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Ethnography: Invitation to Review Revised Manuscript

1 message

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16-Jan-2025

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Sent on behalf of

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Manuscript details

TITLE: Methodological Issues in African Youth Languages Research

ABSTRACT: Youth language research is an outgrowth of sociolinguistics and has contributed immensely to redefining and reconstructing youth-based identity, linguistic ideology and agency. Youth language practices are exoticized and othered as deviant, and speakers of youth languages are labelled as violent and street-based. This top-down view of youth language (speakers) poses problems and creates inequalities between researchers and their subjects of study. This article, therefore, aims to offer methodological insights and blueprints for African youth language research. The initial starting point is to address the lack of clear definition of the concepts of “youth” and “identity” and to interrogate the question of othering and inequality. The paper also discusses some ethical concerns and methods of authentic data collection during fieldwork. I proffer a model to guide researchers in the field. Significantly, the paper strives to redefine African youth language methodology to further expand the frontiers of research in this emerging field.

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Ethnography

Methodological Issues in African Youth Languages Research

Journal:	*Ethnography*
Manuscript ID	ETH-24-0113.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Research Papers
Keywords:	African youth languages, Identity, Agency, Ethnographic methods, Fieldwork

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Methodological Issues in African Youth Languages Research

Abstract

Youth language research is an outgrowth of sociolinguistics and has contributed immensely to redefining and reconstructing youth-based identity, linguistic ideology and agency. Youth language practices are exoticized and othered as deviant, and speakers of youth languages are labelled as violent and street-based. This top-down view of youth language (speakers) poses problems and creates inequalities between researchers and their subjects of study. This article, therefore, aims to offer methodological insights and blueprints for African youth language research. The initial starting point is to address the lack of clear definition of the concepts of "youth" and "identity" and to interrogate the question of othering and inequality. The paper also discusses some ethical concerns and methods of authentic data collection during fieldwork. I proffer a model to guide researchers in the field. Significantly, the paper strives to redefine African youth language methodology to further expand the frontiers of research in this emerging field.

Keywords: African youth languages; identity, agency, ethnographic methods, fieldwork

Introduction

Youth language research is a field that has made increasing contributions to our knowledge of urban variation amidst multilingualism and contact. African research on youth languages can be seen as extending the knowledge generated in this field, through numerous close analyses of youth language practices. Often taking current sociolinguistic theory as a starting point, recent fine-grained perspectives on language practices through the examination of a variety of data are notable (see some of the studies in recent collections such as Hurst, 2014; Nassenstein and Hollington, 2015; Hurst, 2016; Hollington, Nassenstein and Storch, 2018; Hurst-Harosh and Kanana, 2018).

However, there are also cases of both contemporary and historical studies in the field which have been methodologically lacking, for a range of reasons.

Major critiques of approaches thus far include Nassenstein et al. (2018) and Beyer (2015). This article seeks to follow these authors in critically examining the methodological approaches prevalent in youth language studies in Africa, highlighting the inadequacies, and proposing a way forward. The paper seeks to propose a kind of blueprint or 'best practice' model for (African) youth language research, which will assist researchers to avoid many of the common methodological and theoretical pitfalls of this field. The first issue that arises in much African youth language research is a lack of clear definitions, particularly of 'youth' and 'identity', which the first section will address. The following two sections discuss the 'othering' inherent in much youth language research, and inequalities between researchers and speakers. The next section discusses the ethics of anonymity versus demographic information. The final two analysis sections focus on what can be considered 'authentic' youth language data; and the focus in previous studies on vocabulary or grammar at the expense of the bigger system. The concluding section presents a possible blueprint to follow when working in this field of research.

Definitions of youth and identity

The category of youth is generally understood as a stage in life that occupies a transitional space between childhood and adulthood (Frederiksen and Munive, 2010: 251). Youthful behaviour, which may be seen as being both socially constructed and part of a biological process, is often marked by the desire to be different and to express independence and creativity. Buckingham (2008) argues that youth is fundamentally a social and historical construct rather than a universal state of being.

Because youth as a category is at least partly socially determined, there can be no universally accepted demographic benchmarks that clearly define and delineate this category. According to Bucholtz (2002: 526):

> It is a commonplace of much research on youth cultures and identities that the youth category lacks clear definition and in some situations may be based on one's social circumstances rather than chronological age or cultural position. In a given culture, preadolescent individuals may count as youth, while those in their 30s or 40s may also be included in this category. And youth as a cultural stage often marks the beginning of a long-term, even lifelong, engagement in particular cultural practices, whether its practitioners continue to be included in the youth category or not.

A set of circumstances that differ across societies/cultures, and history, determine the social construction of youth (Kett, 1977). In many African societies, social institutions such as the age-grade system (social organization based on age), initiation cults and coming of age ceremonies (ritual celebrations at puberty that symbolize the transition of a child to an adolescent) have been celebrated as rites of passage into youthfulness, while other events such as marriage and starting a family mark the end of the youth phase (Calvès, Kobiané and Frederiksen, 2007; Munive, 2010: 251). In spite of these social benchmarks, deeper economic and political problems such as inequality, unemployment, exclusion and marginalization have impacted on the ability of young people to make these transitions. Bucholtz (2002: 527) contends that '…historical changes such as population shifts that increase or decrease the number of adolescents and economic circumstances that prevent young people from assuming a new status as wage earners may lead to redefinitions of the category [of youth]'.

In Africa, according to Frederiksen and Munive (2010: 251) the state of marriage is an

indicator of 'economic wellbeing and independence', while being unmarried may be associated with 'poverty and dependence'. They further suggest that 'As a category, youth positions the individuals within imagined attributes related to the social, economic and political environment, but most importantly marks their position in terms of dependence, authority and certain responsibilities' Frederiksen and Munive (2010: 251-252). In a place where there are no expanding economic opportunities and functional educational systems, young people are often compelled to assume adult life as late entrants. They can also be propelled into informal work at an early age, or become heads of families in circumstances of sickness or death (Aycard, 2014). Those without the prospects of jobs and education can be subject to assumptions of youthful 'deviance and delinquency' and a 'pathological view of young people' (Buckingham 2008: 4). Buckingham states that 'Youth – particularly youth in marginalized or subordinated social groups – are frequently constructed as a "social problem" or "at risk" (Buckingham, 2008: 4). The category of youth as an intermediary life stage is therefore not just fluid but also problematic given these kinds of uncertainties and realities.

