Imperative of Indigenous Grammar and Rhetoric Perspectives in African Urban and Youth Language Scholarship

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Attempts to build a sociolinguistic profile for urban and youth languages have led to a multiplicity of perspectives, some of which would appear controversial. This is because ways of conceptualising urbanity and of characterising the associated forms of language vary according to scholar perspective. Scholar perspective may also sometimes conflict with the perceptions of speakers of these languages regarding the nature of these languages, or even their "languagehood" (Kerswill, 2013: 128), and with acceptability judgments within respective speech communities. While such issues are universal, African urban and youth language scholarship has had to grapple additionally with the problem of determining the true nature and sources of the so called urban and youth languages of Africa. This includes the problem of determining the base or constituent languages, as well as the applicability of extant western classifications to the languages (see, among others, Bosire, 2006; Hurst, 2017; Mazrui, 1995; Myers-Scotton, 1993; Oloruntoba-Oju, 2017).

A major difference between Western and African youth language practices is the widely acknowledged "mixilingualism" of the latter. The term "mixilingualism," employed by Brann (1989) in a different context, has since been adopted in the description of African urban and youth language practices, and particularly to describe "the unrelenting mixture of languages that is typical of Nigerian hip-hop," for example (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2018, p. 187; see also Odebunmi, 2010). Indeed, the adjective "extreme" has been used repeatedly to describe the extent of code-mixing and semantic manipulation in African youth languages compared with the situation in Western Europe (see for example, Kerswill, 2010, pp. 7, 9, 29). This difference has roots in the respective linguistic environments of the youth practices. There is, on the one hand, the superlative multilingualism of many African communities (with Nigeria alone hosting about 500 languages, for example, and all jostling for input into the urban and youth languages), and, on the other hand, the relatively homogenous linguistic circumstances of western countries. The difference poses a challenge for the characterization of African urban and youth languages and associated practices such as code alternation, language mixing and or "fused lects" (Auer, 1999).

Related to this challenge is the "urban-rural divide" in African youth languages. This divide manifests in the difficulty in determining the relative input of urbanity and rurality to the lexis and structure of African youth languages, and the disproportionate focus on urbanity and coloniality in the construction of African youth languages. The virtual absence of wholly indigenous, non-colonial or non-mixed

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languages of Africa in 'African' 'urban' and 'youth language' scholarship is a distinct manifestation of this disproportionate focus. This is the challenge that birthed this edition of *REAL*.

At the European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) that held in Basel, Switzerland, in 2017, a panel convened by one of the editors of this volume extensively discussed the rural-urban dimension in African youth languages, their classifications, and their predictive value for language change and social development. The panel's interest was in "theoretical reflections and empirical exposé on the urbanisation of indigenous (rural) languages, and the reciprocal ruralisation of 'urban,' especially colonial, languages" (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2017a). The panel also wanted to focus on those African urban and rural youth language varieties in which rurality or indigeneity was conspicuously expressed. This would signal, on the one hand, the fluid nature of youth language practices and, on the other hand, the resilience and transformative potential of indigenous language forms vis-à-vis modern language expressions. Another important dimension for the panel was the predictive value of youth languages and expressions for language development and language change in Africa. Finally, the panel sought to establish indigenous, non-colonial languages of Africa as a neglected but proper subject of study in youth languages. Some of the papers discussed at this panel were revised and peer reviewed for this special edition of REAL.

The validity of the urban-rural binary in the description of youth languages has no doubt been challenged in the research literature (e.g. Mufwene, 2010; Nassenstein, 2016). This is especially in view of the intertwining nature of urbanity and rurality in youth speech samples. A couple of studies of youth languages in rural locations have also been conducted, such as among the Tarok in Nigeria (see Blench and Longtau, 2016). Many of the so called 'urban' youth languages of Africa such as Sheng (Kenya), Tsotsitaal (South Africa), Nouchi (Abidjan), Ligali, Indoubil (DRC), Camfranglais (Cameroon), etc., have actually been shown to contain significant representations of rural-indigenous thought and linguistic systems, both in naturally occurring settings and in simulated forms such as music, theatre and the media (see Hurst and Erastus, 2018). This has suggested over time that the youth and so called urban languages invariably comprise a *glocal* fusion of the global and the local.

