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The cultural politics of language in Sudan: against the racialising logic of language rights

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ABSTRACT

The sociolinguistic repertoires of individuals in Sudan are products of institutionalised orders of normalisation. The visibility of language in popular and official discourses in Sudan is always linked with wider cultural and political projects. This paper intends to engage with and explicate this observation by, first, examining how the dominant ideology of language operates in practice in Sudan, and second, by inspecting how it is contextually negotiated, appropriated, and resisted by social individuals. Our guiding questions are: (1) How is the hegemonic ideology of language in Sudan enacted, appropriated and resisted in concrete verbal interaction and other metalinguistic activities? (2) How can social groups and individuals exploit the dynamic nature of language not just to defend the right to develop their languages beyond the polarising terms (e.g. Arabic vs. African) constructed by interest-oriented ideologies, but most importantly to do politics through the dominant regime of language? We argue for a recognition of 'difference' within a historically established frame of diversity rather than a culturalist model of naturally fixed homogeneities This paper is an exercise in semiotic ideological analysis within the framework of cultural politics which views language as a proxy for doing politics by culture.

Introduction

The visibility of language in official and popular discourses in Sudan (as elsewhere) is always linked with wider cultural and political projects. In the case of Arabicisation as a cultural discourse, Arabic construed as a hermetically sealed unit is given pride of place in constitutional texts as a nation-building instrument. The concept of 'language' as a reified entity with a name (e.g. English, Arabic, Italian) is a modernist construction; it is a product of nationalist ideologies largely rooted in German Romanticism and the French Enlightenment project (see Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). The linguistic ideologies which equate a given 'pure' language with a particular people mobilise language as a kind of red herring to structure (trans-)local relations so as to achieve specific material and political ends.

However, in actual practice, as we will show, Arabic never operates as a self-contained code separable from other aspects of social practice, such as (individual and collective) subjectivity, history, and power. This is evidenced by the observation that semiotic repertoires in Sudan are products of institutional systems of normalisation. What therefore needs to be investigated is how a particular complex of social practices reinforces and legitimates the dominant ideology

of language, and most importantly how this monolithic conception of Arabic gets negotiated, appropriated, and/or resisted by groups and social individuals in actual interaction on the ground. We are interested in highlighting the ideological dimension of conflicts in Sudan with the aim to understand how political contestations are conducted on the terrain of language. So this paper is an exercise in semiotic ideological analysis within the framework of cultural politics which views language as a proxy for doing politics by culture (Gramsci 1985; Suleiman 2013).

Our guiding questions are: (1) How is the hegemonic ideology of language in Sudan enacted, appropriated, and resisted in concrete verbal interaction and folk-linguistic commentaries?, (2) How can social groups and individuals exploit the dynamic nature of language not just to defend the right to develop their languages beyond the polarising terms (e.g. Arabic vs. African) constructed by interest-oriented ideologies, but most importantly to do politics through the dominant regime of language? We address the above two questions drawing upon multiple data sources including historical documentation, a transcript of a TV interview, and metalinguistic commentaries and activities (institutional policy discourses, translation, explicitly formulated folk-linguistic views). To approach the first question we first consider how translation of a 'metalinguistic label' is a site of struggle between different forces over non-linguistic issues, and the aim here is to understand the implications of constructing a language-rights project in which translational practice effects a perception of a 'pure' language necessarily coupled with a specific race or ethnicity in the Sudan; secondly, we analyse a transcript of a TV interview with a famous singer in Sudan to understand how patterns of inequality are instantiated in concrete intersubjective discourse. The focus here will be on the semiotic strategies which social individuals deploy to maintain or resist institutional ideologies of language and social relations of asymmetry. We have chosen these forms of data to demonstrate the fact that language ideological battles about what counts as 'a language' or 'a dialect' in Sudan are political to the core: they are about identity construction in a context of patterned relations of power and inequality.

For the second question, we inspect a metalinguistic commentary by the late Southern Sudanese leader John Garang. The focus here will be on the ways in which Arabic, as a symbolically valued communicative form at the official level, is strategically redefined by Garang to decouple language from any specific racial or theological connotations; this re-articulation of Arabic is part of a post-colonial project intended for transcending the African-Arab divide in the context of Sudan. As 'data of mention' (Errington 1985), metalinguistic reflections on actual or hypothetical language use are one of the significant sites for the production and circulation of (counter-)ideologies of language (Mertz and Yoval 2009; Suleiman 2013). Hence, they are a valuable source of data. The oppositional or (re)appropriating strategies which we have explored illustrate our argument for a recognition of 'difference' within a historically established frame of diversity centrally informed by the complex, dynamic social reality, rather than by a culturalist model of permanently fixed homogeneities. It is upon this basis, we contend, that a successful strategic alliance among minoritised language communities can be formed without sliding into a self-celebratory position representing language within a racialising logic of discourse.

The paper is organised into five sections: in the next one, we sketch a theoretical argument to be drawn on in the analysis and discussion of the materials. The third section contextualises the analysis with a brief historiographical note about Sudan. The fourth section presents an analysis of the materials. The final section summarises the paper and concludes with implications drawn from the discussion.

