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Theoretical considerations on linguistic innovation through new combinations in African youth language practices, exemplified in Yanké and Langila (DR Congo)

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Abstract: In youth language practice, diverse creative linguistic strategies are applied to derive a language variant distinct from what is perceived as the norm. Since linguistic innovation is of primary interest for the study of “deviant” speech varieties, this paper discusses whether the structural similarities and differences observed between African youth languages can be addressed by determining the linguistic strategies employed by speakers in order to innovate. Defining innovation as a new combination of existing material, I identify two higher-level types of practices that I propose lead to linguistic innovation: (i) combining two or more resources from different languages in the speaker’s linguistic repertoire, and (ii) using a linguistic strategy with a part of the speaker’s linguistic repertoire. To illustrate these two types, reference is made to the Lingala-based youth language practices Yanké and Langila. Although both types of strategy may occur simultaneously, I argue that Yanké speakers rely more on combining different languages from their repertoire, whereas Langila speakers more heavily rely on applying creative language games to their repertoire. The question is raised as to whether the structural differences between the two youth language practices can be accounted for by determining the type of innovation practices employed by the speakers.

Keywords: innovation; innovation strategies; typology of African youth languages; Congolese youth languages

1 Introduction

African youth languages are characterized by deliberate language manipulations that result in a divergence from prevailing linguistic norms (see Dimmendaal 2011: 249; Kießling and Mous 2004). The creative force of the speakers and the variety of “deviant” linguistic strategies that have been detected as being exploited in youth language practices lead to the association of African youth languages with the notion of ‘innovation’. Regularly used in scholarly work, the abstract nature of this term and its broad scope make it an interesting topic for discussion in its own right. Among other linguistic practices, African youth languages can be argued to be characterized by extensive linguistic innovations. These innovations may or may not become established parts of the speaker’s repertoire.¹ This paper discusses whether African youth languages can be approached in a typological manner by identifying linguistic strategies that are applied to create a language variant distinctive from what is perceived by the speakers as the linguistic norm. Thus, this contribution discusses whether youth language practices can be characterized by the type of innovative linguistic strategies that are applied by their speakers, also assuming that the type of innovation strategy determines the structural features of the youth language. Accordingly, structural similarities and differences between African youth language practices might

¹ Beyond becoming part of the repertoire of a “set” and of a “young” community of practice, linguistic innovations and youth language practices might undergo a wide social spread, as is the case, e.g., with Yanké (Nassenstein et al. 2018: 14).

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be accounted for by determining the linguistic strategies employed by speakers in order to innovate. We could then consider whether identifying different innovation strategies may help in detecting structural similarities between youth languages from different geographical regions, as well as structural differences between youth languages that are spoken within the same area that are based on the same language. By drawing on a definition of innovation as the new combination of the already existing, I propose two higher-level types of practices that are applied by youth language speakers in order to innovate and thereby create a distinct speech variety:

- i. The combination of two or more resources from different languages in the speaker's linguistic repertoire
- ii. The utilization of a linguistic strategy with a part of the speaker's linguistic repertoire

These two types of innovation practices are exemplified in Yanké (also referred to as Lingala ya Bayankée) and Langila, both of which are youth language practices spoken in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo); both based on the Bantu language Lingala (C30b in the classification of Maho 2009). As I argue, structural differences between these two youth language practices can be approached by considering different types of innovation strategies applied by speakers: Yanké is generally characterized by the combination of resources (both lexical and grammatical) from different languages in the speaker's linguistic repertoire (among others, Lingala and French), whereas Langila is rather characterized by the second strategy, the application of a linguistic strategy – creative language games – to the existing repertoire.²

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 briefly discusses the term 'innovation' in the context of African youth languages. In Section 3, I elaborate on two innovation practices proposed in this paper, exemplifying the strategy of combining resources from different languages in the speaker's repertoire using data from the youth language Yanké (see Nassenstein 2014), and the practice of combining a linguistic strategy with a given repertoire using data from Langila (see Nassenstein 2015).³ In the final Section 4, the approach of categorizing African youth languages based on their innovation practices and some resulting implications are discussed, and the paper closes with some final remarks and thoughts.