Still, more work needs to be done in order to isolate truly indigenous urban and youth languages of Africa – indigenous in the sense of having local or indigenous, rather than colonial languages, as base, or in the sense of being the dominant language in terms of lexical and structural input. While the hybridity of African urban and youth languages can almost be taken for granted, the constituent codes are not evenly distributed in output samples; the hierarchical distribution of lexical and structural elements in the languages therefore needs to be well investigated in order to establish the motivational and dominance patterns. Furthermore, given the fluidity of the age factor in the use of the referenced languages, the aptness of the term "youth language" needs to be further investigated within the context of Africa, and the distinguishing features relative to the general lingo of the respective speech communities established. Finally, there is a yawning need to investigate

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attitudinal perspectives to youth languages, in view of the connotation of "anti-language" and "criminal milieu" that often trails the characterization of the languages.

Most of the contributions in this volume agree that, notwithstanding the multiplicity of the voices that characterize African Urban and Youth Languages and its scholarship, and notwithstanding the surface linguistic appearance of the languages and practices, the languages ultimately bear the mark and intensity of the rural and indigenous as a major, if not dominant, component. While some contributions acknowledge African urban and youth languages as "fractal practice," some others demonstrate how some of the languages bear the marks of a contest between different colonial language varieties, such as British vs. American English. Others, still, demonstrate that so called youth languages are invariably marked by domain characteristics that may not be valid in other domains. For example, in some university campuses, as a restricted domain, the general language of instruction (English in the cited cases) 'duels' with the indigenous language of the immediate environment for proprietary rights over youth expressions. Ultimately, the articles in this volume are united in the attempt to isolate *the mark of the indigenous* as a constant and indelible feature of all the varieties of African urban and youth languages. What follows below is a brief summary of the chapters of the volume.

In the opening chapter, Oloruntoba-Oju uses the phrase *hidden in plain sight* to refer to indigenous urban and youth languages or language practices that have been rendered "invisible" under the influence of the colonial factor in African urban and youth language scholarship. His examples are drawn from three Nigerian cities, Lagos, Kano and Onitsha. Lagos is the most populous city in Africa and is also home to youths from all rural regions in Nigeria. Oloruntoba-Oju's "preliminary survey" of indigenous language practices in this sprawling metropolis identifies a number of indigenous language based varieties, such as *Yoruba Eko* (Lagos Yoruba), and *Erea* ('Area'), spoken by "area boys" identified as class and occupational groups. There is also a brief discussion of *Otu Onitsha* and *Hausankano,* which are elaborated as the urban and youth languages of the Nigerian cities of Kano and Onitsha respectively. The varieties are generally marked by a high level of indigeneity right in the heart of the urban and modern centres.

Fridah Kanana Erastus and Ellen Hurst-Harosh examine the rural-urban dichotomy in African youth languages through comparative data from Kenya (Sheng) and South Africa (Tsotsitaal), with additional data from some rapidly urbanising rural towns of Kenya. The authors demonstrate that the so called 'urban' languages do not only draw from modern paradigms and languages in their linguistic performances, but also from archaic and rural forms, to create layers of meaning and indexicality. The authors emphasise the intermingling of these resources as material base for youth linguistic performances.

Comfort Ojongnkpot compares Camfranglais as an established youth variety with Ejagham (a Cameroonian language), with the purpose of establishing the rural roots of 'urban' Camfranglais. Her analysis derives from the perspective that the so called African Urban Youth Languages do not only communicate ideas, strengthen ties and create in-group identities, but also link the youth to their indigenous roots, and that youths appropriate rural roots elements to create an African

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identity. This presumption is borne out by comparing the question structure of Camfranglais with that of Ejagham (a South-Western Cameroon language). The findings reveal that the questioning pattern of Camfranglais is influenced by Ejagham, thus establishing a link to cultural roots which inevitably serve as markers of an African identity for Camfranglais users.