A conceptual argument: the cultural politics of language

The cultural politics of language is a framework of ideological analysis which politicises social practices, including languages, by examining their historical conditions of existence and their metalinguistically constructed symbolic associations with subjectivity and other forms of stratification

(Jordan and Weedon 1995; Pennycook 1994; Suleiman 2013; Vertovec 2011). As a methodological perspective, cultural politics is used to conduct historical, semiotic, and ethnographic observations cognizant of the social relations of power and domination as an explanation of the dynamic valuation of cultural materials. It addresses the question of how language as a concrete practice is deployed to 'do politics' at times of social and political struggle (Suleiman 2013, 2). Focusing on the nexus of language ideologies, subjectivity, and linguistic practice, the cultural political perspective is intended to transform semiotic and historical analysis into a 'political critique' (Bourdieu 1991, 213). Language ideologies refer to cultural conceptions about linguistic practice and speakers (Blommaert 1999; Irvine and Gal 2000; Milroy and Milroy 1985; Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998).

Ideological discourses on language are not directly about linguistic issues but about sociopolitical concerns articulated by the proxy of language. This means that all social positions are regarded as ideologically interested, including our very sociolinguistically unqualified fascination with 'social diversity'. That is, the uncritical celebration of social, including linguistic, diversity, which conceptualises structured variation as 'a given' rather than a product of human action, is deeply worrying because in some contexts (e.g. Nazi regime) diversity is viewed by (physical) anthropologists as racially motivated (for discussion see Duchene and Heller 2007; Hutton 2005). Thus, language in the cultural sense is not a 'given' but itself a dialogical site of struggle over meaning (Bakhtin 1984). In order to analyse language in a cultural context, language has to be construed as 'political from top to bottom' (Joseph 2006, 17). The cultural political lens helps us understand how power relations operate in/through language to constitute a particular form of 'lived' social reality, and thus constitutes a cultural-materialist perspective on language (Williams 1980). One of its tenets is the centrality of linguistic practice in the social construction of reality.

Sociolinguistic orders operate as interpretive frameworks which normalise particular patterns of language use and 'Orientalise' others (in Said's [1978] sense of 'culturally abnormalise'), a position which resonates particularly with the Frankfurt school. When we say that language 'is' social practice, we stress a complex nexus of dynamic processes, including practices of representation, subjectivities, normativities, power relations, and uneven patterns of interpretation (Blommaert 2010; Hymes 1996).

Further, people's use of language not only reflects existing cultural relations but also lets them intervene in, and in the process (re)constitute, (alternative) forms of relation. This in turn involves them in the process of ideological struggle for recognition (identity politics) which in turn affects their linguistic behaviour. Thus, our entry point to understanding social phenomena is language use conceptualised broadly as socially shared practices of representation (Coupland 1999; Hall 1997). Representation is always situated within relations of social stratification, since it constitutes our cultural frame(s) of interpretation. Gramsci's (1971, 1985) concept of 'hegemony' as a structural relations of domination and subordination saturating all aspects of cultural life puts language at the heart of power conflict.

However, against the grain of their complex and dynamic sociolinguistic repertoires, oppressed groups often manipulate a putatively 'monoglot' (Silverstein 1996) ideology of language as a discursive resource for doing cultural politics. We use the term 'repertoire' in the sense advanced in ethnographic and interactional sociolinguistics, to refer to the totality of systemically organised verbal resources available to a person (Blom and Gumperz 1986). The dominant cultural order, with its 'ideological apparatuses' and associated material practices, structures the interpretive repertoires we strategically deploy to articulate, negotiate, or resist hegemonic discourses (Althusser 1971). Or, in Foucauldian terms, our subjectivities are structured by the cultural discourses in/through which we are socialised (Foucault 1972). However, the contingent and dynamic nature of language as a social practice also indicates that meaning is never finally fixed, and anti-hegemonic movements exploit this condition to construct alternative social realities.

Further, when individuals enter into a normatively organised 'interaction order', they do so with an established biography (assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, etc.) formed by the situated histories of previous encounters (Goffman 1983). 'Histories' are understood here not as an unbroken

chronology (hence the plural), but as relations of power and struggle over the resemiotisation of orders of social existence (Grossberg 1986; Iedema 2001). The sociolinguistic resources in our repertoires are inherently indexical of the histories of their formation (Silverstein and Urban 1996). Thus, social practice is fundamentally positioning: we always speak from a particular place 'in history' (see Crowley 1996). Further, if participants interact by navigating multiple practices, discourses, and genres, 'context' itself is not fixed but a product of semiotic process of 'contextualisation' (Gumperz 1982). Thus, every social context is multilayered and contingent, and its actual dynamics depends on real-time, interactional appropriation processes and strategies such as 'bricolage', 'resemiotisation', 'erasure', and 'styling/crossing' (see respectively Levi-Strauss 1966; Iedema 2001; Irvine and Gal 2000; Rampton 2005). These concepts capture in common active attempts by agents to inflect pre-existing structures with shades of new meaning.

The entire cultural political approach rejects any essential correlation between language and identity (e.g. 'race') as a basis for a language-rights project. For instance, 'linguistic human rights', a mainstream paradigm of language rights promoted by Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1994), advocates education in mother tongue. This perspective visualises the right to language not as 'authorised rights' but in universal terms as a fundamental individual human right (for discussion see Canagarajah 1999; Branson and Miller 2007). The mainstream thesis of language rights has productively politicised the discipline of applied linguistics, in a way which has stirred much controversy and generated very useful and interesting debates. For example, Davies (1996) rejects the right to specific languages, advocating instead the right to 'language' (read: 'a standard language'). He argues that the paradigm of linguistic human rights promoted by Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas, which views English as a 'killer language', is essentialising and reifying, in that it draws necessary correlations between language and ethnicity.