2 On innovation and innovation strategies in African youth language practices

There are various ways of approaching the concept of innovation; however, the abstract notion remains difficult to define and narrow down. In this contribution, I apply an understanding of innovation, in the context of language, as denoting linguistic material – lexical or grammatical – that is perceived as new in a given context. This context can be understood as the linguistic repertoire of a speaker or a shared repertoire of the community of practice. Drawing on this understanding of innovation, an innovative element does not necessarily have to be radically new in order to be understood as such. The lexeme or grammatical construction might be found elsewhere, but is perceived as new in the given context. Referring to the well-known economist Joseph Alois Schumpeter (1883–1950), who conceptualized innovation as “the doing of new things or the doing of things that are already done, in a new way” (as cited in Freudenberger and Mensch 1975: 14), I want to approach innovation in the context of language as the product of the combination of already existing linguistic material in a new way. Applying this understanding to African youth languages, it can be argued that new linguistic material is a product of the new combination of elements of the speakers' repertoire. As indicated in Section 1, I propose two

2 This paper presents a theoretical thought experiment exemplified in Yanké and Langila. What is missing, however, is the speakers' perspective on the issues discussed here. Including this perspective in future research and reflections on youth language practices and innovation would be both interesting and important. Furthermore, the historical and sociolinguistic contexts of Yanké and Langila, referred to as a case study in this paper, are crucial for understanding innovation strategies and pathways. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers who pointed this out. The interested reader is referred to Gondola (2009), Nassenstein (2014, 2015) and Wilson (2012) to learn more about historical and sociolinguistic aspects of the two youth language practices discussed here.

3 This paper deals with theoretical concerns regarding youth language practices and innovation, without introducing new data.

higher-level innovation strategies: (i) innovation through new combinations of two or more resources from different languages in the speaker's repertoire, or (ii) innovation through applying a linguistic strategy to the repertoire. As I discuss in this paper, both practices lead to linguistic innovation and thus to speech varieties with characteristics distinguishing them from what is determined to be the norm, but resulting in different structural features. However, this division does not suggest that speakers or communities of practice do either (i) or (ii) exclusively; I assume that they most commonly apply both innovation practices at the same time, although the two might be applied to varying degrees in different youth language practices. These theoretical considerations may offer insights in the productive comparison of African youth languages, potentially aiding in the identification of structural similarities and differences among them.

To illustrate these thoughts on innovation and different types of innovation strategies, reference is made to two Lingala-based youth language practices – Yanké and Langila – both of which are spoken in Kinshasa, the capital of DR Congo.

3 Applying the theoretical framework to youth language data

By defining innovation as the recombination of already existing linguistic material, I identify two higher-level types of practices that lead to linguistic innovation. As structural similarities are found among youth languages spanning various geographical regions of Africa, alongside structural differences between youth languages of the same area, this theoretical framework might help us in productively comparing African youth languages. It may provide an approach to investigating the underlying reasons for similarities or differences in the speech practices in question. The theoretical considerations outlined in Section 2 are exemplified in the following, using data from the Congolese youth languages Yanké and Langila. Both linguistic practices are based on the Bantu language Lingala and originated within the same city, so it could be argued that speakers of Yanké and Langila have comparable linguistic repertoires that they are able to draw on.⁴ Still, these two youth languages differ significantly from one another in their linguistic properties. As I propose here, this can be approached by considering the linguistic strategies applied by the speakers in order to innovate. Considering selected morphosyntactic features of the two youth language practices, I approach the question of whether the structural differences between the two can be accounted for by identifying and determining the type of innovation practices employed by the speakers. As I argue, speakers of both varieties rely on new combinations of already existing material – specifically, the combination of two different languages from their repertoire (e.g., calquing, structural borrowing), or the novel combination of a method of realization (e.g., new morphophonological rules) with their repertoire. I propose that speakers of Yanké tend to rely on innovations of type (i), combining different languages of their repertoire with each other, as the youth language is characterized by frequent lexical and structural borrowing from French, as well as from other languages such as Kikongo and English. Langila speakers, however, rely more heavily on applying creative language games to their repertoire – that is, innovation of type (ii) – in order to achieve the linguistic deviation pursued.