According to Androutsopoulos (2005: 1496), youth language refers to language use in adolescence, which he defines as 13 to 19 years of age, and qualifies that adolescence is 'not merely a biological age, but a social institution, which is specific to the modern era'. However, given the above, adolescence is a less socially relevant category in African research, and in youth language research from the continent, a very broad age range has been described. For example, Brookes (2014: 361-362) focuses on the language of youth in South Africa between the ages of 18 and their late twenties, arguing that this period marks 'a transitional life stage between childhood and adulthood'. The transition ends when they become too old to spend the majority of their time with their peer groups, and instead enter into employment, cohabitation, or marriage. Alternatively,

Mitch (2016) in her study of the use of discourse markers by Senegambian youth, describes how youth is not a static category in Senegal and the Gambia. She defines it for the purposes of her study as 'involving those who are old enough to have developed their identities vis-à-vis the state, their ethnicity, and the borderland and who have grown up during the times of relative political stability in both countries since the early 1990s', thus demonstrating how the youth category can be entirely-context-dependent. Her study participants range from 18 to 34. Some studies (Brookes and Lekgoro, 2014; Hurst and Mesthrie, 2013) have included older speakers; while they learnt their youth language when young, older speakers may still use vestiges of youth language practices in peer groups. Nassenstein, Hollington and Storch (2018: 11) in their critique of youth language research, contend that the strategies of youth language are in reality 'employed by other speakers in a wide range of contexts' and argue that youth language is a 'strange contradictory term that denotes the deviant in language' (Nassenstein, Hollington and Storch, 2018: 14). I assert however, that some practices emerge from or during the youth phase, which is marked by extensive peer interaction, and that the descriptive term 'youth language' remains a useful one to describe the experimental and playful practices generated amongst young peers.

Quite a number of studies of youth language in Africa have been concerned with youth identity, sometimes emphasising the 'identity construction' affordances of youth language practices (*inter alia* Slabbert and Finlayson, 2000, Githinji, 2006; Hurst, 2008, 2009; Maribe and Brookes, 2014; Hollington, 2015; Chariatte, 2016). Less commonly however have these studies engaged with a definition or theorisation of identity. The use of the term 'construction' implies an underlying social constructionist approach rather than an essentialist approach, but this is rarely explained (with the exception of Hurst, 2008) and may be in contradiction to other (non-relativist) theoretical assumptions within the research. For example, a number of the aforementioned studies claim that

particular identities are being constructed through youth linguistic practice, and yet treat the identities as essentialised (that identity is the 'essence' of the person), while a social constructionist approach in contrast would assume that identity is fluid, shifting, and never fixed. The sometimes partial and incomplete nature of identity constructions, the multiple and sometimes competing identities of speakers, the relationships between social and individual identity, the constraints of structure on agency and the awareness (or not) of youth about these processes are rarely considered. Research incorporating approaches such as style/stylisation, indexicality, linguistic repertoire and other aspects of the 'third wave of variation studies' (Eckert, 2012) may go some way towards addressing this issue, however, it would be useful to see theoretical frameworks clearly identified, and identity defined.

Othering

A review of the field suggests that youth language research identifies or highlights some form of extra-ordinary, innovative and/or subversive language practice. According to Nassenstein, Hollington and Storch, (2018: 11) this has led to research in this field 'essentialising and exoticising representations of young people's language practices', resulting in constructions of youth language as deviant, or 'other'. Indeed, speakers of youth language are sometimes presented as violent, street-based, uneducated and lower class, both in research publications, and in wider society (Hurst, 2018). Use of youth languages may be conflated with gang membership, or 'anti-societies', for example in the use of Halliday's (1976) theory of 'antilanguage' which has been used by a number of African youth language researchers (Makhudu, 1995; Brookes, 2004; Kiessling and Mous, 2004; Mugaddam, 2009, M and Author, 2013). Halliday's theory was developed through an analysis of a number of 'underworld' languages such as that used in prisons, and by association use of the theory

may cause African youth languages to be aligned with criminal, class and race stereotypes. Kiessling and Mous (2004:303) for example state that

> …certain strategies of linguistic manipulation are particularly recurrent and dominant in urban youth languages – namely, morphological hybridization, truncation, phonotactic distortions, and far-fetched semantic extensions and dysphemisms. This proves that the linguistic forms taken by anti-languages of urban youth clearly reflect their antifunction, since all of these strategies are manifestations of their speakers' attitude of jocular disrespect and of their readiness to experiment and to take bizarre viewpoints on the world. (Kiessling and Mous, 2004: 332-333)

They also describe how urban youth languages share some features with argots, and claim that some have their roots in criminal argots, or incorporate slang words from criminal varieties. It has often been suggested in the literature that African urban youth languages may have evolved from gang or criminal languages (for example, Tsotsitaal (Hurst, 2009), Nouchi (Boutin and Dodo, 2017), Sheng (Abdulaziz and Osinde, 1997), Yabacrane (Nassenstein, 2016) among others). It is likely that, rather than a trajectory involving a set of language practices expanding outside their domain of usage from criminals to youth social or peer groups, the relationship involves the adoption of lexical items from criminal varieties for the purposes of what Kiessling and Mous (2004:313) call 'covert prestige'. It is known that youth language practices involve drawing on unfamiliar linguistic resources for the purposes of novelty, and descriptions of the origins of youth languages in criminal varieties or argots is often based on lexical evidence. Thus criminal varieties could be seen as lexifiers for some youth language practices, rather than embryonic versions of them. Current speakers of the wide range of described African youth language practices in the literature do not necessarily exhibit anti-social or resistant behaviours, and other African urban youth languages

clearly did not develop from criminal varieties – for example the youth varieties of Leb Pa Bulu (Rüsch and Nassenstein, 2016), youth forms of Nigerian Pidgin (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2018) and Ghanaian Student Pidgin (Yakpo, 2024).