Situated within the above theoretical arguments and drawing on the above concepts, in this paper we consider the social value of a language to be a site of contestation and a product of contextualisation strategies and processes. As a prelude to the analysis of how ideologies of language and subjectivity are enacted and strategically appropriated in intersubjective and metalinguistic practice, the next section offers a brief sketch of a historical trajectory which shaped the nature of the conflict over cultural identity in Sudan.

Sudan: a discursive struggle over visions

The term 'Sudan' carries intertwined narratives of different historical trajectories formed by forces including colonialism(s), modernism(s), postcolonial nationalism, (pan)Arabism, (pan)Africanism, state socialism, and Islamism. Postcolonial regimes of governance in Sudan are deeply shaped by colonial discourses on language and subjectivity (see Sharkey 2003). For instance, the British colonial system used divide-and-rule strategies and compartmentalised the geographical space into two physically and semiotically different places through antagonistic binaries that severely constrained the complexity in/across the society (e.g. North vs. South, Islam vs. Christianity, Arabic vs. local languages, etc.). Linguistic resources in the South were subjected to intense standardisation by Christian missionaries, resulting in the emergence of a number of well-codified and tightly bounded 'languages' (for detailed review of colonial and postcolonial language policies in the Sudan see Abdelhay 2010b; Abdelhay et al. 2016; Abdelhay et al. 2011; Miller 2010). The British colonial regime used both coercive and semiotic strategies to create locally anchored identities. For instance, the *Closed District Order* of 1929 turned the Southern region into a self-contained space in relation to the Northern part; an administrative approach which had both linguistic and cultural implications. Arabic was portrayed as a 'dangerous language' and consistently represented in collocation with Islam and the Northern part of the country.

At the same time, in the Northern part, artificial tribal boundaries were created and tribal chiefs were invested with state powers (e.g. taxation). As a consequence of the coercive and discursive strategies through which this was done, the Sudanese cultural space has become a 'text' that requires a

particular sociolinguistic repertoire to be interpreted: 'South' vs. 'North' are no longer dynamic spaces but rather physically and socially self-contained 'places'. The 'ethnicities', initially discursively structured, are now recognised as objective or transcendent, locally policed categories of belonging. The sociolinguistic outcome of these strategies, applied via a regime of representation linked with institutional power, is an 'image' of multiculturalism and multilingualism as a set of socially structured monoculturalisms/monolingualisms.

Heading towards and after Independence (1956), postcolonial politicians (almost exclusively 'Northern') tried to modernise the newborn state by creating a unifying national culture using the centralised Westminster system as a model to 'erase' colonially constructed ethnic particularisms through both hegemony and coercion. 'Northern'-based ruling regimes consistently looked to the South as, in the words of El-Affendi (1990, 372), the '"lost brother" snatched away by the aliens, and long due back'. Keeping with this, various assimilative nationalist projects (e.g. 'Sudanisation') were designed to Arabicise and Islamise the South as a way of undoing colonially created differences (for a review of how these linguistic policies minoritised groups, see Nyombe 1997; Sharkey 2008). The Southern demand for a federal system was betrayed and silenced, and most Sudanese governments preferred brute force as a way of subjugating dissenting voices.

South–North relations erupted into a protracted civil war, which ended in 2005 with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement or Naivasha Peace Agreement (CPA; 2005–2011). This peace accord gave the South the right to self-determination through a referendum; in which it chose separation. South Sudan became an independent nation-state in 2011. The CPA included a significant language policy statement which was enshrined in the Interim National Constitution of the Republic of Sudan (2005). The CPA's language policy contained five key statements: '(1) All the indigenous languages are national languages which shall be respected, developed and promoted; (2) The Arabic language is the widely spoken national language in the Sudan; (3) Arabic, as a major language at the national level, and English shall be the official working languages of National Government business and languages of instruction for higher education; (4) In addition to Arabic and English, the legislature of any sub-national level of government may adopt any other national language(s) as additional official working language(s) at its level; and (5) The use of either language [Arabic or English] at any level of government or education shall not be discriminated against' (CPA 2005, 26–27). This language policy and the peace agreement as a whole were of course not signed in a social vacuum; the present Islamic regime, which signed the peace agreement, had already overturned a democratic government in 1989 and imposed a rigid ideological project called *al-mashru' al-hadari* 'The Civilisation Project'.

To govern the country, it is necessary to 'win' the tribally distributed loyalties represented by established political parties. Whether adopting a top-down or bottom-up way of imposing change, therefore, serious ideological work in relation to existing cultural identities is required. Deng (1995) captured the cultural dimension of the conflict over governance as a 'war of visions'. The Islamist-backed military regime, when it took power in 1989, strengthened the state as a way of 'erasing' particularising structures of belonging (old sectarian loyalties) by recentring cultural identity on new conditions of possibility. This project employed a particular discursive pattern of classification through which it tried to aggressively discipline and resemiotise nearly every micropolitical aspect of social life. The trial of Lubna Hussein over wearing a pair of trousers is a case in point (Hussein 2009).

