors of the present issue, we have ourselves contributed to the diverse discussions in the field of African youth language practices, and are currently engaged in a research project that highlights microvariationist approaches to the morphosyntax of youth language practices.¹ The project “Microvariation in African youth language practices” applies a specific morphosyntactic framework to the morphological and syntactic features that recur in the Bantu languages, a group of about 450–600 related languages belonging to the Niger-Congo phylum of African languages that share numerous structural features. We follow work in the vein of Marten et al. (2007), Guérois et al. (2017), and the studies contained in Bloom Ström et al. (in press), and are inspired by the idea of adopting a more systematic approach to the structural study of youth language practices, particularly those in ecologies with a high presence of Bantu languages.

As the best documented linguistic subfamily on the African continent, the Bantu language family provides a good testing ground for such fine-grained analyses of youth linguistic practices compared to other varieties even against the background of their respective base languages. Here, the focus on a range of relatively well-studied and well-described languages (e.g., Lingala, Kiswahili, and some languages of the Nguni subfamily such as isiZulu and Zimbabwean isiNdebele)² allows for a comparison of different and yet related youth language practices that are modeled upon comparable linguistic bases, that display linguistic influence from different substrate or donor languages, and/or that have emerged in different regional or geographical contexts. This special collection can thus be seen as a crucial first step in bringing together different perspectives and looking at the morphosyntax of youth language in Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa, and also as an endeavor to bring descriptive approaches towards Bantu languages closer to sociolinguistic perspectives on youth language practices.

2 A turn towards morphosyntactic studies of youth language

The study of the particular morphosyntactic properties of youth language practices in comparison to their base languages (sometimes called matrix languages) – for example, Lingala ya Bayankee (or Yanké) versus Kinshasa Lingala, Sheng versus Nairobi Swahili, Tsotsitaal/isiTsotsi versus isiZulu – is not a simple undertaking. This was

¹ For further information, see the project website, <https://microvariation-and-youth-languages.com> (last accessed 12 August 2024).

² The research project initially primarily targeted mostly these three languages or groups of closely related languages. However, the empirical scope was subsequently expanded to include youth language practices of Zambia and Malawi. The present special collection has also benefited from contributions by scholars working in these broader regional contexts.

also observed by Gunnink (2014: 164), who notes in her grammatical study of Sowetan tsotsitaal: “Contrasting Sowetan Zulu and Sowetan tsotsitaal linguistically is much more problematic than contrasting both varieties socially ... [because] tsotsitaal grammar is mostly identical to the grammar of Sowetan Zulu.”

While the study of closely related youth language practices in terms of certain features can provide solid comparative insights (see, e.g., Gibson et al. 2024; Nassenstein and Bose 2020 on Kiswahili youth languages), a lack of distinguishable morphosyntactic features between a youth language practice and its urban base language (e.g., the fluid boundary between Nairobi Swahili and Sheng, or Kinshasa Lingala and Lingala ya Bayankee/Yanké) can actually complicate such a study: where to draw the line between urban speech and youth speech, which morphosyntactic features are more likely to be used by young speakers, and which features have already “leaked out” or been “absorbed” by other speakers in the urban domain?

Complex linguistic ecologies in such contexts underline the necessity of looking at both the linguistic practices themselves and the sociolinguistic, ideological, pragmatic, and stylistic aspects that impact the language of young speakers. For instance, a feature such as the use of the verbal extension and “pre-final” *-ag* (with a habitual meaning) has become widespread in Tanzanian Swahili despite it not being a feature of so-called Standard Swahili. This feature is so widespread that it cannot be regarded an exclusive feature of *Lugha ya mtaani* (despite the fact that it is used extensively by youths, for example in Bongo Flava music and other artforms). This leads to new questions on the impact of youth cultural practices such as music, film, and spoken word poetry on the frequency and meaning nuances of such morphosyntactic features. In this regard, a focus on linguistic repertoires of speakers, a compilation of diverse corpora of linguistic performances in various contexts and genres, and an analysis of language in discourse can lead to the fine-grained study of grammatical features in such complex (socio)linguistic scenarios.

3 About this special collection

This special collection of *Linguistics Vanguard* combines several fine-grained analyses of variation in the morphosyntax of African youth language practices in the “Bantu region”. The focus of the studies is on linguistic practices from the Democratic Republic of Congo (see the contributions by Kunzmann; Motingea; and Nassenstein), from Zimbabwe and South Africa (see the contributions by Cook, McGilly, and Miranda; Gibson, Marten, and Ndlovu; by Hollington who also includes data from East Africa; and by Hurst-Harosh and Goxo), and from Kenya (see the contribution by Kariuki, Gibson, Jelpke, Ochieng, and Poeta).