Nassenstein, Hollington and Storch (2018: 11) argue that the types of linguistic creativity found in youth language practices which are often highlighted in research on the subject are 'widespread, common and everyday phenomenon in language use and not special to youth languages', and that for this reason, youth language should not be marginalised and subjugated as a subject. While I agree that the language practices of youth, should neither be 'exoticised', nor marginalised, as they are centrally located within social formations rather than peripheral to language practices, I maintain that they are in fact linguistically noteworthy, and include prototypical features, patterns, and manipulations such as semantic and phonological disguise, deliberately creative shifts, metaphor, stylisation and so on. While I acknowledge that these strategies may also be used by children and adults, the youth phase as described above does appear to mark a time of increased experimentation with language. I also contend that the language practices of youth in African contexts are of special interest because of the interplay of multilingualism, migration patterns, colonialism and postcolonial language negotiations, and the 'melting pot' conditions of urban centres in the continent.

Inequalities between researchers and speakers

Differences in social status and education between the researcher(s) and participants can lead to inequality in power relations in any research project. Researchers involved in the study of African youth language are likely to be highly educated and speak and write in prestige languages and

varieties of languages such as, in ex-colonial countries, English and French – colonial languages which have maintained status in a large number of national contexts but are often only accessed by the wealthy. Meanwhile, the speakers of youth language, despite their diverse linguistic repertoires which may also include prestige languages, are solicited and emphasised for their use of vernacular and 'informal' varieties, running the risk of becoming linguistically monotone in descriptions in research publications.

In Africa, in urban centres particularly, there are high levels of multilingualism as well as style-shifting between contexts; yet researchers may be only participants in specific contexts, therefore eliciting partial repertoires from speakers. In addition, as with any fieldwork setting, researchers may go to the field with already established mind-sets and impressions which may be influenced by rigid academic traditions (such as documentation and categorisation traditions). These can constrain more fluid interpretations of the data, such as linguistic practice on the ground differing from that expected in terms of, for example, languages used, language mix and different interpretations of prestige and standard. In practice, academics are often what Tsotsitaal speakers would call 'softies' (Brookes, 2014) – oriented towards mainstream society and education – and who are unlikely to be able to successfully contextualise language practice based on a completely removed set of social realities. Without an understanding of the context, youth language often remains ambiguous or is misinterpreted because social context and knowledge is required to understand the meanings and metaphors.

There are furthermore some social and demographic factors that pose challenges to naturalistic data collection during fieldwork in any youth-based research. These include gender differences, generational differences and differences in cultural background. Differences in age are an important social variable in youth language research. As described above, the category of youth

itself is a flexible, culturally-influenced stage of life, made up of people who may not subscribe to the social and linguistic orders prescribed by the older members of the society, where 'old' is seen as a correlate to (linguistic) 'norms', traditional (and sometimes standard) language. For these reasons, a younger researcher can perhaps more easily integrate with and understand a group's dynamics and processes than an older researcher.

A related factor to generational differences is an understanding of the cultural background in which youth linguistic and social practices are embedded. Author and N. (2016) maintain that the wider sociocultural environment provides the resources for the creative use of language in the discourse of young people, who establish sets of common communication styles, lifestyle and popular culture references and norms in spite of their transcultural affiliations. In Nigeria for example young people may come from different ethnic groups like Efik, Ibibio, Oro, Igbo, Annang and Upper Cross-River but are united by the values of the peer group, such as social behaviours and choices of cultural forms, such as music and artefacts, from the available resources and practices. For example, in terms of Nigerian Youth Language practices, in the case of the Agaba Boys (a male street peer group in Calabar South, Nigeria), heterosexual practices, American and Naija hip-hop along with okele music, and dance styles such as 'the popular *yahooze*, *álántá*, *étíhí*, and *azonto* revolution' (Author, 2012: 389) are valorised. A researcher who is knowledgeable in the particular cultural practices of an urban youth group is more likely to correctly interpret linguistic practice, including references to popular culture, than one who is seen as *ínwáŋ* 'farm' ('a total stranger' in the language of the Agaba Boys) – or bari ('stupid/rural' in South African Tsotsitaal).

A different ethnic background of the researcher may also create distance, for example, in the case of White Europeans researching African settings and languages – a problematic situation

often not discussed in relation to linguistics but embedded in the history of the discipline (particularly in terms of missionary linguistics). White Europeans researching African contexts can present an outsider perspective, different from an insider view, and steeped in assumptions about modernity and what Roth-Gordon and Woronov (2009: 136) describe as a teleological perspective on development 'from the 'traditional' to the 'modern,' from the 'local' to the 'global,' and from the 'rural' to the 'urban.''. Critiques of intellectual colonialism levelled at African Studies and other Area Studies as well as Anthropology (Devisch, and Nyamnjoh, 2011), could equally be levelled at studies of African Youth Language that have been conducted from the perspective of, and using theories from, the global North. How do we resolve this in the current absence of a decolonised academy? One way I would suggest is to support and promote the research of local students and academics in the field of youth language research, including the development of Southern-relevant theory. However, I also suggest that an 'outsider' perspective on language practices as well as analyses from the established perspective of a discipline and its related theories can allow for useful interpretations of language practices.

