



ISSN 2336-3274 (Print) ISSN 2570-7558 (Online)

<https://edu.uhk.cz/africa>

Doing Language, Ethnicity, and Nation

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Recommended citation:

Rudwick, S., & Bing, N. (2019). Doing Language, Ethnicity, and Nation. *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society*, 7(1), 5–9. <https://doi.org/10.26806/modafr.v7i1.276>



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EDITORIAL TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE Doing Language, Ethnicity, and Nation

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In much of political discourse the significance of language is underestimated. As linguistic anthropologists working on Africa we see all language usage and communication as constituted by complex power relations between individuals and groups. In this special issue of *Modern Africa: Politics, History and Society* we have aimed to provide an outlet for scholars who approach the study of language, ethnicity, and nation in their entanglements. We focus on the importance of language and its complex interrelations with politics in Africa.

Providing different, yet complementary cases on the African continent this issue aims to unpack the interrelation between language and politics beyond the meta-discursive regime of “one nation – one language.” Taking polylingual practices as a point of departure, the contributions to this issue provide insights into the “doing of” language, ethnicity, and nation, which unfolds its validity even beyond the African continent.

This special issue contains five papers that engage with the complex study of language, nation, and ethnicity, focusing on the social construction of the three variables. Language, ethnicity and nation are not studied as bound, monolithic and static phenomena but as versatile sociopolitical variables that are context-dependent and dynamic. An understanding of language as a bounded system and Herderian ideologies of “pure” languages and “pure nations” attached to it constitute one of the major inheritances of early modern linguistics. The construction of an inextricable link between language, ethnicity, and nation continues to be prevalent in Africa. Languages in this narrow sense keep being entangled with ethnic and national imaginaries that can unite and fragment people and stir contested identity politics. And yet, this widespread *ethnolinguistic assumption*, i.e., the idea that languages are inextricably linked to specific

identities, ethnicities and nations in a monolithic way is far removed from the realities of sociolinguistic practice (Blommaert et al. 2012: 7).

Postcolonial studies have aptly demonstrated that the sociolinguistic landscape in Africa is the result of the “invention” of “separate” languages by linguists, missionaries, and colonial administrators bringing new differences into existence (Makoni and Pennycook 2005, 2012; Errington 2008; Bauman and Briggs 2003). As a consequence of the colonial encounter, languages became an important resource in the making of identity and power (Irvine 2008). In contrast to developments in nineteenth-century Europe, in which standardised languages were closely linked to the gradual homogenisation of nation states and the establishment of its formal institutions, languages on the African continent became part and parcel of ethnic differentiation and political fragmentation.

There continues to be a need for the dis-invention and (re-)constitution of not only languages (Makoni and Pennycook 2005), but also ethnicities and nations. By thinking of language, ethnicity, and nation “in action,” this collection aims to escape the frequent reductionist views expressed by drawing narrow and direct links between the variables. The potential of multiple languages, ethnicities and nations as coexisting next to each other in a multifaceted way, albeit often within a hierarchical order, is illuminative in the African context, perhaps even more so than elsewhere in the world. Individual and societal polylingualism has led to communication patterns that are not static, bound or homogenous. Multiple language usage and complex translanguaging (Jorgensen et al. 2011) practices are the default mode of communication and interaction.

Everyday polylingual realities pose a challenge to the study of languages and can lead to theoretical innovations in the field. Many sociolinguistic actors in Africa are caught in a complex web of sociopolitical dynamics, micro- and macro-politics that often also involve questions of ethnicity and nationalism. This is why all ideological perspectives from everyday practices to official politics are relevant to the study of this subject. To show through empirical evidence how ambiguous and contentious these entanglements are, is part of the aim of this collection. Therefore, in line with approaches that have fundamentally questioned the well-established

unconditional connections between language, ethnicity, and nation, we offer a volume that explores “how such relations are produced, resisted, defied or rearranged” (Otsuji and Pennycook 2010: 246).

The authors of this collection share the theoretical approach to language use as embedded within complex ideological frameworks. They interrogate some of the following questions: What sociocultural positions do speakers of multiple languages in Africa enact? How do polylingual individuals discursively construct power and how is their sense of belonging constituted in relation to various languages? In which ways are linguistic ideologies about African languages, English(es), French or other languages prevalent and how do they manifest?

With this special issue on language, nation, and ethnicity we wanted to provide a platform not only for established but also for young scholars. We are delighted to have three authors who are located on the African continent. Most of the scholars have aimed at critically examining essentialist sociolinguistic identity politics on the African continent and at framing questions of the dynamics of language and identity production. Their articles offer rich empirical data from the African continent and provide a multitude of methodological and theoretical concerns.

The first paper by Nico Nassenstein, entitled *Kinyarwanda and Kirundi: On Colonial Divisions, Discourses of National Belonging, and Language Boundaries*, is an excellent introduction to the topic of colonial linguistics. His article discusses the artefactualisation of the Bantu languages Kinyarwanda and Kirundi against the background of Rwanda’s and Burundi’s (post-)colonial identity trajectories. Nassenstein contrasts the colonial history with contemporary fluid practices in multilingual neighbourhoods of the aforementioned countries, providing an outlook for further research in this region.

Lloyd Hill’s contribution, *Language, Ethno-Nationalism, and the South African University*, presents a nuanced analysis of the changing relations between language, ethnicity, and race in the context of the South African university system. Hill traces developments from the twentieth century to the present and ends with an illuminative

discussion of the legacy of language-based “ethno-national” politics in the post-1994 university sector.

South Africa is also the subject of the third paper, *Axing the Rainbow*. Irina Turner’s explorative study of political rhetorics focuses on the deconstruction of the Rainbow Nation through the student Fallist movements of 2015–2016. She interrogates the question to what extent the new president Cyril Ramaphosa has reacted to the criticisms brought forward by the Fallists and how he has approached the issue of ethnicity and nation. Turner convincingly argues that a shift from race/ethnicity to social inequality could provide a new strong metaphor for the South African state.

Nathan Oyori Ogechi’s intriguing contribution on *Ethnicity, Language, and Identity in Kenya* focuses on the use of language and non-linguistic communication strategies in the negotiation of identities in Kenya’s political and sports discourses. He argues that code choice, stereotypes, jokes and nicknames are used in the reification of “we” versus “they” while cleavages are overcome in the unstable linguistic practice of Sheng.

The final paper, *Come-no-go/L’ennemi...dans la maison*, provides a profound personal account of conflict in Cameroon’s urban history by Henry Kam Kah. It examines the sociolinguistic trajectories after the reintroduction of multi-party politics and the liberalisation of political expression in Cameroon during the 1990s. By analysing examples of derogatory statements the author examines the political power of language in Cameroon’s urban space, which poses a challenge to national unity and integration since the disputed reunification of British Southern Cameroons and the Cameroun Republic in 1961.

All examples presented in this issue aptly demonstrate how processes of belonging and identity production are intertwined with language practices – based on the “artefactualisation” and “intervention” of languages “enforced” in the context of colonisation. The studies focus on the complexity of these interrelated dynamics and their consequences for identity construction. To sum up, the broad aim of this collection is to critically engage with diverse approaches to the interplay of language and identity, to provide novel empirical data, and

to present new perspectives of and from contemporary Africa framed in historical, cultural, sociolinguistic, and political terms.

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