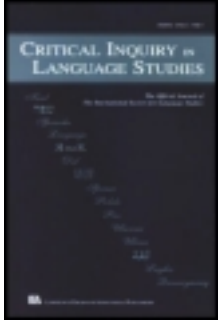


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# Disinventing and (Re)Constituting Languages

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*In this paper we argue that although the problematic nature of language construction has been acknowledged by a number of skeptical authors, including the recent claim in this journal (Reagan, 2004) that there is no such thing as English or any other language, this critical approach to language still needs to develop a broader understanding of the processes of invention. A central part of our argument, therefore, is that it is not enough to acknowledge that languages have been invented, nor that linguistic metalanguage constructs the world in particular ways; rather, we need to understand the interrelationships among metadiscursive regimes, language inventions, colonial history, language effects, alternative ways of understanding language, and strategies of disinvention and reconstitution. Any critical (applied) linguistic project that aims to deal with language in the contemporary world, however estimable its political intent may be, must also have ways of understanding the detrimental language effects it may engender unless it confronts the need for linguistic disinvention and reconstitution.*

## Introduction

In the first issue of this journal, Reagan (2004) proposed that “there is, or at least there may well be, no such thing as English. Indeed, my claim is even a bit stronger than this—not only is there no such thing as English, but there is arguably no such thing as Russian, French, Spanish, Chinese, Hindi, or any other language” (p. 42). To back up this provocative claim, Reagan argues that the notion of languages as fixed entities is problematic from both an historical and a social point of view. Historically, “language—*any* language—is constantly changing, and in flux, and thus any effort to demarcate the boundaries of a particular language are inevitably at best able to provide a snapshot of the language at a particular time and place” (p. 44); and socially, language varies across contexts, speakers, classes, genders and so on. A language, he suggests, is “ultimately a collection of idiolects which have been determined to belong together for what are ultimately non- and extra-linguistic reasons” (p. 46). He concludes by arguing for a form of critical language awareness which employs a constructivist

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epistemology in order to “reject the positivist objectification of language, in favour of a more complex, sophisticated and nuanced view of language” (p. 56).

In this paper, we intend to push these insights further by exploring in greater depth the processes of linguistic invention and reinvention. We start with the premise that *languages*—and the *metalanguages* used to describe them—are inventions. By making this claim we are pointing to several interrelated concerns: First, languages were, in the most literal sense, invented, particularly as part of the Christian/ colonial project. Second, in a parallel process, a linguistic metalanguage—or as we prefer, given its broader coverage, a *metadiscursive regime* (Bauman & Briggs, 2003, p. 299)—was also invented. Thus, alongside the invention of languages, an ideology of languages as separate and enumerable categories was also created, an ideology founded on a nominal view of language. An extreme extension of this nominal view of language enumerability arises when languages are treated as institutions, a view reinforced by the existence of grammars and dictionaries (Joseph, 2004). Third, these inventions have had very real and material effects, determining how languages have been understood, how language policies have been constructed, how education has been pursued, how people have come to identify with particular linguistic labels. And finally, as part of any critical linguistic project, we need to disinvent and reconstitute languages, a process that may involve becoming aware of the history of invention, and rethinking the ways we look at languages and their relation to identity, geographical location and other social practices. Given that we acknowledge the very real contemporary effects of these inventions, our intention in disinvention is not to return to some edenic pre-colonial era, but to find ways of rethinking language in the contemporary world.

It is our contention that although some of these themes have attracted attention over the years—the invention of languages is reasonably well documented, and the problematic assumptions underlying the metalanguage of linguistics has not escaped the attention of some linguists (e.g., Harris, 1980, 1981; Mühlhäusler, 1996)—the *interrelationship* between these elements, and the development of strategies for moving forward, have not been adequately considered. A central part of our argument, therefore, is that it is not enough to acknowledge that languages have been invented, nor that linguistic metalanguage constructs the world in particular ways; rather, we need to understand the interrelationships among metadiscursive regimes, language inventions, colonial history, language effects, alternative ways of understanding language, and strategies of disinvention and reconstitution. Any critical (applied) linguistic project that aims to deal with language in the contemporary world, however estimable its political intent may be, must also have ways of understanding the detrimental language effects it may engender unless it confronts the need for linguistic disinvention and reconstitution.

