Foreword

Youth languages are important. They reveal, often simultaneously, how language works and how young people express themselves. One may perceive a youth language as a pressure cooker of high-speed renewal, perfectly equipped to help us understand language change more broadly. Couched in the dominant language of its city or region of origin, the expanded, modified, and substituted lexicon of a youth language can become so abundant that its grammatical skeleton is hidden like a tree overgrown by ivy. To study youth languages is to study the linguistic norms of tomorrow. They show us what speakers can and cannot do when they take control over language. The choices they make, consciously or semi-consciously, are charged with meaning and express how young people position themselves in society through their conversation. It is not surprising, then, that efforts to study youth language have become global, hosting multiple approaches. One particularly popular theme is how youth languages can spread beyond the street, beyond the subcultures of the urban youth, and how they enter mainstream language use. Sheng of Kenya, for example, has expanded its domains of usage so widely that it nearly functions as a full-fledged language. Such processes reveal how new languages can emerge from existing ones – not through the pidgin-creole route, and not through a slow linguistic differentiation out of variation, but akin to a caterpillar becoming a butterfly.

The differences and commonalities in youth language phenomena across the world thus offer a rewarding area of research, to which this edited volume has allowed us to contribute. Its chapters came, to a large extent, out of the *8th International Conference on Youth Languages*, held on May 24 to 26, 2019, at Leiden University. In comparison to previous events, the conference had an emphasis on the youth languages of Africa and Asia, in addition to those of Europe. This regional focus is well motivated by the richness of youth languages in these parts of the world. If we can be forgiven for generalizing, the speakers from the African and Asian settings highlighted in this volume have taken language play and linguistic appropriation to a whole new level, supported in their efforts by a much larger part of society compared to, say, youth language speakers in Europe. On average, cities in Africa and southern Asia have a higher social media penetration and lower median age than elsewhere. Youth languages can be heard ubiquitously: at university campuses, in shopping malls, on screen, in popular songs, in the countryside, in the diaspora, and online. Arguably, some have now become native tongues.

Research on youth languages has seen a number of interesting developments. In the past decade, the field experienced a remarkable boost accompanied by

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dedicated conferences and edited volumes.[1] Particularly in the context of Africa, it gained momentum with a series of conferences held in Cologne (2012), Cape Town (2013), Nairobi (2015), and Ivory Coast (2017).[2] Yet the academic study of youth language in Africa has older roots.[3] Initially the main focus was on reporting the existence of the phenomenon in a particular city. Kießling & Mous (2004) made a first attempt at comparing the youth languages of a number of different cities in Africa and noted the commonalities in formation and function. A lot of discussion in the early literature focused on the best linguistic label: pidgin, creole, slang, etc. Later studies addressed sociolinguistic aspects and the development of youth languages beyond the city and beyond the conventional domain of rebellious youth. Youth languages indeed entered the mainstream media – including advertisements, radio and television – and researchers reported on that. The spread of youth languages through music and poetry has also become a popular theme of study. Whereas the social aspects of youth language use have for some time been central in studies on the European situation – using terminology such as *crossing* and *translanguaging* – they received less attention in the contexts of Africa and Asia. This research gap has recently started to improve for several African settings. The effect of youth language on the educational system has also become a matter of concern and debate (Hurst-Harosh 2020b).

Cumulatively, these developments underline the importance and centrality of Africa – and presumably parts of Asia as well – in understanding the phenomenon of youth language in its full diversity. In the near future, we hope and expect that more methodologies will be developed in these regions, rather than solely in the confines of Global North universities. The greatest challenge at present is a lack of empirical data. From the beginning of youth language studies in Africa, data have often been anecdotal. Much of the collected data have furthermore been numerical – on language use, attitude and knowledge – but only rarely included the rich, annotated, video-taped data of natural conversations required to arrive at a fuller understanding of the phenomenon being researched. A logical next step would be to compile more corpora and make them available for research.

The recent burgeoning of conferences and edited volumes have furthermore made it clear that youth languages are not restricted to a number of cities in Africa but exist all over the continent and are used in rural areas as well. A similar situation

1 For example, Nortier and Svendsen (2015), Jørgensen (2010), and Drummond (2018).

2 These events have yielded numerous edited volumes (Hurst-Harosh and Kanana Erastus 2018, Atindogbé and Ebongue 2019, Nassenstein and Hollington 2015). Additional recent publications include Ebongue and Hurst (2017), Hurst-Harosh (2020a, 2020b), Hollington and Nassenstein (2017), Brookes (2014, 2019), and Barasa and Mous (2017).

3 Ebongue and Atindogbé (2019) provide a detailed overview of African youth languages.

has been reported for parts of Asia (Djenar 2015). Typologically, the youth languages of Asia and Africa seem to have a lot in common and less so with those of Europe, where ethnicity and class exhibit rather different social functions. Interestingly, the kinds of playful, deviant youth languages of Africa and some parts of southern Asia – most of which have their own name – have not been reported to the same degree in Latin America, North America, the Pacific, and large parts of Asia. Perhaps this chiefly reveals a lack of academic interest in documenting such phenomena. Alternatively, one might speculate that the social situations in those parts of the world differ to such an extent that they leave no fertile ground for youth codes to emerge.

Instead of regional generalizations, perhaps a focus on socio-demographic specificities might provide more fruitful ways to understand youth language as a broader linguistic phenomenon. The most obvious factor is, of course, age. In the realm of gender, the more streetwise and abusive-laden speech tends to be associated with performative masculinity. Female youth languages do exist but deserve far greater attention than they have received so far. Migration, both within a country and internationally, is clearly important too. Examples of youth languages popularized by people with migrant backgrounds abound in the literature and indeed in this volume. These are not always confined to a single ethnicity. In fact, as we see worldwide, youth languages invariably draw from multiple languages in contact. Economic differences play a role too. In Nairobi, for example, Sheng originated in the poor urban neighborhoods, whereas Engsh is spoken by more affluent communities. In Indonesia, the correlation between university cities, such as Jakarta, Malang, and Yogyakarta, and the development of youth languages is hard to miss. While English and – in some parts of the world – French continue to influence youth languages worldwide, we also see local centers of cultural orientation emerge, such as Abidjan, Jakarta, and Nairobi.

Lastly, we must stress that those who were able to attend the *8th ICYL* only reflect a fragment of all the interest we received and abstracts we accepted. Regrettably, the usual hurdles prevented many colleagues from outside Europe from making their way to Leiden: visa struggles, financial uncertainty, excessive paperwork, and last-minute rejections from their department. Nevertheless, it is palpably manifest how their studies and perspectives have enriched the field and will continue to do so in the future. We feel that our colleagues working in Africa and southern Asia, if given the same chances, are better situated to study the phenomena discussed in this volume, including beyond their own regional contexts. For this reason, it would only be appropriate that academic theorization around youth language practices will increasingly originate from the Global South.

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