3.1 Newly combining two or more resources from different languages in the speaker's linguistic repertoire: exemplified in Yanké

Yanké (or Lingala ya Bayankée) is an African youth language that arose in the 1970s in the capital of the DR Congo, Kinshasa. It is based on the Bantu language Lingala, but differs from it to a degree that it is not easily intelligible for outsiders and is considered a fully functioning youth language (see Nassenstein 2014). Deviations of Yanké from Lingala are strongly concentrated on the morphosyntactic level and can often be traced back to language contact with French (see Kunzmann 2022). Instances of calquing and structural borrowing from French can be

⁴ However, as an anonymous reviewer rightly pointed out, the social backgrounds of Yanké and Langila speakers can differ greatly in various aspects, such as their level of education.

observed, for example, in the verb phrase. To express reciprocity, the verbal extension *-an*, which is commonly used in Lingala, can be substituted by a construction combining the reflexive prefix *mi-* with the verb *-tíka* ‘let’ (Nassenstein 2014: 62), as seen in (1):⁵

- (1) *Ba-zó-mi-tík-a bá-bay-é nwa móko síma móko.*
 SM2-PROG-REFL-let-FV SM2-smoke-FV marijuana one after one
 ‘They let/make each other smoke marijuana one after another.’
 (adapted from Nassenstein 2014: 62)

Constructions like these very much resemble French reciprocal constructions using the reflexive pronoun *se* in combination with the verb *laisser* and thus can be considered an instance of calquing.

Comparable strategies are used to derive causative meaning:

- (2) a. *Sókí o-súndol-í nga na-bay-é nwa póro a-o-bóté nga.*
 if SM2SG-cause-PRS 1SG.OBJ SM1SG-smoke-FV marijuana father SM1-FUT-beat-FV 1SG.OBJ
 ‘If you make me smoke marijuana, father will beat me up.’
 (adapted from Nassenstein 2014: 62)
- b. *Ó wáná e-sál-ak-a ná-lí-a butú mobimba.*
 DEM DEM SM.INAN-do-HAB-FV SM1SG.SBJV-eat-FV night whole
 ‘This causes me to eat all night long.’
 (adapted from Nassenstein 2014: 62)

Here, speakers make use of the verbs *-súndola* for ‘cause’, as in (2a), or *-sála* ‘do’, as in (2b), which accompany the verb denoting the lexical meaning. Both periphrastic constructions can be argued to be instances of calquing.

Besides that, structural and lexical borrowing techniques are found in passive constructions, as seen in (3):

- (3) *Na-pal-é mo-to wáná yó o-zal-ákí boloké na lapólís.*
 SM1SG-inform-FV CL1-person DEM 2SG.SBJ SM2SG-be-PST arrest COM police
 ‘I told that man that you were (had been) arrested by the police.’
 (adapted from Nassenstein 2014: 63)

Again, the verbal extension commonly used in Lingala is substituted, in this case by the auxiliary verb *kozala* ‘to be’ in combination with a participle borrowed from French (Nassenstein 2014: 63).

The overarching strategy of these and other linguistic innovations in Yanké is, as I argue, the combination of different languages (in these examples, French and Lingala) from the repertoire, both grammatically and lexically. The application of French grammatical constructions to the Bantu language is used by speakers to create profound changes on the morphosyntactic level. Complex morphosyntactic constructions like those given for the reciprocal and the passive above illustrate the depth of deviation of Yanké from Lingala, and why the youth language practice is argued to be a fully functioning youth language rather than a language game.