There is an argument to be made in youth language research for academics co-creating knowledge with community members and participants. Ethnography (alternatively, ethnomethodology or linguistic ethnography) is perhaps the most likely approach to enable the necessary 'rapport' between researcher and community (Blommaert and Dong, 2010). Participant observation is central to ethnographic approaches, and in the rare cases where the researcher or research assistant is a member of the community, or at least a long-term participant, and simultaneously well trained in linguistics research methods, successful ethnographies have been described in African youth language research, e.g. Bogopa (1996), Brookes (2014), and Williams (2016) in South Africa; Wairungu (2014) on Sheng in Kenya, and Kamden (2015) on Camfranglais

in Cameroon. The strength of participant observation in youth language research is that it 'draws on a range of different perspectives on and approaches to understanding the very notion of community.' (Pritzker and Perrino, 2022: 127). This is because the concept of 'community' is often framed in terms of practices that allow access to human diverse population. Beyer (2015: 42) suggests that relevant data can only be achieved when 'the researcher becomes intimately acquainted with the group under scrutiny, or – even better – is already an integral part of it'. He suggests that collaborations with local researchers are one way to achieve this, and indeed, researchers such as Brookes (2014), Hurst and Buthelezi (2014) and Hollington and Makwabarara (2015) have utilised researchers who are (peripheral) members of peer groups to record naturalistic data. Other AYL studies use some aspects of ethnomethodologies and supplement with questionnaire approaches (e.g. Author, 2012; Githiora, 2018; Gunnink, 2014; Blench and Longtau, 2016; Nassenstein, 2015a; Hollington and Makwabarara, 2015).

Ethics

Some of the above issues suggest that the researcher needs to disclose the research agenda to the subjects of study and other members of the community in enlisting their co-operation and support, but as is well known, this affects data, as subjects or participants usually react and change (linguistic) behaviour when they know they are being studied or observed. In addition, of consideration are the ethics of eliciting or absenting information – for example in the choice between anonymity and demographic data. Demographic data is necessary for drawing correlations between language practice and social identities, individual performance and social history, and so on. In some cases, it is important to know the identity of the participants in the event of follow up

with further interviews, clarification or verification of data. Yet eliciting demographic data can threaten a participant's anonymity and in turn, possibly alter linguistic performance or end their participation in the research. Even more complicated is the use of video – which is necessary for the study of gesture and other semiotic systems, but, depending on how the data is analysed and published, can negate any anonymity provided in transcripts.

The specific aims of a project therefore tend to drive the information gathered about the participants; for example, Hurst and Buthelezi (2014: 188) describe how natural recordings were prioritised over demographics. The authors chose not to gather any personal details about participants in order to make the recordings the least threatening possible. Participants freely smoked marijuana, swore and discussed illicit behaviours and mutual acquaintances while being recorded on video. However, the linguistic data is left decontextualized – for example, what personal history factors might play into the use of English, Afrikaans or prison linguistic resources in the speech of the different participants. According to Jones and Gershon (2022), ethical considerations also entail giving people choice in terms of recording, taking extra steps to maintain confidentiality or erasing video after transcription. Ethics also mean thinking carefully about how and when to compensate people encountered in the field. Essentially, adherence to ethical standards underpins primary data collection in youth language or ethnographic research more broadly.

Authentic data

In youth language research 'we need to focus on individual speakers' practices in their different communicative contexts… Beyer (2015: 42). To that end, real-life data of communication in peer groups and small communities of practices need to be recorded alongside a full account of all other relevant semiotic subsystems like, for instance, posture, gesture and dressing style'. Beyer suggests

audio and in particular video recordings are needed but to use them with caution in regard to the 'individual rights of speakers, the obligations of the researcher and the effects of the 'observer's' paradox' (Beyer 2015: 42). Beyer (2014: 251) suggests that Hurst and Buthelezi's (2014) use of video recordings to capture semiotic systems 'beyond mere linguistic signs' was a major step in the direction of 'integrated data gathering'. Additional semiotic information can be gathered through video/visual data, leading to often revealing gesture analysis, such as that conducted by Brookes (2004), who was the first researcher in the field to capture video data of gestural behaviours associated with male youth language in Johannesburg. Brookes has continued to work with video data analysis of Tsotsitaal usage by young men in Vosloorus, South Africa, with her analyses represented in a number of publications (Brookes, 2014; Brookes and Kouassi, 2018).

Following on from Brookes' work, Hurst and Buthelezi (2014) compared and characterised the different features of the varieties of Durban and Cape Town Tsotsitaal. The study used data collection approaches including ethnography (participant observation) and video recordings to investigate variation in lexical items, the use of gestures and other semiotic markers in two varieties of Tsotsitaal to ascertain that regionally and contextually specific features exist. Beyond South Africa, no analyses of this type of data have been published to the author's knowledge; data which could contribute significantly to the development of a bigger AYL corpus (although it should be acknowledged that video requires intensive analysis, especially if gesture analysis is involved, and there may be publications in process). The strength of video recording is that it is essentially infinitely reviewable and sharable. Reviewable in the sense that it has the potential of being watched repeatedly without loss of quality, and shareable in that it can be transferred with ease to collaborators for redistribution of interpretation (Kohler and Murphy, 2022).

A large proportion of studies in the AYL field have relied on interviews and qualitative

questionnaires, or have undertaken attitude surveys, but it is a concern how accurately these types of approaches reflect actual language use. There is a danger of relying on audio and transcripts of interviews, as well as elicited translations, to represent youth language – as described above, in interview settings (rather than in the case of 'naturalistic' data capture), youth are often accommodating the interviewer, who, even if a youth, and a native speaker, in the act of conducting an interview still represents the academy or authority. Example phrases and words elicited within interview contexts, simply cannot represent natural data. Primarily elicitation-based studies include Nyota and Mareva, (2012), Adamo, (2013), and Githinji, (2006). However, Black and Riner (2022) have warned that research participants should be engaged on their own terms rather than imposing our own ways of doing things on them. This will help to eliminate power imbalance inherent in conventional interview format.

Unfortunately, in terms of grammatical analyses, some of the data in existing publications has been based on unreliable or unexplained methods of data collection, with data which exhibits apparent responses to interview-type questions, along with reconstructed sentences by both speakers and researchers themselves. Other studies have drawn examples from previous publications without explaining the secondary source methodologies, making representativeness difficult to evaluate (see Schroder, 2007; Ploog, 2008). Although studies based on these types of data can be valuable depending on the research aims and questions, their limitations should at least be acknowledged.