Furthermore, although the colonial system created the semiotic conditions of possibility to talk about the 'South' and the 'North' as constituted in opposition ('dislocated' in Laclau's [1990, 39] sense), postcolonial governments conducted both cultural politics and physical violence as if these categories were part of the 'natural order'. The state has become a space of 'contested national identities' (Lesch 1998). The sociolinguistic repertoires of individual Sudanese are an emergent property of institutionalised regimes of normativity.

However, normalising the practices generated by *al-mashru' al-haḍari* does not mean dismissing existing Sufi religious practices altogether as regressive or 'primitive'. Rather, using the discourse

strategy of 'bricolage' (resignification of existing practice), this approach – that of Hassan al-Turabi, the late Islamist thinker who designed this ideological programme – re-accentuates established Islamic tradition with new ideological content (Noble-Frapin 2009). In this scheme, the social formation based on a distinction between the state and civil society is viewed as a product of Western secularism aimed at eliminating Islam from politics. The task then is to collapse these two orders of social life into one by using the state as an agency for the imposition of the conceptual project of *al-mashru' al-haḍari*. Thus, *al-mashru' al-haḍari* draws on a varied archive of discourses related to Islam, the Arabic language, a version of Western modernity, anti-colonialism, existing traditions, territorial nationalism, pan-Islamism, pan-Arabism, and the free-market economy. Some of these discourses are contradictory; however, they are ordered in a coherent formation to re-define 'who we should really be' and in the process to legitimate its military dominance. *Al-mashru' al-haḍari* is a 'discursive formation' in Foucault's (1972, 38) sense: a regime of knowledge designed to regulate, discipline, and normalise a particular configuration of cultural relations. The ideological process of restructuring state institutions and imposing uniformity over peoples created various inequalities. As a project of cultural hegemony, *al-mashru' al-haḍari* was resisted in various quarters, and the regime has resorted to physical coercion as an alternative mode of subjugation. This brutal use of state force has led to armed conflicts and resistance movements particularly in the Darfur, Blue Nile, and Nuba Mountains regions. In the next section we focus on the ideological dimension of these conflicts, with the aim to understand the ways in which larger extralinguistic concerns continue to be articulated on the terrain of language, and how the dominant ideology of language is enacted, resisted, and appropriated in social practice.

Language as a racialised site of discursive struggle in Sudan

To begin the discussion, we invoke the term 'indigenous', mentioned in the first statement of the Naivasha agreement ('All indigenous languages are national language which should be respected, developed and promoted'). We will briefly critique the concept of 'indigeneity' and its associated connotations of 'purism' and 'heritage', with a focus on how this concept is re-translated by a dominant institutional ideology of language which views Arabic as the only 'legitimate language' (in Bourdieu's [1991, 43] sense of the term). That is, the term 'indigenous' is also offered essentialising (whether strategic or not) interpretations which invest it with correlations such as ethnic/racial 'purism'. Our critique is directed towards this latter understanding not just to indicate how translation as a metalinguistic activity enacts a value-assigning ideology, but also to understand the implications of constructing a language-rights project in which translational practice effects a perceived 'pure' language necessarily coupled with a specific race or ethnicity in the Sudan. First we need to discuss how 'romanticising' an interpretation of the construct 'indigenous languages' can be in the context of Sudan.

The formulation of 'indigenous languages' seems to have been intended to position subordinated groups in Sudan in relation to the dominant normative order defining the country as Arab-Islamic. However, a language (e.g. Dinka, Beja) cannot be described as 'indigenous' without invoking an 'Other' – a non-equivalent linguistic 'alien/colonial' (e.g. English) (Makoni and Pennycook 2007). However, 'indigenous' as a positioning raises serious questions. In a context which has witnessed an intense history of contact among peoples, the notion of 'indigeneity' implies a romanticising sense of 'self-enclosure': an intrinsic value naturally stamped into a language since its original inception and remaining untouched by the dynamics and conjunctures of history and social life. In other words, an 'indigenous language' is an a-temporal language; and such an understanding of 'indigeneity' could backfire, since the concept of 'indigeneity' in this sense is logically self-subverting as an ideological basis of struggle against the established sociolinguistic regime, since it invokes notions of 'exclusivity' and 'self-enclosure' in a dynamic context requiring willingness to build strategic alliances. That is, any discourse on language rights is inherently

'multiaccentual', and, thus, a language can never be automatically and permanently sealed against reclaiming or penetration.