### **Invention, imagination, construction**

Terence Ranger's (1983) *The Invention of tradition in colonial Africa* is the Ur-text of invention (Spear, 2003, p. 5). The concept of invention is relevant to both colonial and contemporary postcolonial and metropolitan contexts. Conceptually, the notion of invention was initially used by Ranger to describe 'not the invention of African traditions but how colonial authorities adopted recently constructed British institutions of the regiment, public school, country house, civil service and imperial monarchy to establish a feudal patriarchal ethic of African subordination.' Yet, linking a notion of invention in overly simple terms to colonialism runs the danger of creating an impression that it was only colonial agents that were actively involved in the invention process, and that the process of invention culminated at the end of the colonial epoch. Such a view would be unhistorical. Vaughan (2003), for example, describes how contemporary elites in postcolonial Africa create their past as an 'imaginative adaptation of Yoruba indigenous political structures (particularly Yoruba chieftaincy) to the processes of state formation in Nigeria in which Yoruba elites consistently deployed subjective interpretations of their past to construct structures and ideologies of power' (Spear, 2003, p. 11).

Our understanding of invention links closely with what Blommaert (1999, p. 104) calls 'discovery attitude', the defining aspect of which is the myth that Africa prior to colonization was a blank slate on which Europeans had to map their categories. The categories which were created included names of ethnic groups, languages, and how they were to be described. Everyone who had some knowledge of Africa could present his/her knowledge of them as 'discovery'. Another concept related to 'invention' is Edward Said's 'being there' (Said, 1985, pp. 156-7). The very fact of having been present in Africa, the Middle East, India, South East Asia—irrespective of length of stay or nature of association—is deemed adequate to claim 'knowledge' of the native languages and cultures. Missionaries, administrators and other colonial functionaries wrote grammars and textbooks which were based on very particular constructions of languages rather than the local languages used by the natives themselves, contributing to the Christianization of 'indigenous' languages' (Isichei, 1995; Renck 1990). In some cases what were subsequently referred to as 'indigenous' languages were the variants which the missionaries themselves spoke in their exchanges with Africans, and not what the Africans spoke with each other. And Africans through their reactions were clearly aware how the codified languages constituted new languages. As Rusike commented,

No African was given a seat in the unification committee and the use of the results is that the newly formed language is all a mixture of Xhosa, Zulu, Ndebele, Kitchen kaffir, Nyanja and English. To my mind it's not Shona language that the white people are trying to force but a white man's language. (Rusike, *Bantu Mirror* 1934)

Descriptions of indigenous languages reflected the internal referential discourse of the missionaries and the administrators in their discussions of the colonized, rather than the language use of the colonized. In the Christianization of indigenous languages, it was the analyst's individual competence and not necessarily those of the 'native informants' which formed the basis of the description of so-called 'indigenous' languages. 'Missionaries did not describe (or even learn) African languages because 'they were there'; their linguistic, scholarly work was embedded in a communicative praxis which had its own internal dynamics. In very broad terms, it was characterized by a gradual shift from descriptive appropriation to prescriptive imposition and control' (Fabian, 1986, p. 76).

The notion of invention is thus in a number of ways akin to Homi Bhabha's (1994) discussion of narration (*narrating the nation*) and Benedict Anderson's (1983) 'imagined community'. Contrary to Ranger's auto-criticism of the complexity of the concept of 'invention,' there are substantial similarities between 'invention' and Benedict Anderson's 'imagined communities': both point to the ways in which nations are imagined and narrated into being, and both stress the role of language, literacy, and institutions in that process. Ranger prefers Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' because it effectively captures the multidimensionality of the process of invention. Unlike Anderson, however, we regard both languages and nations as being co-constructed dialectally, and thus concur with Joseph (2004) in his critique of the one-sidedness of Anderson's formulation: 'Anderson's constructionist approach to nationalism is purchased at the price of an essentialist outlook on languages. It seems a bargain to the sociologist or political scientist, to whom it brings explanatory simplicity not to mention ease. But... it is a false simplicity. National languages and identities arise in tandem, dialectically, if you like, in a complex process that ought to be our focus of interest and study' (Joseph, 2004, p. 124).