'Natural language data' is of course preferential to study grammatical structure and as described, recent studies have attempted to get the most natural or 'authentic' data possible, although often encountering limitations, see e.g. Mesthrie and Hurst (2013) who acknowledged a continuum between youth register and urban vernacular in their data. It is important to distinguish

on what basis a study makes the claim that the data is, for example, Nouchi and not (urban) vernacular French; Tsotsitaal and not urban isiZulu. As argued elsewhere, we need to be careful to separate data on youth language and data on urban varieties, and contact from 'manipulation' (broadly). The purposes/effects of an urban (contact) vernacular are very different from the purposes/ effects of a youth (manipulated) register - the latter highlights (group and individual) identities; the former flattens ethnicities. Yet it is nevertheless difficult if not impossible to separate 'youth language' from the urban vernacular because they overlap significantly as linguistic objects. How can we construct data collection techniques to ensure the capture of the most authentic 'youth language'?

An example of a strategy to elicit natural linguistic data is that of Beck (2016), who evaluated linguistic performance in an educational game on HIV/AIDS among youth in Nairobi. She used 'ethnographic conversational research' (Beck 2016: 19) to explore knowledge production amongst her respondents. Elsewhere (Beck, 2015:55) she states that the approach had the benefit of capturing 'naturally occurring, i.e. practical use of language'. This data enabled her to firstly identify that the language practices were not remarkably different from Swahili (Beck, 2015: 54), and to identify some linguistic features: 'the high degree of lexical innovation' along with some restructuring mainly involving nouns classes and concords. The study leads her to conclude that Sheng is 'the name given to urban/ urban youth practices of which linguistic practices form an intrinsic part' (Beck, 2015: 70-71). However, the context of the game, outside of normal peer group contexts such as friends' houses and street/outside spaces, would likely prevent the use of the more ingroup and performative practices observed in work such as that by Brookes (2014) and Hurst (2016). Similarly, group interviews or focus groups, techniques which are intended to enable group members to interact with one another on a particular topic or using a particular linguistic code (see

e.g. Author 2012) have the benefit of allowing for more spontaneous discussion wherein more natural language may be produced. A weakness would be the introduction of a level of formality which can constrain the use of certain explicit codes like sexual taboo, swear words, abusive words and expressions. The question remains whether in these kinds of methodologies, researchers can make claims that the data represents authentic youth language. The data may nevertheless be useful to provide examples of the unmarked urban variety for comparison; and for metalinguistic discussion to gauge attitudes for example.

Strategies for gathering 'authentic' data in previous African youth language research have included the use of lapel microphones on participants (Aycard, 2014), RAs from the community of practice (Brookes, 2014, Hurst and Buthelezi, 2014) and repeat recordings – in which it is hoped that participants get used to the presence of a recording device (Hurst and Buthelezi, 2014) – and increasingly, the study of youth languages by speakers themselves (e.g. Ntshangase, 1993; Ndlovu, 2018; Kamanga, 2014; Karanja, 2010). The ideal data would represent the typical interactions, language play or banter, and language dynamics within a peer/friendship group context in the prototypical environment in which they interact.

In addition when studying a youth friendship or peer group in particular, it is important to identify the roles and status of different members; along with considerations of what is authentic language, there are questions of who is an authentic speaker. Beyer (2015 42) suggests a focus on 'social network constellations'; Brookes (2014: 377) worked with linguistic innovators; while Nassenstein (2015b: 86) describes 'saccadic leaders' (from Labov's (2001) study in Philadelphia, relating those speakers who jump ahead in sound change[1], adapted by Nassenstein to describe 'the most creative or influential speakers' who initiate linguistic innovation'). These authors emphasise

[1] From the term 'saccades' referring to the rapid jumping movement of eyes when they scan ahead e.g. during reading.

the role of influential members of a community of practice who may provide critical information about practice and how practice evolves in peer groups. Informants more peripheral to the group may draw on practices from elsewhere and not be up to date with the latest slang. As a result they may be considered less 'authentic' in terms of linguistic practice by core members of the group, in situations where young people are judged on the skilfulness of their linguistic performance.

As an example of different authenticities of users, Brookes (2014) has described four 'social levels among young men' in her research context, Vosloorus in South Africa. In terms of these levels, she suggests that the labels '*cheese boys'*, '*softies'* and '*bhujwas'* are used to refer to young men who have completed high school and whose 'orientation is towards mainstream society and activities beyond the confines of the township'. The next level is the 'typical township *authi* 'guy' who spends more of his time in the township and on the street corner', and who she suggests are mostly unemployed and involved in the daily township scene. The third level involves 'young men who have mostly dropped out of school and are unemployed. Almost all their time is spent on the township streets'. This group are labelled '*pantsulas'* in the township, referring to a style of dressing, or to young men who are 'rough, disrespectable, or engage in delinquent behavior'. The fourth social level refers to unsuccessful pantsulas or *vuilbobs* meaning 'vagabonds'.

Regarding language use, Brookes (2014: 366) suggests that 'the most distinctive and socially significant variation is according to [these] four social levels among male youth' and describes how particular lexical items and gestures mark speakers as members of one or other group. For example, infrequent use of slang lexicon, use of English words, and gestures which visually illustrate what he says in speech, mark a speaker as a 'softy' (Brookes, 2014: 368). She suggests that softy speech is 'predictable and lacks innovation' (Brookes, 2014: 368). On the other hand, she identifies a particular speaker in her research setting 'Johnny', as the 'linguistic innovator

and trendsetter in his section of the township' (Brookes, 2014: 377). She (Brookes, 2014: 373) analyses his use of lexicon from the male slang repertoire, his intonation, body movements and performative and discursive gestures, and identifies these features as being typical of the *pantsula* social level. Brookes states that 'Groups that express a *pantsula* style and outlook and are economically successful through illegal means are usually viewed as the most streetwise and authentic in terms of espousing a "genuine" township male identity.' (Brookes, 2014: 377)

I remain cautious about assigning individuals to social level categorisations, in light of the discussion earlier regarding identity, and it should be noted both that the social levels described may not hold relevance beyond the narrow fieldwork site, and also that linguistic performance is differently evaluated by different people. For this reason, claims to authenticity should be viewed as entirely subjective. Nevertheless, Brookes' research highlights that a long-term engagement with and analysis of a core context, particularly focusing on speakers who have status and may be considered innovators, may hold the key to the most (relatively) 'authentic' youth language data and performances.