Given this recognition, disengaging language from essentialist connotations of 'Nature'/'race' directs attention to how dominant interest-driven ideologies operate through the same language-rights discourse. However, for sociopolitically minoritised groups to adopt such an active concept of language implies a view of language as a historical construction; self-enclosure in an essentialising 'racial purity' is no way to win a dynamically political struggle. Further, an 'indigenous language' in the Sudanese context is usually 're-appropriated' by the dominant ideology as a 'local language'. This is precisely how the English phrase 'indigenous languages' was rendered in the Arabic version of the CPA (as *lughat maḥaliyya*) (2005, 27–28, 5, Arabic version). In contrast, interestingly, in the Arabic version of the *Interim National Constitution*, which embodied the CPA and its language policy, 'indigenous' is re-translated as *aṣli*, equivalent to 'indigenous' in international legal discourse on indigenous populations (Barsch 1986), whereas in the English versions of the CPA and the *Interim National Constitution*, what are ideologically perceived as 'non-standard/unofficial languages' are never rendered as 'local', but always 'indigenous'. These respective reproductions are diagnostic of different systematic ways of thinking about language. Powerful discourses reduce the status of nondominant languages by denoting them merely 'local', even though 'the local' may have a greater sense of social legitimacy. Thus, in this context of dynamic conflict, terms such as 'indigenous' and 'local' have developed very complex semiotic biographies: their meaning always depends on who interprets them and from within which discursively grounding regime of understanding are they interpreted. The translation of 'indigenous languages' as 'local languages' under the dominant institutional ideology indexes the psychoanalytic condition of 'ambivalence': under political pressure, the ruling regime recognises minoritised linguistic varieties as 'languages' but not quite as legitimate as Arabic because they are 'local' (on this usage of 'ambivalence' see Bhabha 1994, 121–131). This is how the (mis)translation of 'indigenous languages' functions ideologically: it creates a particular value of language and indexically a particular form of subjectivity.

A look at how these varieties are labelled in 'official' texts should show that their value as resources is indeed dynamic per their status as 'vernacular', 'local', 'indigenous', 'national', 'official', or whatever. However, in Sudan, the phrase 'local languages' is still considered a politically correct concept. The 'off-record' (outside formal politics) dominant representation of these linguistic varieties is '*roṭanaṭ*' (literally: unclear speech). In some folk-linguistic ideologies, this social label represents them directly as a 'problem' obstructing the creation of an Arabic-speaking, Islamic, national, cultural centre of orientation (an 'imagined community' united by the singularities of language and theology). As we show below, ideological monolingualism is not just consciously exercised by the state apparatuses but also embedded in individual utterances.

The Sudanese national TV is accustomed to use another politically correct term: *lahja* 'dialect'. This term implies less violence than *roṭana(t)* but still carries negative indexicality, connoting 'unwritten/corrupted/unintelligible', whether used in relation to local varieties of Arabic or to other linguistic systems such as Beja (also called Bedawi). In other words, anything apart from 'Standard Arabic' is a dialect. The effect of this representation is both psychologically and materially profound. Let us illustrate with the following transcribed interaction, from a show called *Assudan Yajma'una* ('Sudan Brings Us Together') aired on Sudanese national TV in 2006. The female host and the guest (Mohamed al-Badri, a Sudanese performer and singer), converse in Arabic. We provide broad Roman transliteration and relatively free English translation:

1   al-Muḍiyyfa   *dairein nitakallam fi al-ḥita al-tanya bita'at al-lugha. Niḥna mush mumkin nagul lugha nagul lahjah, saḥ? Lanu*
     (host)   *al-lugha hiya lugha 'arabiyya.*
            We want to talk to you about something else in relation to language. We can't say language. We say dialect,
            right? Because language is the Arabic language.

2	al-Badri	*ana agūl lugha*
		I say language.
3	al-Muḍiyyfa	*Inta bitgūl lugha? Ṭaib ana ikhtalafta m'āk fi al-hita di. Ṭaib nitkallam mathlan 'an-l- lahja, lahjat alsharig. Raghm inu mathlan a-lugha al-bijawiyya, kweis jibtaha leik zai ma inta dair, ya'ni ma mafhūma le-l-nas al-tanein wa asa ana ya'ni gareit fi ḥajātak inta sharakta fi dubai wa fi barīs, al-nas di keif gidrat inha tafham al-bijawiyya aw titgabalah, keif?*
		Do you call it language? OK I disagree with you. OK let's talk for example about the dialect, the dialect of the East. Although the Beja language, OK I used it in the way you wished, is in a sense unintelligible to other people, and I have just read in your publicity material that you performed in Dubai and Paris; how could people understand Beja or accept it? How?
4	al-Badri	*Ṭaib tab'an al-urobiyyn musiyyqian muṭaweriyyn aktar minana. Hum laman yajeibūk al-baḥith da byabḥath 'an iqā'at wa-aṣwat fi al-'alam ba'dein hum bya'tamidu 'ala byashufu al-iqa' bita'ak haja ghariba 'alehum wa-l-tanfeiz bita'ak wa-adā'k wa-kida ma ma-'indahum 'ilaqa bi-l-naṣ al-inta bitagulu. Hum mawdu'am ino mawd' aṣwat wa iqa'at fi al-'álam aw fi afriqiyya kida ya'ni hajat zai di*
		OK, of course the Europeans are musically more developed than us. When they bring you, the person of course is looking for rhythms and voices from around the world, and after all they depend on, they see your rhythm, use and performance and the like as different. They are not concerned with the content of what you say. Their focus is on voices and rhythms from around the world or from Africa and so on.