The advantage of the term 'invention' is that it points to specific contexts—as well as the specific agendas and conceptual beliefs—in which institutions, structures, language and languages are produced, regulated and constituted. For example, the invention of some African languages, such as Tswana, Shona, and Tsonga (mainly used in southern Africa) was based upon the Herderian view that was a significant part of the German Intellectual Romantic movement in which language, race and geographical location were constructed as indivisible. These conceptual insights have encouraged us to explore the essential contradictions in colonial rhetoric between preserving the past, promoting economic development and protecting Africans and other colonized people from the traumas of modernity. These contradictions were eloquently captured in colonial disdain for the 'detrribalized' or 'trousered' Africans who responded most enthusiastically to the 'colonial civilizing mission'. 'Trousered' Africans, who were more likely than not to be educated, were held in disdain because they were treated as 'mimics' or 'hybrids' parodying white discourse (Jeater, 2004). The term hybrid was being used negatively to refer to the appropriation which took place in moments of encounter between Africans and whites (see Young, 1995). When the

colonizers appropriated material from encounters they were not regarded as hybrids. The term hybrid was thus restricted to appropriation by the colonized 'trousered' Africans.

The insights from invention can serve as a critique of some aspects of language 'endangerment' as articulated by Nettle and Romaine (2000), Crystal (2000), and Skutnabb-Kangas (2003), amongst others. Currently, there is a discernible shift away from indigenous languages towards urban vernaculars in Africa. While some linguists may regard the shift as regrettable because it constitutes a form of endangerment, from an invention perspective, promoting the continued use of the indigenous languages constitutes a retrospective justification of colonial structures. While the shift from 'indigenous' languages to urban vernaculars may also be read as catastrophic from the perspective of some linguists, those who shift from indigenous languages to urban vernaculars may construe the shift as a reflection of a creative adaptation to new contexts (Makoni & Meinhof, 2004). The advantage of the notion of 'invention' is that it provides opportunities for social intervention, and counter-practices through disinvention. For example, the widespread use of urban speech forms which are ontologically inconsistent with notions of 'language as hermetically sealed units' (Makoni, 1998) challenges existing dominant ideologies which constrain official policies, particularly in South Africa.

The conceptual orientations which we adopt in disinvention may also vary depending upon the problems we are seeking to address. Language planning debates have tended to think and articulate their positions in terms of solutions. Through disinvention we prefer to argue that it is more realistic to think in terms of viable alternatives than solutions. The conceptual alternatives which we propose might vary between situations. For example, in some situations the viable solution may lie in essentializing mother tongues, in other cases, in problematizing them (Pennycook, 2002). The ideology of invention serves as a critique of language imposition or linguistic imperialism, not in the sense that dominant languages are imposed on minority groups, but rather in the sense that the imposition lies in the ways in which speech forms are constituted/constructed into languages, and particular definitions of what constitutes language expertise are construed and imposed.

### **Inventing languages**

An important starting point for understanding the invention of language is within the broader context of colonial invention. Our position that languages are inventions is consistent with observations that many structures, systems and constructs such as tradition, history, or ethnicity, which are often thought of as natural parts of society, are inventions of a very specific ideological apparatus. To claim authenticity for such constructs, therefore, is to become subject to very particular discourses of identity. That is to say, while lived contemporary practices may create an authenticity of being and identification with certain traditions, languages and ethnicities, the history behind both their construction and

maintenance needs to be understood in terms of its contingent constructedness. A great deal of historical work has drawn attention to the common project of the invention of history (the processes by which we establish legitimacy, lineage and linkage by reference to a constructed past (see Hobsbawm, 1983; Ranger, 1983, Wallerstein, 1999)). As Cohn (1996) and Wallesterstein (1999) argue, a major aspect of the British colonial project in India was to turn Indian language, culture and knowledge into objects of European knowledge, to invent an India not in Britain's image but in Britain's image of what India should be like. Similarly, Mudimbe (1988) discusses in detail the ways in which Africa was invented. This project of invention needs therefore to be seen not merely as part of European attempts to design the world in their own image, but rather as part of the ideology of countability that was a cornerstone of European governance and surveillance of the world.

This process reached its peak in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As Ranger (1983) puts it, "The 1870's, 1880's and 1890's were a time of a great flowering of European invented traditions—ecclesiastical, educational, military, republican and monarchical. They were also the time of the European rush into Africa. There were many complex connections between the two processes" (p. 211). As Ranger suggests for Africa and Cohn (1983) for India, the invention of traditions became a crucial part of colonial rule as Europeans sought to justify their presence and redefine the colonized societies in new terms. Hardt and Negri (2000) explain: "British administrators had to write their own 'Indian history' to sustain and further the interests of colonial rule. The British had to historicise the Indian past in order to have access to it and put it to work. The British creation of an Indian history, however, like the formation of the colonial state, could be achieved only by imposing European colonial logics and models on Indian reality" (p. 126).