These contributions are united by the authors’ commitment to addressing specific morphosyntactic phenomena that may have otherwise gone unnoticed, or which are less documented in the existing literature – in particular, in the scholarly literature on the respective base or matrix languages. Many of these also do not fall into the category of well-described “linguistic manipulations” in youth languages (see, e.g., Kießling and Mous 2004 for the most influential contribution in this regard with a focus on phonology, morphology, and semantics), which are often employed consciously by young speakers for reasons of social distinction against mainstream society and for the purpose of identity formation.

Rather, the morphosyntactic features dealt with in the contributions in this special collection include distinctions of different practices by examining markers of, for example, past tense, future tense, and progressive aspect in youth language practices, analysis of linguistic changes in the verb phrase, the structural encoding of politeness by affixes to the verb, the habitual aspect and the “pre-final” slot within Bantu verbs, variations and semantic nuances in the noun class system, nonstandard functions of verbal derivational morphemes, the use of ideophones in these youth language practices, code-switching mechanisms, and several other facets of these practices.

Altogether, the structural features that are in focus here involve more subtle, and at times less conscious, changes in the morphosyntax of youth languages, which some speakers may be aware of while others may not be. Some of these seemingly less conscious linguistic changes may actually occur due to everyday language contact in

often multicultural urban areas where these youth language practices are actually used (e.g., in Kinshasa, Nairobi, Johannesburg, etc.) or due to multiethnic communities of practice whose members have diverse language repertoires at their disposal.

Again, other reasons for fine-grained changes in the morphosyntax of youth language practices when compared to the background of their base languages could more classically or typically be grammatical borrowing or “simplification” as a contact process, but equally a complexification of the grammatical structure based on linguistic innovations and a “reintroduction” of specific Bantu features. In yet other cases, youth languages display a range of grammatical variants that have emerged over time, whereas the base language (e.g., Nairobi Swahili or Kinshasa Lingala) commonly only displays one dominant realization – which may have to do with standardization, textualization practices, colonial language policies, and, in the broadest sense, with strong language ideologies of the speakers of these languages.

In some ways, youth language speakers may actively strive to distinguish their speech from the “common” urban language – not only at the lexical level through processes of relexification or as creative linguistic manipulations, but also at the grammatical level. This may go further than gradually evolving divergence, in a process that Dimmendaal (2015: 65) refers to as “esoterogeny”: “a phenomenon whereby speakers add linguistic innovations that increase the complexity of the language in order to highlight their distinctiveness from neighboring groups” (a concept first introduced by Thurston 1987 in his work on Austronesian languages). Some speakers, when using and speaking a “stylect” (Hurst-Harosh 2020) modeled on Kiswahili, Lingala, or isiNdebele, could then actively choose a less prominent or salient grammatical form over a more widely used variant, a practice which in some cases may solidify. In other contexts, however, morphosyntactic variation clearly lacks this strategic or ideological dimension and is based on contact-induced change.

Janika Kunzmann’s paper on two Congolese youth language practices (Lingala ya Bayankee/Yanké and Langila) highlights aspects of “innovation” by discussing how specific linguistic elements – that is, forms and structures – are combined, reconfigured, and catalyzed (or “recycled”) by young speakers to appear as new, fashionable, and appropriate. In her thought-provoking paper she examines grammaticalized markers and other morphemes that contribute to the “new” linguistic repertoire of Congolese speakers, and then determines the degree of innovation in their language. The comparative view of two (competing) youth language practices in the same city (Kinshasa) paves the way for new, structurally oriented foci, which are then also pursued in Nassenstein’s contribution.

Nico Nassenstein also looks at the changing morphology of Bayankee speech in Kinshasa (with selected examples from Langila speakers), focusing on the verb phrase. His paper shows how grammaticalization processes worked on a manipulated verb *-dyé* ‘to go’ (from French *adieu*), analogous to a similar development around a more standard verb *-kende* ‘to go’. A second change in verb morphology addressed in the paper is a high degree of (creative) variation in progressive aspect forms, with Langila speakers further modifying the varying forms in Lingala ya Bayankee speech.

André Motingea Mangulu’s paper focuses on changes in the use and function of the past tense morpheme *-á*; this feature in the Lingala of the youth of Kinshasa has been affected by language change when compared to “standard” Kinshasa Lingala. He discusses the use of this tense marker in comparison to more general changes in the youth language(s) of Kinshasa and also includes examples from recorded texts and musical song lyrics that were popularized among different generations of youth speakers.