The interaction deserves a close microanalysis; however, here, we make only a few general observations. In line one the host downscales Beja to a 'dialect', and rejected talking about it as a 'language proper'. The tag question 'right?' here is a rhetorical strategy and not a serious question, because she immediately, intuitively qualifies it with the rationalisation 'because language is the Arabic language'. This 'explanation' is of course tautological: Arabic is a language because it is Arabic. It is a prevalent kind of ideological rationalisation: one couched as a commonsensical 'sort-of-what-everyone-knows' statement, a view that appears natural but is in fact naturalised as an effect of an established scheme of classification. However, the banality of this established ideological view is revealed when al-Badri 'resists', recontextualising Beja as 'a language' (line 2). In other words, in this context al-Badri is conscious of the contextually 'cued' economy within which Beja is being (de)evaluated, and rejects 'interpellation' into the 'subject-position' of a 'local singer'. Here, the dominant ideology of language is itself an interactional resource that can be mobilised by subordinated individuals struggling for discursive recognition. This should not imply that subordinated individuals or groups in Sudan are always aware of systemic sociolinguistic stratification; in fact, ideological devaluation of local(ised) resources is most successful precisely when it is misrecognised as 'natural' and 'legitimate', and thus subconsciously popularised by the subordinated. In the context of Eastern Sudan, Morin noted that:

> The potential conflict between the maternal languages and the official and dominant Arabic is solved by postulating a hierarchy in which inferior members (Beja or Tigre) are called jargons (*roṭana*) by the speakers themselves. This supposed conformity of the dominated language and the values it expresses is tantamount to implicit legitimation of its survival. (1997, 16)

However, as al-Badri's reaction shows, the subordinated are not simply 'dupes'. Evidenced in this interaction, as al-Badri negotiates the word 'dialect' in collocation with Beja, is the ideological magnetism the term 'dialect' carries in contrast with Arabic as 'the language proper'. That is, his protestation is not against the classification of Arabic as 'the language', which he accepts, but rather that of Beja as a 'dialect'. Al-Badri's acceptance of the superior status of Arabic is an effect of a prolonged institutionalised form of 'symbolic violence': the state's cultural policy of Arabicisation. Al-Badri's resistance is mitigated as merely a subjective viewpoint, rather than the position of a legitimate alternative cultural frame of understanding. The host's question in turn (line three), 'do you call it a language?' entextualises al-Badri's recast of Beja as 'a language' as quite literally a personal view ('you call it'), and this grounding prepares the way for her to continue to implicitly disagree with him. Thus, the category of 'language' becomes a site of self-conscious struggle.

As the interaction unfolds in turn (line three), the host prefaces her question with the polite request 'OK let's talk for example about the dialect, the dialect of the East'. Here the host not only recasts 'Beja' as a 'dialect', but frames the entire eastern region of Sudan in monodialectal

terms (as the region of the Beja dialect). However, the sociolinguistic situation in this part of Sudan entertains a complex form of ordered multilingualism (see Morin 1997).

So, Beja, which is itself an umbrella label covering multiple sub-branches, serves as a metonym for a whole world of economic and discursive complexity, which is thereby levelled and stereotyped. We expect the host to define this 'dialect of the East'; in doing so she upgrades it to a 'language', before self-reflexively spotting and rationalising the tension between these two hierarchically ordered values by switching to a friendly footing to apply retroactively: 'OK I used it in the way you wished'. This parenthetical justification amounts to a strategic accommodation (read: 'it is a favour'). This top-down accommodation is a feature of unequal power relations between the host and al-Badri; by signalling that she is voluntarily granting the 'wish' of al-Badri, the host flags her re-(e)valuation of Beja as temporary/provisional and inauthentic. These strategies of manoeuvring and patronising accommodation have not just metapragmatically saved her 'face', but most importantly displaced the contradiction and retained in place the dominant hierarchy of discursive values, as becomes clear when the host continues her turn by saying that Beja 'is in a sense unintelligible to other people'.

The host's localising practice of representation indexically frames Beja as an 'immobile dialect' essentially tied to a particular geographical place (Eastern Sudan), which, if used beyond this bounded 'locality', would be 'out of place' ('unintelligible'). According to the embedded linguistic ideology, a 'dialect' as an 'immobile' resource indexes the subjectivity of very locally anchored 'immobile tribes'. Far from innocent, this practice of representation tribalises both the linguistic variety and its users. In this cultural conception of language, a 'mobile dialect' is a contradiction in terms. Rooted in this essentialist correlation between a particular linguistic variety (Beja dialect) and a 'subjectivity' (of a person from Eastern Sudan), the host goes on to frame her question: 'I have just read in your publicity material that you performed in Dubai and Paris; how could people understand Beja or accept it? How?' In this dominant cultural ideology, 'Paris' indexes 'modernity', as al-Badri in turn (line four) confirms when he states that musically 'Europeans are more developed than us'. Obviously by 'us' al-Badri meant not only Eastern Sudanese singers but all of the Sudanese by implication. Taken together, Paris and Dubai thus represent global capitalist modernity in multiple dimensions, possessing the undisputed right to evaluate and accept or reject the peripheralised's linguistic practice (and by extension other cultural performances such as music). Beja, al-Badri and the interaction order between al-Badri and the host are caught up in this hierarchicalising dialectic between the global and the local, the realm of historical structures of inequality at various levels.