Philip Rudd's "Sheng as Fractal Language Practice" also proposes a reconceptualization of African Urban Youth Language as practice rather than as object. Reinforcing the analogy of fractals, the author argues that languages are not rigidly demarcated but composed of discrete fragments and amalgamated practices. Rudd traces the history of Sheng in order to demonstrate that its fragments comprise precolonial elements growing into a postcolonial context, hence its fractal nature. Though Sheng is fragmented and continually challenging, it has over time acquired standardizing features that confer legitimacy on it as an established lingual practice.

In examining the appropriateness of the term "youth language" to describe the language practices of youth, Moufoutaou Adjeran and Gratien Atindogbe argue that the term is a socio-demographic categorisation with socio-ethnic coloration, in addition to the implied meaning of age-grading. They underscore the inappropriateness of the term, arguing among other reasons that the youth language practices are hardly autonomous languages, contrary to the connotation conveyed by the nomenclature. Citing existing literature and drawing additional data from advertising billboards in the Republic of Benin, the authors observe that the 'youthness' of the so-called "youth language" is mainly noticeable at the level of lexis. The peculiarities of the sociolect are therefore examined through the sociolinguistic strategies of borrowing, truncating and what the authors refer to as 'inversion' or 'back slanging.'

For his part, Matthias Hofmann establishes Tweets as a youth language variety in Nigeria and as a promising source of corpus investigation into youth language varieties in general. Taking due cognizance of the peculiarities of the Nigerian sociolinguistic population, Hofmann examines the influence of American English on prepositional usage and orthography in the Tweets by young Nigerians. He concludes that Hausa English, which is spoken in the North of Nigeria, appears to be less impervious to American influence than Yoruba English spoken in the South of the country, judging from the evidence of the Tweets. Hofmann's work once again establishes the multiplicity of inputs into what is known as 'youth language' and also the fact that the youth varieties are determined by the sociolinguistic peculiarities or specific speech communities or specific domains of language use.

Saudah Namyalo investigates the variety of English spoken by Makerere University students' population, which she labels *Mak-Eng,* as a possible specimen of urban youth language. She examines the linguistic strategies of speakers as well as functions of the variety. Namyalo submits that *Mak-Eng* is an emerging urban youth language. She finds that the variety has the English language as its core but also employs metaphors and similar usages from the indigenous languages, especially Swahili. Similarities in the creative strategies of the variety (i.e. metaphor, semantic manipulation, borrowing, etc.), coupled with its function as a marker of identity, bring the variety in tandem with many other African Urban Youth languages.

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Souheila Hedid examines the reality of the multilingualism of the Algerian linguistic terrain from attitudinal perspectives, focusing on the perception of young Algerians of this multilingualism. The author uses a triangulation methodology in an attempt to find answers to two interesting questions that are fundamental to the paper: how is the mixture of languages in the verbal interactions of young Algerians conceived? What representations do these speakers have of this phenomenon? The author concludes that the mixture of languages as confirmed by her study is not an aberration, and that if certain languages or language practices are preferred by young speakers, it is because they cater to very particular needs.

In their paper, Jean-Claude Dodo and Yves Youant acknowledge the increasing growth and popularity of Nouchi, focusing therefore on the predictive value of the phenomenon. The authors especially question whether the language constitutes a threat to the other Ivorian languages or not. They submit that Nouchi is not a threat to the other Ivorian languages, but rather an ally, a strategic partner for the promotion of the indigenous languages of Ivory Coast. This conclusion follows the authors' analysis of a corpus of Nouchi, which reveals massive borrowing of vocabulary items by Nouchi speakers from Ivorian languages, notwithstanding that its 'base' is considered to be French.

The separate contributions by Shikuku Tsikhungu and Felix Banda explore the deployment of urban linguistic dynamics in the domain of film and music. Tsikhungu's "The Urban Film Narrative as a Space of Linguistic Hybridity in Africa" locates Kenyan urban films as a prime site where many languages compete for space, resulting in linguistic hybridisation. The infusion of the dominant indigenous languages such as Lingala and Swahili in the mixed codes is noticeable. This hybridisation is readily accepted by film makers as a signpost marker for the average Nairobian to understand and relate to the films. The author argues that the hybridisation in the Kenyan urban film is a true reflection of the real world Kenyan urban city, where the urban dweller is surrounded by many languages. The city is therefore suffused with influences from the rural landscape, the urban landscape, and the linguascape between both.