It was the metadiscursive regimes of European thought that produced the histories and languages of the empire from the materials they found in the field. One of the great projects of European invention was Sir George Abraham Grierson's massive Linguistic Survey of India, completed in 1928. A central problem for Grierson, as with other many other linguists, was to decide on the boundaries between languages and dialects. Dialects tended to be considered spoken forms, while languages were accorded their special status according to other criteria such as regional similarities, family trees, or literary forms. One of the problems with this, however, was that while people had terms for their 'dialects'—or at least terms for other people's dialects (their own just being considered the way one speaks)—they did not have terms for these larger constructions, 'languages'. As Grierson explained:

Few natives at the present day are able to comprehend the idea connoted by the words "a language." Dialects they know and understand. They separate them and distinguish them with a meticulous, hair-splitting subtlety, which to us seems unnecessary and absurd; but their minds are not trained to grasp

the conception, so familiar to us, of a general term embracing a number of interconnected dialects.... It thus follows that, while the dialect-names in the following pages have been taken from the indigenous nomenclature, *nearly all the language-names have had to be invented by Europeans*. Some of them, such as “Bengali,” “Assamese,” and the like, are founded on words which have received English citizenship, and are not real Indian words at all; while others, like “Hindostani,” “Bihari,” and so forth, are based on already existing Indian names of countries and nationalities. (Grierson, 1907, p. 350; emphasis added)

While it is interesting at one level to observe simply that the names for these new entities were invented, the point of greater significance is that these were not just new names for extant objects (languages preexisted the naming), but rather the invention and naming of new objects. The naming performatively called the languages into being. Crucial here, too, we can see the dismissal of local knowledge as ‘hair-splitting subtlety’ and an inability to grasp the concepts borne by superior European knowledge. As suggested above, this invention of Indian languages has to be seen in the context of the larger colonial archive of knowledge. The British, as Lelyveld (1993) points out, “developed from their study of Indian languages not only practical advantage but an ideology of languages as separate, autonomous objects in the world, things that could be classified, arranged, and deployed as media of exchange” (p. 194). This whole project was of course a cornerstone of the Orientalist construction of the colonial subject. Orientalism, suggests Ludden (1993), “began with the acquisition of the languages needed to gain reliable information about India. Indian languages became a foundation for scientific knowledge of Indian tradition built from data transmitted to Europeans by native experts” (p. 261).

At the heart of the problem here is the underlying ideology of countability—what we call *census ideology* in sociolinguistics. The idea of linguistic enumerability is based on the dual notions of both ‘languages’ and speakers of those languages being amenable to counting. It has been widely attested that there is a massive disparity between the number of languages that linguists believe exist and the number of languages that people report themselves as speaking. The Christian language preservation society, Ethnologue, for example, notes the disparity between the 6800 languages that exist in the world by their reckoning, and the 40,000 names for different languages that exist if you ask non-linguists to name languages (Ethnologue website). Nevertheless, many linguists interested in preservation are content to deal in terms of enumerative strategies which have the effect of reducing sociolinguistics to the level of arithmetic: “Over 95% of the world’s spoken languages have fewer than 1 million native users; some 5000 have less than 100,000 speakers and more than 3000 languages have fewer than 10,000 speakers. A quarter of the world’s spoken languages and most of the Sign languages have fewer than the 1,000 users, and at least some 500 languages had in 1999 under a hundred speakers” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2003, p. 32). Mühl-



häusler (2000) views this position as a continuation of the tradition of segregationist linguistics, which insists that “languages can be distinguished and named” (p. 358).

To abstract languages, to count them as discrete objects, and to count the speakers of such languages is to reproduce a very particular enumerative strategy. Yet the enumeration of speakers of a language is founded on a ‘monolingual norm of speakerhood’ (Hill, 2003, p. 128), a paradoxical state of affairs given that this speakerhood model seems to play a key role in shaping our images of the world, particularly in multilingual contexts (see *Ethnologue*). In order to make the languages countable, census ideology is crucial because of the role it has played in the colonial imaginary (Anderson, 1991; Appadurai, 1993; Leeman, 2004). A major problem, then, with current approaches to diversity, multilingualism, and so forth, is that they all too often start with this enumerative strategy: How many languages are there in the world? It is our contention that while opening up questions of diversity with one hand, at the same time such strategies are also reproducing the tropes of colonial invention. By rendering diversity a quantitative question of language enumeration, such approaches continue to employ the census strategies of colonialism while missing the qualitative question of where diversity lies.