Aside from Brookes' work, as well as that by Githiora (2018), there have been few longitudinal studies of youth language, which could help to understand the interplay between social, political and linguistic dynamics. The longitudinal approach can provide evidence of language variation over time, for example reactivation and manipulation of existing lexical items from a source language, the introduction of culturally relevant borrowings, or syntactic, morphological and phonological change (e.g. a shift from Afrikaans as base language to Zulu/Sotho such as that described by Brookes and Lekgoro, 2014).

A number of publications have taken historical approaches to youth language research. For example, Brookes and Lekgoro (2014) examine from a socio-historical perspective Bantu- and

Afrikaans-based varieties in two different townships. The researchers used observations, interviews, focus groups, and elicitation of translations into the 'urban male youth varieties' to establish some of the 'typical lexicon' as well as the grammatical base (Brookes and Lekgoro, 2014: 149). In this way they traced a shift in grammatical base for youth varieties that was a result of apartheid social engineering, yet they were also able to trace continuity in the language practices. While the social history interviews are necessarily perception data, this mixed methods approach allowed for an investigation into the relations between social context, historical events and language use.

Finally, another source for data on AYLs are various social media platforms, and public sources such as music lyrics, radio discourse, dictionaries and newspapers. Once again depending on the aims of the research the data has to be interrogated in terms of how it is constructed, the author(s) and interpreter(s), and how 'authentic' it can be considered with these things in mind, particularly in light of internet anonymity and pseudonymity, and the inability to check variables such as gender, age etc. Some examples of studies of music lyrics include Mate (2012) who analyses Zimbabwean lyrics from YouTube. He categorises lyrics as 'patterned 'texts' which in various ways reflect and reveal ideas about cultural norms and values, identity, and about economic, social and political struggles' and therefore uses his analysis to show 'emerging intergenerational and gender identities and struggles' (Mate, 2012: 111). With this research aim in mind, he avoids Beck's criticism that poetic texts are 'not representative of everyday linguistic behaviour' because poetic rules both limit linguistic choices, and 'explore the limits of what is linguistically possible' (Beck, 2015: 54). These particular characteristics of lyrics enable a number of studies which focus precisely on poetics, for example Vierke (2015) analyses the poetic aspects of Sheng hip hop, Williams (2016) analyses rap performance in Cape Town's hip-hop culture, while Inyabri (2016)

analyses stylisation in Naija Afro hip hop lyrics. A number of other examples of analyses of lyrics as well as online African youth language data can be seen in Hurst-Harosh and Kanana (2018), along with relevant discussions of data limitations. Some scholars approach their data using discourse analysis techniques (e.g. Kanana and Kebeya, 2018; Kanana and Hurst-Harosh, 2018) thereby focusing on the linguistic performances and strategies of youth within the online space.

Mesthrie (2014) analyses written newspaper texts: the aim of his study is to show the use of English-based tsotsitaals in two written texts. He demonstrates that this variety can be written down for social effect but that it was not easy for writers to sustain across different styles and for different pragmatic effects, for example, for more serious authorial tasks, there were discernable shifts to more standard grammar and lexis. Therefore the form of tsotsitaal as a written text is an explicit consideration of his analysis.

Considering all the different data sources described in this subsection, in terms of 'authentic' youth language and 'natural' data in the African youth language field, thus far, Brookes (2004, 2014) and Hurst (2016) appear to have made the closest attempts, both based in South Africa. Everything else has been done by indirect means – what people say (interviews), written texts, recollection (elicitation), and secondary data – a set of indirect strategies. The emphasis in future projects should be on generating more of the former type of data from other African countries.

A blueprint for youth language research methods

In terms of a blueprint for how to conduct youth language research, this article proposes that the approach taken by Brookes (over the course of her research represented in publications from 2004-2014) which emphasises understanding the social status of, and semiotic practices of, members

within a community of practice or peer group, coupled with longitudinal naturalistic data, is the approach most likely to provide insights into a particular case.

Important considerations include clear definitions and theoretical frameworks, as well as problematisation of researcher-participant dynamics and their ethical considerations. While these points apply to much sociolinguistic research, I also recommend in the case of (African) youth language that the field focus on analyses which go beyond word lists and considers stylisation and performance. This demands rich data, and I suggest video data recordings of youth involved in prototypical social interactions, such as that gathered by Hurst (2008 and onwards) and Brookes (2004 and onwards) allows for the richest analyses of all aspects of youth communication.

More broadly, youth language research needs to place methodological considerations forefront if claims are to be substantial. As described above, many authors in the African youth language literature have previously not made their methods of data collection explicit, which makes it very difficult to evaluate their linguistic claims. However, the field has expanded and improved methodologically in recent years, incorporating different approaches from a range of different sub-fields of linguistic and sociolinguistics, providing new perspectives and ways to understand and describe the phenomena. Beck (2015: 55) recommends an approach that starts with 'actual everyday linguistic practices such as conversations, and which in a methodologically relevant way indiscriminately looks at the data thus obtained', in order to get a broader perspective on these practices and their role in wider linguistic repertoires and in relation to other registers used by speakers. The discussion above supports this, and I tend to agree with her also, that a range of data collection methods are useful for different purposes: 'Linguistic experiments [such as elicited data] and [naturalistic] corpus data may complement each other depending on the circumstances and questions of research' (Beck, 2015: 57). For example, approaches which prioritise linguistic

description can be complemented by those which prioritise other aspects of the performance of youth styles; quantitative data on social spread can be underpinned by close qualitative analyses of peer group practices. With the rich array of approaches and disciplines that have contributed thus far to the field of study, the future development of the field looks promising.