Felix Banda also explores how musicians draw on diverse cultural materials (especially the linguistic and the musical) as semiotic fodder for their music. The deployment and fusion of elements from multiple languages is also a strategy to achieve multiple affiliations to different ethnolinguistic groups, regions and even nationalities. The idea that youth language is strategic, or motivated, is reinforced by this finding. The musical video of a popular Zambian musician JK (featuring Selma) and titled *Kapilipili* suggests, Banda notes, that heteroglossia and multiculturality are reflective of the transcultural and transmodal communication practices of youths.

In order to preserve the originality and creativity of individual authors, the editors refrained from standardising the original texts too much and only adapted passages where the intelligibility for an international readership may be restricted. The individual variation also shows the different conventions in academic writing in African institutions, where the fascinating topic of youth languages is persued. Thus this volume hopes to contribute to connecting individual authors and their styles to further promote original research in this area.

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Hidden in Plain Sight: Indigenous African Languages as Urban and Youth Languages: Urban Hausa, Urban Igbo and Urban Yoruba in Nigeria

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1. Introduction

An area of discursive conflict in the study of African urban and youth languages is the dominance of the colonial factor in the scholarly consideration of the character and sources of African urbanity and the associated languages. By this is meant the rather frequent assumption that African urbanity, and the associated languages, sprang almost invariably from colonial antecedents (see, for example, Mclaughlin, 2009: 2). As a result of this misconception, African urbanity and African urban languages have been studied more as colonial contact phenomena than as autonomous indigenous languages. Consequently, and incongruously, some of Africa's most populous cities, such as Lagos and Maiduguri in Nigeria, have been characterised as "cities that have not developed any urban language of their own" (Beck, 2010: 14).

While some work has recently focused on the versatility of African languages in urban and youth usage (see, especially, Nassenstein, 2015, 2017, in respect of rural-urban and youth languages in Congo and Rwanda), the exclusion of some of the densest metropolitan centres in Africa from the arc of mainstream "urban language" studies deserves to be addressed. One such city is Lagos, Nigeria. With World Atlas population estimates ranging between 18,000,000 and 21,000,000,[1] that is, five to six times the population of Berlin, Lagos is one of the most cited African cities in connection with the development of an urban youth culture (see Omoniyi, 2006). Therefore, a claim such as that African cities like Lagos "lack an urban language" (along with Addis Ababa, Monrovia, Gaborone, Windhoek, Bujumbura, Lilongwe, Kigali, Kampala, Maiduguri – cities specifically listed by Beck, 2010: 14), underscores, on the one hand, the relative paucity of information on the urban language phenomenon in these quite major and important African cities, and on the other hand the absence of scholarly consensus on what actually constitutes an "urban language" with particular reference to African situations. It is also due in part, as I would be suggesting in this chapter, to the presence of considerable if unwitting fixation with parameters linked to colonial antecedents.

In the sections that follow, I first demonstrate how some characterisations of African urban and or youth languages appear to follow the colonial trajectory almost to the point of fixation, resulting in analytical focus on features that render

[1] *Demographia* (2017, p. 41) cites a considerably lower figure of 13,910,000 for Lagos, which is however still four times the population of Berlin, and about 3 million more than in London.

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the colonial factor rather prominent in the classification of the languages, while a number of indigenous urban languages are literally "hidden in plain sight" begging to be investigated and proclaimed. Next, I present an overview of Nigeria's sociolinguistic profile in relation to the country's urban and rural spaces. I also conduct a preliminary though fairly extensive survey in which I draw attention to three urban languages in three major Nigerian cities. These are: *Hausan Kano* (literally "the Hausa of Kano"), *Otu Onitsha*, the urban Igbo of Onitsha, and *Eko*, the urban Yoruba of Lagos, as major exemplars. In the final section, I project the Yoruba of the so called "Area Boys" of Lagos, which I term *Erea* in this chapter (for reasons that I will make clear), as a social dialect and an exemplar of an urban and youth language in Lagos.