### **Metadiscursive regimes and epistemic violence**

The invention of ‘metadiscursive regimes’ to describe language and languages has implications for both language (as a general capacity) and languages (as entities). That is to say, although we acknowledge that all humans have language, the way in which both senses of language are understood is constructed through a particular ideological lens dependent in a large measure on specific ‘metadiscursive regimes’, and the analysts’ cultural and historical ‘locus of enunciation’ (Mignolo, 2000, p. 116). These metadiscursive regimes are significant because linguists, more than any other ‘scientists,’ create the objects of analysis through the nature and type of ‘metadiscursive regimes’ which form the basis of their analysis. Disinvention here is tied to a question of rethinking understandings of language (for example, language as medium of communication (see Kyeyune, 2004, for a recent use of the medium metaphor), an unfortunate metaphor excluding as it does other more creative uses and ways of thinking about language). Drawing attention to such metaphors is an important disinventive strategy aimed at finding a way in which linguists and applied linguists can avoid being imprisoned by their own semiotic categories.

In order to understand the development of these regimes, we need to return, as with the invention of languages reviewed above, to the historical origins of modes of thought. In their discussion of the work of Bruno Latour (1993) and Michel Foucault (1970), both of whom, in their different ways, sought to understand how it is that we came to be modern, Bauman and Briggs (2003) suggest that Latour “misses language, that is, the role of its construction as autonomous and the work of purification and hybridization this entails in making modernity”

(p. 8). By viewing language as only a mode of mediation between the primary domains of science and society, Latour remains “simply modern here, having succumbed to the definition of language as real and its relegation to the role of carrying out particular modernist functions, such as conveying information” (p. 8). They argue, therefore, for “the full recognition of language as a domain co-equal in this enterprise with Latour’s society and nature” (p. 10). Meanwhile, while Foucault (1970) acknowledged the significance for modernity of the construction of language as a separate realm in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Bauman and Briggs contend that he constructs too unified a view of language. By contrast, as they show, it was the struggles over the construction of language in relation to questions of social difference that led to the particular making of language and its role in the production of modernity: “While Foucault’s account of language thus provides an excellent starting point for discerning how reimagining language was crucial for imagining modernity, we suggest that the story needs to be retold if its broader significance—particularly for understanding how modernity produces and structures inequality—is to become more intellectually and politically accessible” (p. 10).

For Bauman and Briggs, the key question is how modernism (through the work of philosophers such as Locke) created language as a separate domain, how “language came into being” (p. 7), and “the process involved in creating language and rendering it a powerful means of creating social inequality” (p. 9). This, then, is a crucial step prior to the rise of the European nation state’s production of languages as separate, distinct, national entities. This latter point has been widely discussed and observed, from Anderson’s discussion of the role of language in the construction of the nation state (though, as suggested above, he fails to observe that this was a bi-directional construction, language constructing nation and nation constructing language) to observations such as Mühlhäusler’s (2000) that “the notion of a ‘language’ is a recent culture-specific notion associated with the rise of European nation states and the Enlightenment. The notion of ‘a language’ makes little sense in most traditional societies” (p. 358). Bauman and Briggs, however, are pointing to the period that precedes this, when language itself was constructed as an entity separable from the social world. Crucial to this project was Locke’s “positioning of language as one of the three ‘great provinces of the intellectual world’ that are ‘wholly separate and distinct’” (Bauman & Briggs, 2003, p. 299). As they go on to explain, “Separating language from both nature/science and society/ politics, Locke could place practices for purifying language of any explicit connections with either society or nature at the center of his vision of modern linguistic and textual practices” (p. 299–300).