Further, although the host read al-Badri's 'publicity material' (his CV), she nevertheless expropriates his narrative, drastically and capriciously reducing his historical trajectory and complex artistic performances to the single aspect of 'language' (viewed in the very narrow linguistic sense). Al-Badri repairs (corrects) her understanding, trying to return language to only one dimension, often unimportant, of the total complex of (any) artistic performance. Nevertheless, the host continues to reduce the richness of his performance and language to matters of mimetic intelligibility and unintelligibility. In fact, later on in the show the host also asks al-Badri how Sudanese people could understand his songs; in this way, through her politically correct, hedged language, multiculturalism/multilingualism is articulated by the dominant linguistic-ideological regime as a 'problem', and the communities' cultural practices are thereby dismissed as 'unintelligible' and potentially opened up to being wiped out. These representations (as pieces of knowledge) index power both in discursive practice (the power to abnormalise) and beyond discourse (in the host's institutional position as a National TV presenter). And as we see in turn (line four), al-Badri rejects this theory of language, telling the host that the Europeans who invite him to perform are not obsessed with the isolated 'words' but with his total artistic performance, both musical and lyrical.

To take stock of how al-Badri is multipositioned in the above interaction order, we can note that a number of semiotic practices are deployed by the host to construct a particular image of him – that is, he is stereotyped. These discursive strategies include essentialising, localising/tribalising/ethnicising, downscaling, and erasure. Al-Badri's autobiographical repertoire is slighted, reducing him to 'a local singer in unintelligible dialect'; this devaluation of his cultural practice of performance makes him

'tribally immobile'. A performer of repute, invited to perform locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally, will be expected to have a complex sociolinguistic repertoire; but the host's stereotyping strategies 'erase' this role of al-Badri's along with its sedimented history of mobility into inherently cultural spaces, by placing specific elements of his subjectivity under the systematic abnormalising gaze of institutional power. Recall that, ironically, the name of the programme is 'Sudan Brings Us Together'; and its ambit is to celebrate 'unity in diversity'. This understanding of 'diversity' is monoglottic to the core, based on a nationalistic ideology which views multiculturalism as no more than a series of monolingual pockets combined in an imagined frame called 'Sudan'. A sociolinguistic celebration of this version of 'linguistic diversity' confers a patina of scientific rationalisation to a hegemonic pattern of stratification that is fundamentally ideological.

Although we expect interaction orders such as this to be carefully institutionally scripted, no such pre-defined scripts or expectations thereof can totally capture the dynamic and contingent nature of 'real-time' communicative events. Individuals and groups continue to negotiate and resist, and thus shake established schemes of viewing the world. This is precisely what al-Badri did: he not only re-entextualised Beja as 'a language', but most significantly reconfigured the very concept of 'language' (as a grammatical system) as a minor ingredient in a total ensemble of poetic performance. Linguistic varieties are 'resources' with no pre-fixed values; they are assigned by various people different and often conflicting ideological values (e.g. language, dialect), as those interpreting and interpellated individuals move through semiotically charged landscapes. For example, the word *roṭana* (or any other metalinguistic label) does not have a permanently fixed indexical association (whether positive or negative) across all social contexts. It should be remarked that 'place' may not be a 'relevant' contextual dimension in the determination of the value of a linguistic resource. For example, at the intragroup level, the word *roṭana* used by an elderly Dongolese addressing a young relative living in the city of Khartoum with the Arabic question *inta bitartun?*, may have a completely different value (it simply means 'a group's speech': 'Do you speak the language?'). That is why the (dynamic) social indexical values of linguistic categories (dialect, language, *roṭana*) have to be found out through ethnographic enquiry to understand the contextual dimensions which determine their psychological and cultural attachments. Edwards (2012, 13–14) is correct to argue that 'our notions of "standard" and "non-standard" dialects rest upon foundations of social convention, and not – as many continue to think – upon any intrinsic differentiations in "goodness"'.

Most of the communicative groups in the Sudan are at pains to flag up their social varieties as a 'language proper' through intensive processes of canon-formation (e.g. developing a writing system, producing pedagogical primers and dictionaries). However, most of them take what counts as 'a language' for granted, thus they operate, within conditions of indexicality set by the dominant symbolic order. The late South Sudanese leader John Garang de Mabior, problematised 'universalised Arabic' upfront, not by dispossessing it as an 'ex-colonial language' (i.e. a language imported to Africa or imposed on southerners), but by relocalising and reappropriating it: radically inflecting it as an 'ethnic language', a 'Sudanese national language':

> We are a product of historical development. *Arabic* (though I am poor in it – I should learn it fast) *must be the national language in a new Sudan* and therefore we must learn it. We are as frank and as sharp in everything. Arabic cannot be said to be the language of the Arabs. No, it is the language of the Sudan. English is the language of Americans, but that country is America, not England. Spanish is the language of Argentina, Bolivia, Cuba and they are those countries, not Spain. Therefore I take Arabic on scientific grounds as the language of the Sudan and I must learn it. So, next time, I will address you in Arabic if Daniel Kodi, my Arabic teacher, does his job well and if I am a good student. (Garang 1992, 133, emphasis in original)

Garang's position on language is coloured by a cultural-materialist tradition (see Scott 1985) conceptualising language and subjectivity in radical terms as historical constructions and re-articulating Arabic within this indexical order as part of the 'Sudanese national identity'. Arabic must be made a historical product before it can be redefined and reclaimed. In the 1980s and 1990s, during the conflict in the South, the majority of Southerners regarded Arabic as the property of the 'Northern

