

METABABBLE

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LANGUAGE is an ephemeral concept. Whenever we refer to a specific communicative practice or to a particular sonic phenomenon as ‘a language’, we refer to certain epistemologies and ideologies. A language therefore can be imagined as a form of speech shared by a community, or as a national language based on a standard and normed literacy, but it can also be seen as a practice and as a fluid and dynamic part of the complex repertoire used by a multilingual individual. These concepts have in common, however, that they all rest upon the assumption that something like a single language might exist – either as a fixed thing or as flexible practice. And although the increased interest of sociolinguists in multilingualism has produced new insights into communicative practices, which rather put the validity of language as a sequestered thing into question, we cannot easily think about linguistics without this concept. As a consequence, seemingly subversive approaches to language as speaking, in a framework of subjectivity, context, interpersonality, situatedness and creativity, hardly leave their imprints in academic writing about *a language*. Whatever the setting might be, a language can always be constructed on the basis of its lexicon and grammar, which are parts of the whole, or rather some singled-out entities of which the entire structure of a language is made. In other words, the difference between languages “is merely a specific sector in an ocean of isoglosses that comprise its systemic limits” (Holquist 2014: 8).

From the perspectives of other people, who are not linguists or members of northern academia, these might be arbitrary criteria. Structure – the order of morphemes and words and phrases – is just one of many possible criteria of defining a language, and one that is reserved to a specific group of experts.

A glimpse into an interview with one of Nigeria’s most prolific language users, the lawyer and politician Patrick Obahiagbon, illustrates how a deviating metalinguistic discourse – talking about language – is able to dismantle a language, which in terms of its structure might be seen as whole, at least from the perspective of northern

descriptive linguistics. Patrick Obahiagbon was interviewed in *Laila’s Blog* about GRAMMAR:

Why do you always speak ‘big grammar’?

I am not really consensus ad idem with those who opine that my idiolect is advertently obfuscative. No no no, it’s just that I am in my elements when the colloquy has to do with the pax nigeriana of our dreams and one necessarily needs to fulminate against the alcibiadian modus vivendi of our prebendal political class.

Is this the way you were speaking in your school days?

I’m sure if you confer with my school mates they will tell you that I no longer speak what those who just know me now call “grammar.” I could speak for about twenty minutes when I was in the university and you won’t understand one word of what I said. I must say I have deteriorated in my grammatical construct.

Patrick Obahiagbon speaks about English, and yet not the form of English that might be controlled by ‘its owners’. The difference lies in the words, and the power to dismantle language lies in the possession of these words:

When you speak to Caucasians of English origin, how do they react to you?

My friends that are whites simply marvel and sometimes get maniacally bewildered when we engage, most times to my consternation.

Do you think that you understand English language better than the owners of the language?

I have never had the ambition to know the English language more than the owners. However, I must mention that they are shocked most times to find out several words from me they never heard of that existed in the dictionary. Yet, those words are supposed to be theirs. Na so we see am.

Later in the interview, Patrick Obahiagbon describes how he began to become different as a languager when he developed the habit of reading dictionaries. Not structure, but amassing words, and using them, is 'grammar'.

The comments on Patrick Obahiagbon's way of speaking, just below the interview in the same blog, are much more deviant from English in terms of academic concepts of language. They use Naijá, or 'Nigerian Pidgin English' (which exhibits structural differences to other Englishes; c.f. Faraclas 1996), some bits of Jamaican (Odimegwu 2012), emblematic tokens such as *plz*, *ASAP*, etc. that are characteristic of language use in social media, and some textpl@y (Deumert 2014):

BXXX7 September 2013 at 13:23

What da fuck is he saying plz? " Academic braggadocio, farrago of baloneys, peper soup objurgators.....mehn diz dude ain't normal!...hehehe. infact I don develop vavous bunkum from reading this egregious ambience.

AXXX7 September 2013 at 13:35

Mr. Grammarian don come again.

EXXX7 September 2013 at 23:18

T☺☹ bad he ~~is~~ from ~~My~~ state. A ☹ m gonna sue him F09̄ 7h̄'s papatual paribus. ASAP

There is an interesting twist here. The essence of northern concepts of the mastery of a language, knowing grammar, is inverted in a funny way that at the same time bewilders us. Patrick Obahiagbon's reflexivity of his own linguistic practice translates into grotesque mimetic interpretations of the other, the 'owners of the language'. The reactions to his way of speaking in turn artfully play with the negation of similarity with these owners – a kind of inverted mimetic performance, a mirror in a mirror.