3.2 Newly combining a linguistic strategy with the repertoire: exemplified in Langila

Langila is a Lingala-based youth language practice that emerged in Kinshasa. However, it is a much more recent phenomenon than Yanké, as it first appeared in the early 2000s. It arose amongst young artists of the city and spread from the art scene to be used among young people in general (Nassenstein 2015: 81–82). Whereas Yanké is considered a fully functioning youth language with characteristic deviations from its base language Lingala on a morphosyntactic level, Langila might be perceived by some as a language game rather than a youth language.

⁵ Examples follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Abbreviations used: 1SG/2SG first/second person singular; CL noun class; COM comitative; DEM demonstrative; FUT future; FV final vowel; HAB habitual; INAN inanimate; OBJ object; PROG progressive; PRS present; PST past; REFL reflexive; SBJ subject; SBJV subjunctive; SM subject marker; SM1/2 subject marker, class 1/2.

Langila speakers mainly use semantic and phonological manipulations in order to set themselves apart linguistically. Amongst these manipulations are, for example, various instances of onomastic synecdoches and substitutions, such as the use of the brand name of a famous bakery, *kanga journée*, as a lexeme to denote ‘bread’ in general, or the use of *miamí*, which is a combination of the Yanké noun *myá* ‘hunger’ and the place name *Miami*, for ‘hunger, hungry’ (Nassenstein 2015: 87–88). Lexemes are thus regularly alternated or partially substituted with personal names, place names, brand names, and so on, which are used to refer to something they are usually not linked to semantically, often because they sound similar. Wilson (2014) refers to this as “alliterate substitution”, stating that lexemes are prolonged in this process; for example, the Yanké lexeme for ‘house’ – *palais* – is substituted by *palestine* in Langila, or “‘W.C.’ is stretched out to ‘Ouagadougou’, Burkina’s capital”.

As I argue, the innovation strategies exploited by Langila speakers differ in their type from the ones used in Yanké. They tackle the lexical level rather than the morphosyntactic, and, as stated by Nassenstein (2015: 87), “semantic and phonological manipulations are . . . more important for the creation of new linguistic innovations in Langila than morphological techniques”. Speakers apply a creative language game, a certain pattern, to their existing repertoire. Strategies such as onomastic synecdoche and regularly used substitutions can freely be applied to the lexical repertoire and allow for fast change and manifold variations. It could be argued that youth language practices characterized by linguistic strategies of this kind can be placed rather closer to language games on a scale between fully functioning youth languages and language games.

3.3 Discussion: concurrent use of strategies and categorization challenges

Arguing that Yanké and Langila can be characterized by their types of innovation strategy, the two proposed higher-level innovation strategies are by no means intended as exclusive categories. Although I claim that Yanké speakers rely heavily on combining with each other two or more resources from different languages in their repertoire, while Langila speakers rather rely on applying structural manipulations to their repertoire, both types of innovation strategies are exploited in both youth language practices. In Yanké, for example, structural and recurring phonological manipulations, such as metathesis, do take place: the French loans *savon* ‘soap’ and *laver* ‘wash, clean’ are realized by Yanké speakers as *vósa* and *-véla*, swapping the positions of the first and second syllables (Nassenstein 2014: 53). Another linguistic strategy of innovation type (ii) that is regularly applied by Yanké speakers is the clipping of polysyllabic lexemes: the French loan *l’argent* ‘money’ is for example realized as *lar*, or somebody who collects money in taxis is referred to as *res*, which is the shortened form of the French *receveur* (Nassenstein 2014: 53–54). Thus, this approach does not suggest that we think of these as exclusive categories, of youth language speakers as making use of innovation strategies of either type (i) or type (ii). Rather, I argue that youth languages might reveal tendencies towards one of the proposed higher-level innovation strategies, by which they might be characterized. I suggest considering a scale of youth language practices that reaches from so-called fully functioning youth languages – mainly characterized by innovation strategies of type (i) – to language games – mainly characterized by innovation strategies of type (ii).

