RURAL YOUTH LANGUAGE PRACTICES, SOCIAL MEDIA AND GLOBALIZATION IN AFRICA: NEW SOCIOLINGUISTIC ARENAS

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Over the past decades, youth language practices have increasingly moved into the focus of sociolinguistic studies, mostly analyzed as manipulative forms of agentive antilanguage behavior. African youth language practices have mostly been treated as urban phenomena (cf. Kießling & Mous 2004, Nassenstein & Hollington 2015), while youths’ creative practices in rural spaces have been neglected, with a few exceptions (Blench 2012, Kioko 2015). While patterns of mobility, accessibility and globalization have not only transformed urban as well as rural spaces in numerous African countries, also new modes of interaction through social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Viber etc.) have connected ‘the village’ with ‘the city’ and speakers are in steady contact through mobile phones, making creative use of the ‘third space’ (Oldenburg 1989, Deumert 2014) that is provided in form of WhatsApp groups, YouTube comments and Facebook groups. The use of social media is embedded in daily life activities in the ‘global village’, and rural youth play and creatively use words from Mandarin and American hip hop, while urban youth embed and refer to linguistic material from ‘the village’, in order to increase secrecy in speech and play with the urban associations of ‘hillbillyness’. The linguistic interconnectedness of city and village is thus a mutual endeavor.

African individuals are and have always been ‘super-mobile’, long before colonial authorities from the Global North have forcefully transformed societies and created nation states. The paper aims to illustrate the subversive agency expressed through young rural Africans youth’s connectivity and creativity, having “completely bypassed the West’s route to the cell phone” (Lule 2015: 144) by hurdling certain technological steps. Young villagers do not solely use language that is usually perceived as ‘urban’, ‘modern’ and ‘fashionable’ but they create new rural registers that express regional identity, agency and subversive style. This adds to the Belgian journalist David van Reybrouck’s observations when he speaks of Africa as the ‘vanguard of globalization’, being based on the omnipresence of Skype and Western Union (see Signer 2014).

The paper aims to present a first overview of adolescents’ language practices in rural Africa and discusses the changing parameters in the field of (socio-)linguistic documentation of fluid repertoires in Africa. Data from Kenya (Sheng), Uganda (Leb pa Bulu), DR Congo (Yabacrâne) and Rwanda (Imvugo y’Umuhanda) are presented, questioning the predominant focus on ‘urban’ scenarios in current sociolinguistic research.
References


Oldenburg, Ray. 1989. The great good place: cafés, coffee shops, community centers, beauty parlors, general stores, bars, hangouts, and how they get you through the day. New York: Paragon.