My projections in this chapter derive from participant and non-participant observations, recording and analysis of sample conversations on the streets of Lagos, as well as an assessment of the relevant literature on the languages profiled in the chapter. My knowledge and intuition, as a native speaker of Yoruba with considerable familiarity with many Yoruba dialects including the Lagos dialect, and the associated "folk linguistics",[2] is also a useful tool in the consideration of the elements of urbanity in the languages. In addition, secondary sources of data are employed.

2. African urban and youth languages through the prism of the Colonial

Despite compelling evidence of old African urbanities relating to languages such as Wolof in Senegal, Swahili in Kenya, Ligali in the Congo, Akan in Ghana and Yoruba in Nigeria, African urban language scholarship has tended to either deny spatial and lingual urbanity to pre-colonial Africa, or downplay the influence of indigenous African languages in the growth and development of contemporary urban languages. This may well be a reflection of the perpetual politics of inequality that underlies north-south top-down theorising (cf. Rudd, 2017, and in this volume, on "monoglot ideologies"). As noted by Beck (2010: 18) referring to Coquery-Vidrovitch (1991), "the essentialist ascription of an intrinsic ethnification and rurality to Africa was not reconcilable with concepts of urbanity and Western modernity". Consequently, many characterizations of African urbanity and the associated languages automatically assume the predominant influence of western colonisation in the origination of both. "Urban speech" in Africa is generally dated to coincide with European entrance into the African polity; accordingly, "the urban vernaculars [that] have emerged to become the language(s) of the city [are] most often dominant African languages that show evidence of contact with a former colonial language" (Mclaughlin, 2009: 2; also cited by Beck, 2010: 18, and Hurst, 2017, among others).

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[2] I refer here to the common knowledge, intuitions and understanding of communities, and assumptions that they make, regarding the nature and structure of their languages and those of others. These are often expressed in the form of profiling statements or stories that can be depreciative or appreciative of the languages profiled.

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African urban language scholarship does acknowledge gaps in the history of African urbanity. It, however, continues to "flirt" with the ramifications of these gaps. An example here is the idea that "a great many of African cities came into being during the colonial period, as a direct consequence of colonialism, and were originally planned and modelled on European cities" (McLaughlin, 2009: 7), which seems obviously exaggerated.[3] While some of the ancient African cities[4] have definitely expanded and modernised with the effluxion of time, and under catalytic interventions that have certainly included colonialism, it is also true that cities all over the world have always expanded and modernised under sundry internal and external influences.[5] More importantly, with the African pre-colonial urbanities came a corresponding linguistic complexity: "Nothing was more natural than for Africans to speak several languages and to learn the language of a neighbouring group when out-group interaction so demands" (Bamgbose, 1998; also cited in Oloruntoba-Oju, 2007).

My main argument here is that the characterisation of African urbanity as a creation of Europe seems to have also influenced the analytical orientation towards contemporary urban African languages, resulting perhaps unwittingly in the privileging of linguistic markers of coloniality, and in the frequent ignoring of clear signs of indigenous African influence in the classification of urban and youth languages. This would also have contributed to the apparent reluctance to characterise indigenous African languages as urban languages except in so far as they "show evidence of contact with a former colonial language" (Hurst 2017). As I elaborate below, a prominent example of the colonial orientation in African urban language scholarship is the characterisation of code-switching of indigenous with colonial languages as the main distinguishing feature of many African urban languages.

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[3] On the contrary, in many African nations such as Nigeria, the colonialists largely exploited existing cities and their resources. "The British did not aspire to remake Nigeria in their own image, but concentrated their efforts in the field of economic exploitation" (Mann, 1990, p. 94, also citing Prator, 1968). Nor did the colonialists remodel most of the old African cities that they met on European cities. Rather, the colonial cities were constructed mostly according to the "cantonment" segregationist principle, often for the purpose of trade and for the comfort of colonial personnel, to protect them from what was sometimes called the "noxious odours of native habitation" (Curtin, 1985, p. 595, cited in Omolo-Okalebo, 2011: 34). Separate colonies or quarters were built for the European colonies; but no metros, no undergrounds, and no inland waterways for the subjugated cities. Education was mostly functional and to facilitate colonial rule. To offer a perspective, the first television station and first skyscraper in all of Africa were built in Ibadan, Nigeria, under African rule (albeit using World scientific and technological knowhow).