In their contribution Toni Cook, Clara McGilly, and Case Miranda discuss the use of ideophones in Shona. Drawing on examples given by a speaker of the Karanga variety of Shona, they illustrate how ideophones are used by youth non-normatively. While the use of ideophones is found in educational contexts and in traditional folktales and storytelling, they show how young people – excluded from being authentic users of ideophones – are able to use ideophones for comedic effect amongst peer groups.

Hannah Gibson, Lutz Marten, and Sambulo Ndlovu illustrate the strategies used to encode politeness in African urban youth languages, with a focus on Southern Africa. While youth languages have often been associated with subversive social groups and anti-languages, the authors provide examples that show that

politeness strategies found in youth languages are similar to those found in other African languages. Examples of politeness strategies which they discuss include terms of address, and compounding, and the use of noun class morphology.

In their contribution Annah Kariuki, Hannah Gibson, Tom Jelpke, Merceline Ochieng, and Teresa Poeta examine Sheng. They focus on verbal extensions in the language, and provide examples of causative, applicative, reciprocal, and passive suffixes, applied to coined, metathesized, and borrowed verbs from Kiswahili, English, and Gikuyu.

Andrea Hollington discusses youth language practices in two contexts, namely Tanzania and Zimbabwe. In her contribution she focuses on creative noun class and agreement practices, highlighting the role which semantics and conscious meaning making has on the choice of grammatical devices in these youth languages. The diminutive in particular features prominently as an example of evaluative morphology with different and context-bound connotations in the language use of youth in Tanzania and Zimbabwe, which also correlates with morpho-semantic phenomena in the surrounding linguistic ecologies.

The problematic nature of drawing clear boundaries between varieties and ways of speaking in many language ecologies in the Bantu-speaking area is addressed by Ellen Hurst-Harosh and Thandiwe Goxo, who take a close look at sentence constructions and the use of different linguistic material in urban and rural isiXhosa and Tsotsitaal. Their comparative account sheds light on the debates of urban versus rural, youth language practice versus urban variety, and linguistic delimitation of closely related varieties, stylets, and linguistic performances, while discussing morphosyntactic variation in the presented contrastive examples.

4 Outlook: microvariation as an innovative direction in the study of youth language

In recent years, specific microvariationist approaches have gradually gained importance, especially in Romance and German(ic) studies, but also for those on a range of European languages more widely, as well as increasingly in the study of the Bantu languages as the best and most thoroughly studied sub-phylum of African languages.

While typically an approach used in the field of dialectology – and initially understood as such – the focus and scope of microvariationist studies has over time shifted from dialectological orientations (comprising idiolectal variation, inter-speaker variation, etc.) towards a more structured and feature-oriented approach and field of research. Particularly in African linguistics, this approach has sought to fill gaps and blanks in the morphological study of closely related Bantu languages by investigating specific (intricate) features cross-regionally and crosslinguistically. Lists of parameters have been compiled that help to provide essential insights in the analysis of, for example, noun class systems and evaluative morphology, tense-aspect distinctions, agreement or concord, and many other areas of research. Specifically in the field of research under scrutiny in this special collection, while focusing on regional and geographical variation, innovative adaptations of microvariationist approaches have combined fine-grained morphological analyses with the (established) study of youth language practices, opening the former to social and pragmatic dimensions of variation and thus widening its scope.

This combination of very different approaches is a fairly recent endeavor: “early” works in the field of African youth language practices – that is, those from the early 2000s onwards – were often concerned with sociolinguistic key questions, and tended to investigate identity construction and the social practices of youth – and, in some cases, even looked upon more structurally oriented approaches with some doubt or reluctance (Nassenstein et al. 2018). Yet, with more decisive advances in research on the morphosyntax of youth languages, the benefits of bringing these different research perspectives together have – alongside, parallel to, and in addition to critical, decolonial, and ethnographic strands of research – helped to make scholars (including the present authors) realize that the study of specific structural features can yield exciting new results, too.

In the course of the ongoing research project on youth language practices in Africa with a microvariationist focus, the present issue can be regarded as a careful first step into this direction, while other studies are in preparation.

It is our hope that this special collection contributes to contemporary discussions and exchanges on young people's language practices in Africa – no longer restricted to sociolinguists or linguistic anthropologists but also among morphologists and syntacticians – and we hope that it inspires others to continue work in this vein. We believe that an improved descriptive state of the languages in question and a better understanding of their features, as well as insights from speakers and communities, will serve to strength the field of research in this domain and move our understanding forward, both with regard to microvariation in youth language practices in Africa and with respect to language contact and change, as well as speaker identities and practices more widely.

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