Focus on vocabulary or grammar

As described previously (e.g. Brookes, 2014), young people's linguistic practices involve discursive and social behaviours and actions alongside stylistic use of registers and styles in different contexts. Historically, research on African youth language focused narrowly on vocabulary, in keeping with slang studies elsewhere (Hurst, 2014: iii). Slang studies have typically not been regarded as serious linguistic investigation or sociolinguistic study, and have failed to take extralinguistic practices into account, often being narrowly restricted to lists of terms and etymologies. While articles on African youth language still commonly list lexical items or include them as an appendix or glossary (see Kouega, 2003 for Camfranglais; Githiora 2002 and Ogechi, 2005 for Sheng), analyses of lexicon has shifted in recent works towards studies of lexical manipulations in AYLs including semantic change and manipulation (Nyota and Mareva, 2012 for Shona Street Lingo, Hollington, 2015 for Yarada K'wank'wa from Addis Ababa), morphophonological encrypting procedures (Manfredi, 2008; Mugaddam; 2015 for Rendók Randuk from Sudan, Nassenstein, 2015b for Langila in Kinshasa) and metaphor strategies (Hurst, 2016 for Tsotsitaal, Author and N., 2016; Author, 2024; Author et al., 2024 for youth 'slanguage' in Nigeria). Youth language research involving the collection of wordlists and building a corpus of slang words therefore often goes beyond simple description in the analysis. As described above, however, vocabulary lists can be problematic in terms of classification of slang terms and

categorising terms as youth language or slang more broadly.

More recently, analyses have moved away from lexicon and emphasised grammatical processes, such as Mesthrie and Hurst, (2013), Gunnink, (2014), Mous and Barasa, (*fc*) Manfredi, (2008) Sande, (2015) and Kanana and Kebeya, (2018). In particular, studies have focused on identifying the 'base' language – the language which supplies the morpho-syntactic frame, rather than emphasising the languages that contribute resources to the lexicon. This move is in response to claims that AYLs are 'mixed languages' or becoming urban vernaculars. As described elsewhere, Hurst and M. (2013) argue that linguistically, Tsotsitaal is a stylised register which takes the most informal variety of the local language as its base; while Kanana and Kebeya describe how Sheng's base is urban (or Nairobi) Swahili.

Despite the advances made by these kinds of linguistic analyses, they nevertheless have limitations. Youth language is used in particular social contexts and accompanied by body language and other practices. As mentioned above, too few studies have used video data as a basis for analysis; studied social networks; and looked at style shifting for example in the practice of an individual or individuals moving between contexts. Few studies of youth language have taken a variationist or other approach to deal with style-shifting, nor with youth language-related phonological or morphological variation, amongst speakers of a particular language. Some research such as Gunnink (2014) has looked at different varieties in use in a community, specifically in her case, Sowetan Zulu (the vernacular) versus Sowetan Iscamtho. But the interactive style-shifting between varieties in daily use remains in the main unexamined, although a number of studies have begun to apply approaches such as crossing (see Rampton, 1995), style or stylisation, and the negotiation of identity to African youth language contexts (e.g. Hurst, 2009; Awadelkarim, 2013; Chariatte, 2016).

Finally, as far as the author is aware, very little has been done in regards to quantitative research on African Youth Languages; they often do not feature in census data so little is known about the spread quantitatively. One of the few studies that has explored the quantitative approach is Githiora (2002) who used a mixed method to study the status of Sheng in Kenya, and included a quantitative sample of school pupils which analysed language use in different contexts, including Sheng. Additionally Ndlovu (2018) analyses the spread of metaphors from the Ndebele-based youth sociolect S'ncamtho to peri-urban and rural areas outside Bulawayo, along the variables of age, sex and level of education. His research responds to Beyer's (2015: 42) suggestion that 'Qualitative and quantitative analyses of correlations between social and linguistic behaviour within the relevant groups in relation to different contexts, places and situations will bring out the focal point of norm development and stabilization of urban codes'.

Conclusion

This paper ultimately aimed to enrich AYLs methodological literature and challenge researchers to rethink the nature of contemporary AYLs research. The two-pronged objective of this paper was to provide methodological insights and blueprints for AYLs research. Essentially, the paper has engaged discussions in the extant literature around definitions of the concepts of 'youth' and 'identity', and problematised some of the more essentialist understanding of these notions which have been in circulation. Youthfulness is a critical developmental phase of life, and language influences the way young people shape their social identity and navigate their transition to adulthood. This is why they are believed to be the most engaged category in creative and manipulative language use (Eckert, 2012). Since language is a strategic priority to young people, it

often contributes to othering process or exclusion which usually creates the gulf between the researcher and speakers of youth languages. This study has broadened understanding of some of the problems with the ways AYLs have been researched often by eternal researchers using colonial languages like English and French, and as such not getting the fuller picture of what constitutes youth repertoire in the African sociolinguistic context. The study has examined the indispensability of ethical norms in promoting dignity and welfare of research participants and guaranteeing the collection of authentic data. It has proposed some blueprints or research models to guide researchers in putting components of their research together; to help them in their investigations to meet the desired objectives. Significantly, some ground-breaking studies on vocabulary, grammar and style in African youth languages were evaluated to identify the relationship between various constituents of youth languages' discourses and showcase their versatility and explanatory potential as unique modes of communication in their own rights. Finally, methodological insights highlighted in this paper are nonetheless exhaustive but should rather be seen as a springboard to further engage the methodological literature on AYLs research as an evolving field of inquiry.

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Methodological Issues in African Youth Languages Research

Reviewer Affiliation
Universitas Islam Riau, English Language Education
Manuscript ID:
ETH-24-0113.R1
Manuscript Type
Original Research Papers
Keywords
African youth languages, Identity, Agency, Ethnographic methods, Fieldwork
Date Assigned:
16-Jan-2025
Date Review Returned:
24-Feb-2025

Please rate the following criterias below on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the weakest and 10 the strongest)

	Weak									Strong
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Clarity of paper thesis								✓		
Thesis supported by well-developed arguments									✓	
Appropriate connections to the literature								✓	✓	
Contribution to theoretically informed ethnography									✓	
Clearly written									✓	

Recommendation

Minor Revision

Would you be willing to review a revision of this manuscript?

Yes

Confidential Comments to the Editor

Comments to the Author

1. The literature is thorough; the author could enhance clarity by explicitly stating how specific referenced studies directly inform the development of the proposed methodological blueprint.