Muslim Arabs'; Garang re-accented the concept of Arabic within the ideological project of the 'New Sudan'; thus, he tried to redefine not just 'Arabic' but also indexically the categories of 'the national' and 'the Sudanese'. In the process, 'Arabic dialects', viewed by the dominant Arabic ideology as a 'corruption', were re-interpreted as a publically shared 'national archive'. Thus, Garang strategically exploited the polysemy of the concept of 'Arabic', a polysemy indicating the socially stratified nature of the Sudanese society. Garang's and al-Badri's appropriating practices, which renegotiate and redefine hegemonic structures at least in their immediate contexts, show us that social diversity and multilingualism are discursive constructions, products of history requiring translation and re-translation and uninterpretable in a social vacuum. The oppositional or (re)appropriating strategies manipulated by Garang (e.g. redefinition of Arabic as a historical construction) and al-Badri (e.g. re-articulation of 'language' as just one aspect of a complex poetic practice) illustrate our argument for a recognition of 'difference' within a historically established frame of diversity centrally shaped by a complex, dynamic social reality, rather than by a culturalist (essentialist) model of naturally demarcated homogeneities.

Conclusion: bringing language from 'nature' back into culture

In this paper we have discussed the ways in which the hegemonic ideologies of language are played out and appropriated in actual linguistic and metalinguistic practice in some contexts in Sudan. As a contextualising backdrop, we have sketched the historical trajectory which largely shaped the authoritative ideology of language in Sudan. Situated within this larger context, we have inspected the reproductive interactional practices of the hegemonic linguistic ideology, and we have explored how this ideology is strategically resisted and appropriated in material practice. We conclude with a few observations drawn from the discussion which have significant implications for projects of language rights in the Sudan.

Social groups in Sudan such as the Nubiin/Nubian, the Fur, the Beja (all with their intragroup branches) have their distinct formative trajectories and local knowledges. However, instead of being placed within a cultural frame of (dynamic) diversity, this proposition is sometimes asserted in the name of an exclusive 'authentic heritage' or (African) 'indigeneity' believed to be fixed by 'Nature'. Hence, we experience a plethora of fossilising and often racialising representations of dynamic subjectivities as rigidly 'self-contained' essences in a crudely binary opposition to 'Arab/Arabic' (and in extreme cases, to 'Sudan', seen as a metonym of 'Arab'). Asserting the existence of an unchanging 'pure Arab identity' or 'pure Nubian lineage' is simply a denial by these groups and individuals of the multiple synchronisations of their semiotic repertoires of interpretation and production. Nevertheless, these identities are still very much with us, not because they are fixed once for all in a permanently irreversible past, but precisely because they are dynamic: they not only survived the loss of their originating discourse, but also continue to be reproduced and promoted through other cultural discourses (e.g. designing websites on Nubian topics in Arabic). Crudely, being a 'Nubian', an 'Arab', or a 'Beja' means being 'impure' (not to be confused with 'false'); being 'in history' rather than closed off in a life beyond history.

This argument and the historical contingency of language and identity that it reveals may understandably not appeal to community language-rights forces, since for them it is only an extreme version of 'essentialism' which can provide the certainties required to build 'ethnic solidarity' at the intragroup level against the oppressive state practices. There is a growing number of vernacular language movements in the Sudan (e.g. Tima Language Committee), which in the context of conflict against the established scheme of control, operate with this nationalist ideology of language rights (for a discussion see Abdelhay 2010a; Mugaddam and Abdelhay 2014). The problem with this rationalisation is that the dominant regulative order operates precisely in/through a racialising understanding of identity and language. The point here is not to undermine the construct of 'native-speakerness' as much as to advocate operating through multiple discourses, including that of diversity itself as distinct from homogeneity as naturally given reality. Multiculturalism/

multilingualism should be critically celebrated, not as a collection of separate, unchanging, handed-down-by-Nature 'heritages' anchored to closed zones. If the meaning of heritage is to mark difference, compartmentalising the 'imagined' space into closed cultural units leading ultimately to an 'image' of multiculturalism, we contend that this is a mere entextualisation of a colonial brand of diversity (see the section on the struggle over visions above). Language in the wider sense inhabits a set of registers, genres, and styles that through patterned social practice become differentially indexical of ideological social values (e.g. identity).

A final point is that the dominant language ideology in Sudan is preoccupied with 'writing' because it conveys the perception of 'permanency' across time and space. This shared ideology has sometimes led laypeople to define 'dialects' as linguistic varieties without a writing system. Influenced by this ideology of writing, subordinated groups have come to believe that one way to get their resources recognised as 'language proper' is to develop grammatically sophisticated written materials for pedagogical purposes, a shift that reifies and thus detemporalizes spoken language. Since language fundamentally regulates access to material and cultural resources, we argue against a containing strategy of equating 'multiculturalism/multilingualism' with 'writing' and 'mother-tongue schooling'. If mother-tongue education is systematically isolated from its wider historical conditions, it dispossesses speakers of the languages in question from fully articulating their views. The right 'to language' (as a verb) should be based in a perspective which views social and linguistic diversity as ideologically stabilised (thus dynamic) constructions. The alternative to a monoglot model of 'naturally' given homogeneities is a centrifugal view that recognises the historically constituted nature of social variation as a valid basis for building social solidarity. It is upon this basis, we contend, that a successful strategic alliance among minoritised language communities can be formed without sliding into a self-celebratory position representing language within a racialising logic of discourse.

Disclosure statement

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