[4] The apparent insinuation that there would have been no urbanity in Africa but for western colonialisation ignores the pre-colonial African empires such as Ghana, Mali, Ọyọ (Yoruba) and Benin and the corresponding metropolises that were certainly large in terms of the spatial dynamics of the time – Mali in the 13th /14th Century was reportedly surpassed in size only by the Mongol (China) empire (Levtzion, 1980; Shillington, 2005).

[5] Brown (1992) offered the perspective that deplorable conditions in some old African cities mimicked the state of development in the west a century or so earlier (see pp. 345-346; p. 360). The inference may be drawn that African cities would have developed on their own. The four centuries of slavery and deprivation of Africans are discounted from the narrative.

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2.1. The problem of code-switching as a major classificatory parameter of African urban and youth languages

African urban and or youth languages such as Wolof and Sheng are predominantly described in terms of sundry mixtures with colonial languages. Thus, urban Wolof is unambiguously characterised as "a language that has arisen out of continuous sustained contact between Wolof and French" (McLaughlin, 2001: 159). Schindler, Legendre & Mbaye (2008) also state that "Urban Wolof is a mixture of Wolof, a West-Atlantic Niger-Congo language, and French that is spoken in the cities of Senegal" (even though the authors also elicited several features that have little if anything to do with code-switching). Similarly, the Kenyan Sheng is seen as largely characterised by Swahili and English code-mixing (Mazrui, 1995; Abdulaziz & Osinde, 1997), although this characterisation is also sometimes questioned (see the brief critique by Bosire, 2006). For Beck (2010: 18), the "particularities of the urban languages" include "code-switching, borrowing, structural reduction".

The point here is not to question the existence or prominence of code-switching or code-mixing in these languages, but to question the idea that code-mixing is a specific or defining attribute of urbanity, or that African urban languages, including urban Wolof, for example, must of necessity be characterised in relation to the colonial languages in their mix. The argument is that code-mixing or code-switching in itself is less a condition of coloniality or urbanity and more a condition of individual and societal bi- or multilingualism and of sundry conditioning contexts. Code-switching has after all been established as a language-alternation process available to and employed by bilingual or multilingual speakers, albeit at varying levels of competency/incompetency. Code-mixing combines this participant-specific orientation (also allowing for social variables such as education, age, gender and class) with a function specific orientation. The latter involves "message intrinsic" factors (code-mixing for specific topics, comments, messages), and "situational" factors such as addressee requirements, in- or out-group dynamics, inclusion or exclusion strategies – the so-called secrecy, endophora and exophora functions (Oloruntoba-Oju, 1999). Degree of formality/informality, domain dynamics and style are also part of the situational factors affecting code mixing (see Ritchie & Bhatia, 2004; Wardhaugh, 2006), and these considerations are accounted for by the "situational" and "metaphorical" types of code-mixing advanced by Blom and Gumperz (1972).

Code-mixing is therefore a discourse attribute that is not specific to any language or locale, since any language can incorporate as much or as little code-mixing as is contextually relevant or required (cf. Auer, 1998; Myers-Scotton, 1993; Poplack, 1980).[6]

[6] It is not questionable that code mixing can ultimately progress to a state of "language mixing" or "fused lects", in the manner of Auer (1999), where it becomes an "unspectacular affair" (Auer, 2000). Mix dynamics has been a huge area of linguistic and sociolinguistic research, from word internal mixing (Poplack 1980) to clause level hierarchical mixing (Myers-Scotton, 1993). When the lexicons of languages merge to the point that relevant lects and processes are not subject to discourse or participant variation, and the community of speakers are not even aware of any "mix" or "switch", then a new language emerges which will not be described in terms of two languages or in terms of code switching.

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