Moreover, other higher-level strategies might be determined, as there are various innovation techniques found in both Yanké and Lingala that cannot be easily assigned to one of the two strategies proposed in this paper. Amongst these is the grammaticalized tense marker *ké-*, which constitutes a significant deviation of Yanké from Lingala. It derives from the verb *kokende* ‘to go’ and denotes an action that will take place in the near future (Nassenstein 2014: 60). The grammaticalization of *kokende* to a prefix can hardly be argued to be triggered by language contact with French, and nor is the grammaticalization of new tense and aspect markers a common strategy in the youth language. Coinage and the invention of neologisms might be argued to belong to strategy (ii), as long as these processes occur regularly in the youth language practice. However, it is more difficult to answer the question of how far this type of innovation is a product of combination. Another linguistic feature that is difficult to pinpoint within the proposed framework is the omission of verb-initial subject markers, as well as tense and aspect markers, in Langila (see Nassenstein 2015: 91).

4 Conclusions

In this contribution it is argued that the features of youth languages are determined by the innovation strategies speakers choose to apply to their complex linguistic repertoires. I claim that determining and categorizing these innovation strategies might be a useful tool to account for structural similarities and differences between African youth language practices. Considering various types of innovation practices, similarities between youth languages from geographically remote areas can be explored, as can structural differences between youth languages emerging from the same base language. I propose two non-mutually exclusive higher-level categories of innovation strategies: (i) the combination of two or more resources from different languages in the speaker's linguistic repertoire, and (ii) the utilization of a linguistic strategy with the speaker's linguistic repertoire. Linguistic strategies that fall into category (i) are, for example, calquing and structural borrowing techniques. Here, a construction is taken from a language different from the base language and then applied to the base language. The result is essentially a deviation on the morphosyntactic level. Techniques that fall into the second category, applying a linguistic strategy to a given repertoire, are, for example, substitutions, morpheme contractions, or structural manipulations on the phonological or semantic level. If a youth language is highly characterized by innovation strategies from category (ii), I argue that it might be perceived by linguists as a language game rather than as a fully functioning youth language, as there are less profound deviations on the morphosyntactic level. Manipulations tend to tackle the word level and can be applied to the repertoire structurally (e.g., the swapping of syllables). As I argue, youth language practices characterized by innovation strategies from category (ii) allow for greater variation and might be perceived as more creative.

Applying this framework to Yanké and Langila, we find two Lingala-based youth languages spoken within the same city, which, however, structurally differ from one another very much. Yanké, a variant that is highly characterized by calquing and structural borrowing techniques and accordingly by strategies from category (i), is perceived by scholars as a fully functioning youth language. Here, deviations from Lingala concern not only the lexical level, but also the morphosyntax, and there is not as much creative variation observable as might be the case in other youth language practices (see Nassenstein 2014). Langila, however, is instead characterized by phonological and semantic manipulations that fall into category (ii). The innovation strategies applied here, such as the creation of onomastic synecdoches and regularly occurring (partial) substitutions, can be applied freely on the word level, allowing the speaker creative variation. As deviations from Lingala do not tend to relate to the morphosyntax and at the same time allow for more variation, Langila can probably be placed closer to language games on a scale between fully functioning youth languages and language games than Yanké, for example. Both proposed innovation strategies can, however, be combined and occur simultaneously in a youth language practice.

Without doubt, more data on youth language practices needs to be taken into account in order to ascertain whether the theoretical framework proposed in this paper is of help in the exploration of structural similarities and differences between youth language practices. A closer consideration of instances of linguistic innovations, which are manifold but occasionally hard to identify, might lead to a more fine-grained classification of innovation strategies in African youth languages.

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