This construction of language as an autonomous object is challenged both by the integrational linguistics of Harris (1980, 1981, 1998), as well as research on ‘critical localism’ (Geertz, 1983, Canagarajah, 2002), which seeks to understand how language may be understood differently in different contexts. Harris has argued that linguistics (or segregational linguistics as he calls orthodox lin-

guistics) has profoundly misconstrued language through its myths about the autonomy, systematicity and rule bound nature of language, its privileging of supposedly expert, scientific linguistic knowledge over everyday understandings of language, which, following Geertz, we are referring to as 'local knowledge'. "An integrationalist redefinition of linguistics" Harris (1990) suggests, "can dispense with at least the following assumptions: (i) that the linguistic sign is arbitrary; (ii) that the linguistic sign is linear; (iii) that words have meanings; (iv) that grammar has rules; and (v) that there are languages" (p. 45). As both Mühlhäusler (2000) and Toolan (2003) argue, an integrational view of language, suggests not merely that language is integrated with its environment, but rather that languages themselves cannot be viewed as discrete items, rejecting "as a powerful and misleading myth, any assumption that a language is essentially an autonomous system which humans can harness to meet their communicational needs" (Toolan, 2003, p. 123). Thus drawing on Harris' work (e.g., 1998), this version of linguistic ecology takes seriously Harris' claim that "linguistics does not need to postulate the existence of languages as part of its theoretical apparatus" (1990, p. 45). As Harris goes on to argue, the question here is whether

the concept of 'a language,' as defined by orthodox modern linguistics, corresponds to any determinate or determinable object of analysis at all, whether social or individual, whether institutional or psychological. If there is no such object, it is difficult to evade the conclusion that modern linguistics has been based upon a myth. (p. 45)

Discussing language use in Papua New Guinea, Romaine (1994) asks how we come to terms with the problem that speakers may claim to speak a different language when linguistically it may appear identical. She goes on to point out that the 'very concept of discrete languages is probably a European cultural artifact fostered by procedures such as literacy and standardization. Any attempt to count distinct languages will be an artifact of classificatory procedures rather than a reflection of communicative practices" (p. 12). If the notions of language which form the basis of language planning are artifacts of European thinking, language policies are therefore (albeit unintentionally) agents of the very values which they are seeking to challenge: 'Like hygiene (the control of diseases often introduced or spread by colonization), 'vagabondage' and alcoholism, the language question belonged to those problems of largely European making whose real importance lay in the fact that they legitimized regulation from above' (Fabian, 1986, p. 82). Branson and Miller (2000) stress that we "must not only revel in linguistic difference but cope with that difference analytically. Let us recognize the culturally specific nature of our own schemes and search for new modes of analysis that do not fit other languages into a mould but rather celebrate and build on their epistemological differences" (p. 32). We broadly concur with these positions but want to push them further: Unless we actively engage with the history of invention of languages, the processes by which these inventions

are maintained, and the political imperative to work towards their disinvention, we will continue to do damage to speech communities and educational possibilities.

### **Towards disinvention and reconstitution**

In the disinvention project we are therefore not merely reiterating the generally accepted notions that languages have fuzzy boundaries, that the distinction between language and dialect is arbitrary, as is frequently stated in conventional sociolinguistics. Rather, we want to argue that the concept of language, and indeed the ‘metadiscursive regimes’ used to describe languages are firmly located in western linguistic and cultural suppositions. They do not describe any real state of affairs in the world, i.e they are not natural kinds (Danzinger, 1998): they are only convenient fictions to the extent that they provide a useful way of understanding the world and shaping language users, and they are very inconvenient fictions to the extent that they produce particular and limiting views on how language operates in the world. In response, we want to propose neither a view that we need better descriptions nor more acknowledgement of fuzziness, but instead (strategies of) disinvention.

The view of language we are suggesting here has major implications for many of the treasured icons of liberal-linguistic thought. Not only do the notions of language and languages become highly suspect, but so do many related concepts that are premised on a notion of discrete languages, such as language rights, mother tongues, multilingualism, or code-switching. It is common in both liberal and more critical approaches to issues in sociolinguistics to insist on plurality, sometimes strengthened by a concept of rights. Thus, there are strong arguments for mother tongue education, for an understanding of multilingualism as the global norm, for understanding the prevalence of code-switching in bi- and multilingual communities, and for the importance of language rights to provide a moral and legal framework for language policies. Our position, however, is that although such arguments may be preferable to blinkered views that take monolingualism as the norm, they nevertheless remain caught within the same paradigm. They operate with a strategy of pluralization rather than a questioning of the inventions at the core of the whole discussion. Without strategies of disinvention, most discussions of language rights, mother tongue education or code-switching reproduce the same concept of language that underlies all mainstream linguistic thought: multilingualism therefore simply becomes a pluralization of monolingualism.