This metalinguistic discourse reflects other ideas about what language might be. While northern scholars tend to distinguish languages according to structure, and ask about which language (L1, L2, L3) a speaker knows best, in

which one she or he is able to produce poetic speech, express feelings, learn maths, etc., the Nigerian metalinguists of *Laila's Blog* are interested in the power of the word: just another ideological choice.

This choice might be an arbitrary one, as well, in another context. Here, it can be read as a symbolic critique on forced bilingualism and post-colonial experiences. There is something serious in all this fun and play: if the owners of English don't have to learn Bini and Yoruba as well – if it's only 'we' who will have to use a language owned by others, then we should at least do with it what needs to be done.

The ways in which Obahiagbon and the anonymous commenters make language blast bears a lot of similarity to critiques on neoliberalism and late capitalism made in cyberpunk novels and digital post-modernism. In her exciting analysis of Neal Stephenson's novel *Snow Crash*, Sabine Heuser (2003) describes how (in the future and in the book) a new, multilayered concept of a virus is created that is so complex that it cannot be disposed of:

This plague to both humans and computers throws everything into question: languages, ideas, ideologies, and religions all become prey to the chaos. [...] This notion of physical disease is then increasingly writ large and applied to language, which degenerates into meaningless and unintelligible noise. (Heuser 2003: 174)

The confrontation between the colonizer and the colonized, and between neoliberal imperialists and subjugated people, translates into chaos and noise. What remains is grammar.

These brief glimpses into 'non-academic' writing and texts that represent 'popular' genres illustrate how and where there might be other ways of framing and grasping language and speech. And the critique inherent in these texts metaphorically relates to a critique on the effects of hegemonic epistemes on subjugated ways of making knowledge. This particular metalinguistic discourse highlights that what used to make sense is not meaningful any longer, has been marginalized or oppressed: for instance, ideas about differentiating languages on grounds other than structure; attributing the power to transform reality to specific languages; wanting to speak many different languages in order to be

complete; seeing the possibility of providing a person with a name as the core of language; thinking of language as the sacred, as something that can be controlled as a powerful secret.

But language remains a social construct, and critique on the effects of the silencing of local metalinguistic discourses may be uttered in the respective socially adequate forms – as mimetic performance, in popular media and poetic genres. This critique invites us to turn the gaze to experiences of inequality shared in a post-colonial world that include forced bilingualisms at the expense of both local linguistic resources and metalinguistic concepts. In Rey Chow's (2014) book on what it means to be *Not like a Native Speaker*, this asymmetrical post-colonial languaging is irrevocably entangled with race, class, gender and biopolitical boundaries. Metalinguistic discourse here is, for example, discourse on food, noise, mourning, calligraphy and the radio, in a figured world.

The radical conclusion that can be drawn with the help of critical theory is that the plague (so to speak, in accordance with Heuser's text) has indeed infected language in its entirety. There is no indigeneity without the colonial dispositive embedded in it, and the notion of INDIGENOUS (AFRICAN, CARIBBEAN, ORIENTAL) languages already bears in itself the potential failure of decolonizing linguistic methodologies. Linda Tuhi-

wai Smith (2012) writes about four words – imperialism, history, writing and theory – that are the basis of northern practices of making linguistic knowledge, and at the same time are difficult from the perspective of southern theory:

I have selected these words because from an indigenous perspective they are problematic. They are words which tend to provoke a whole array of feelings, attitudes and values. They are words of emotion which draw attention to the thousands of ways in which indigenous language, knowledges and cultures have been silenced or misrepresented, ridiculed or condemned in academic and popular ways or avoided altogether. In thinking about knowledge and research, however, these are important terms which underpin the practices and styles of research with indigenous peoples. (Tuhiwai Smith 2012: 21)

To the people whose experiences are put at the centre of post-colonial enquiries, the spread of imperial epistemes – of the multilayered virus – has produced not clarity but noise, chaos and feelings of perdition. Philosophies of language and linguistic ideologies, seen as incoherent, naive, not scientific, turn into metababble. But is this not actually a sound, echoing voices that have something else to tell than what we have already said?