2. Minor grammatical and typographical errors could be addressed through careful proofreading.

3. Long paragraphs could be broken down into shorter segments to enhance readability and engagement.

Files attached

Do you want to get recognition for this review on Web of Science?

Yes

Author's Response
Files attached

Response to Reviewers' Comments: Manuscript ID ETH-24-0113.R1

Reviewers' Comments to Author:

Reviewer: 3

Comments to the Author
This is an interesting contribution to the field of youth language and identity. Thank you for giving me the privilege to read it. A few points need some clarification.

1. Line 10. I would prefer seeks to expand to or contribute to... "seeks to follow". If following, then there is no need for this research, I guess.

   I have adopted the suggestion of this reviewer. The expression now reads as…This article seeks to expand the arguments of these authors by critically …

   2. Both the big quotes from Bucholtze (2002: 526) and from Kiessling and Mous (2004:303) were not engaged or interrogated. If they are central to the manuscript's theorisation of youth and identity, it should engage it, point out how they contribute to our understanding of the concepts being investigated. And if they are not, or just paraphrase.

   The two quotations have been paraphrased to fit into discourses of youth category (re)construction and linguistic creativity respectively.

   3. It will be more convincing to mention at least 2 societies/cultures that define youthfulness. For example, in my culture, you are identified as a youth when you join an age grade, and you become a "man" when your "age grade comes out" (perform certain rites for them to be fully integrated into men's circle where they are allowed to participate in decision-making in the community). This can take up to 6-7 years before an age grade "comes out"; largely, it depends on the socio-economic standing of the members of the age-grade. If we have examples like this, we can then understand the complex dynamics of youthfulness, and their language(s). Surely, youth has its language and it varies from society to society. This is incontestable.

   This discussion was basically about how societies construct youthfulness. It has little or no engagement with youth language hence, it is peripheral to the concern of this paper.

   4. The article claims that African youth language scholars have not made their methodology clear. I think that this is misleading. Research is context-based, for context is the spine of meaning; importantly, the phenomenon being investigated determines its methodological approach. If the article wants to hold tightly to its claim, let it go ahead

and provide us with studies whose methodological approach are not clear, and, of course, point out why so.

I have revised my earlier position that scholars in AYLs have not made their methodology explicit to the claim that they failed to incorporate different approaches from a range of different sub-fields of linguistic and sociolinguistics, which makes it very difficult to evaluate their linguistic claims.

5. Finally, I would wish to see a conclusion that speaks in a nuanced way to the overall objective of the study.

The conclusion has reviewed the findings and put them in the context of the overall research. It has provided a recap of the major argument(s) of the paper, and has highlighted the summary of the work or foregrounded its findings. There are also recommendation(s) for future research.

I guess these are issues that the manuscript can actually deal with.

Reviewer: 4

Comments to the Author
1. The literature is thorough; the author could enhance clarity by explicitly stating how specific referenced studies directly inform the development of the proposed methodological blueprint.

I have shown in specific terms how the various scholarship on AYLs have shaped the development of the blueprint with particular reference to Brookes (2004, 2014).

2. Minor grammatical and typographical errors could be addressed through careful proofreading.
The manuscript has been proofread and all identified errors have been corrected.

3. Long paragraphs could be broken down into shorter segments to enhance readability and engagement.
Long paragraphs have been shortened in the manuscript.

Thank you for submitting your review of Manuscript ID ETH-24-0113.R1 for Ethnography

1 message

Ethnography <onbehalfof@manuscriptcentral.com> Mon, Feb 24, 2025 at 11:20 PM
Reply-To: eth.pra@sagepub.com
To: wahyunis@edu.uir.ac.id

24-Feb-2025

Dear Mrs. Wahyuni:

Thank you for reviewing manuscript # ETH-24-0113.R1 entitled "Methodological Issues in African Youth Languages Research" for Ethnography.

In recognition of your continued support, Ethnography and our publisher Sage are pleased to offer you 60 days complimentary online access to all journals published by Sage. Register at http://journals.sagepub.com/page/help/reviewer-access to activate access to content for all Sage titles. To also benefit from a 25% discount on all Sage books ordered online, go to the Sage website (http://www.sagepublications.com/) and add the Sage books that you would like to purchase to your shopping cart. When checking out, enter the Promotion Code GL10JR0001 when prompted. This will automatically deduct 25% from your final bill.

We are collaborating with Web of Science to give you the recognition you deserve for your peer review contributions. If you opted in for recognition on Web of Science when you submitted this review, you will shortly receive an email inviting you to claim your review on the site. However, if you have missed to opt in while submitting the review, you would still be able to do so by registering at https://access.clarivate.com/login?app=wos following which you'll be required to forward 'review receipt' emails to reviews@webofscience.com and the review will be added to your profile. You can also export your profile as a CV for job or funding applications.

On behalf of the Editors of Ethnography, we appreciate the voluntary contribution that each reviewer gives to the Journal. We thank you for your participation in the online review process and hope that we may call upon you again to review future manuscripts.

Sincerely,
Sakshi Chauhan
Ethnography Editorial Office
eth.pra@sagepub.com

Ethnography - Decision on Manuscript ID ETH-24-0113.R1

1 message

Ethnography <onbehalfof@manuscriptcentral.com> Thu, Mar 13, 2025 at 6:36 PM
Reply-To: eth.pra@sagepub.com
To: eloisamartin@hotmail.com

13-Mar-2025
ID: ETH-24-0113.R1
Title: Methodological Issues in African Youth Languages Research

Dear Reviewers:

Thank you once again for reviewing the above-referenced paper. With your help the following final decision has now been reached: Minor Revision.

All reviewers' comments are included at the foot of this letter.

We appreciate your time and effort in reviewing this paper and greatly value your assistance as a reviewer for Ethnography.

Sincerely,

Divya Arya
eth.pra@sagepub.com

On behalf of

Dr. Eloísa Martin
Editor in Chief, Ethnography

Reviewers' Comments to Author:

Reviewer: 3

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