Sonntag (2003) makes a similar point when she argues that the rights-based approach to support for linguistic diversity and opposition to the English-Only movement “has not fundamentally altered the American projection of its vision of global English...because a rights-based approach to promoting linguistic diversity reinforces the dominant liberal democratic project rather than dismantling it” (p. 25). The point here, then, is that while on the one hand seemingly promoting a progressive, liberal cause for diversity, rights and multilingualism,

at the same time, by employing the same epistemologies on which monolingualism and the denial of rights have been constructed, such arguments may do more to reproduce than oppose the conditions they object to. As Rajagopalan (1999) suggests, “the very charges being pressed against the hegemony of the English language and its putative imperialist pretensions themselves bear the imprint of a way of thinking about language moulded in an intellectual climate of excessive nationalist fervour and organized marauding of the wealth of alien nations, an intellectual climate where identities were invariably thought of in all-or-nothing terms” (p. 201). Thus, as Sonntag goes on to argue, “the willingness to use the language of human rights on the global level to frame local linguistic demands vis-à-vis global English may merely be affirming the global vision projected by American liberal democracy” (p. 25).

Our argument, then, is that just as languages were invented, so too were related concepts such as multilingualism, additive bilingualism, or code-switching. Language planning policies seeking to promote additive bilingualism are founded upon a very specific view of language, a view which takes languages to be ‘entities’ which, when accessed, will then be beneficial to the speakers. Thus although they tend to be projected as if they were goals which language planning policies must seek to achieve, additive bilingualism or multilingualism must also be understood as particular ways of thinking about language. Language planning research therefore needs to focus not only on the political contexts in which it operates, but also on the nature of the concepts of language which underpin the different policy options, to question not only the *realpolitik* but also the *reallinguistik* of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In our view there is a disconcerting similarity between monolingualism and additive bilingualism in so far as both are founded on notions of language as ‘objects’. By talking of monolingualism, we are referring to a single entity, while in additive bilingualism and multilingualism the number of ‘language-things’ has increased. Yet the underlying concept remains unchanged because additive bilingualism and multilingualism are at best a pluralization of monolingualism. The current valorization of multilingualism, furthermore, seems to exclude the reactions of language speakers to situations in which their languages are being learnt by others. Renck (1990), with a Papua New Guinea context in mind, suggests that speakers may erect boundaries around their own languages to limit the degree to which their languages may be learnt by others; in such situations one’s own language is a form of safeguard, a secret which is lost when the language is used by other groups. While from an academic perspective, multilingualism might be construed as progressive, speakers of some of the local languages may regard the learning of their own languages by others as constituting a violation of their private space.

In the context of South African language policy Makoni (1998a) argues that “emerging discourses about multilingualism derive their strength through a deliberate refusal to recollect that in the past multilingualism has always been used to facilitate the exploitation of Africans” (p. 244-245). Proponents of multilin-

gualism seem to suffer from a process of 'historical amnesia' (Stuart Hall, 1997, p. 20), in which they believe that just because they have started thinking about the idea, so the idea has just begun. Furthermore, proponents of multilingualism are the ideological captives of the very system which they are seeking to challenge. 'The battle for independence' suggests Makoni (1998b) is simply not won by opting for vernaculars over English as normally articulated in the decolonization literature... From UNESCO to the multicultural lobby the potential negative effects of learning through vernaculars assigned to speakers is not addressed as it is assumed that it is cognitively and emotionally advantageous that a child learns through such a medium, overlooking as it does the colonized images encoded in such versions of African vernaculars' (pp. 162–163).

More importantly, in disinvention we are seeking to provide alternative ways of understanding some of the frequently reported problems about language planning. For example, it is frequently suggested that in a lot of cases, particularly in Africa, parents may object to their children being taught in their mother tongues. The refusal to be taught in their mother tongue is treated as the legacy of colonialism. We would like to adopt a different perspective. Some indigenous communities object to being taught in 'their mother tongue' because schooling is perceived not as the place where knowledge is transmitted, but as a point of contact between the 'indigenous world and the white-man's world'. Non-indigenous languages (i.e., European languages) are regarded as central to that contact. Education and the transmission of knowledge from the perspective of indigenous communities take place in the oral tradition in the home. While indigenous communities regard schools as sites of contact between indigenous communities and the 'white-man's world,' education being understood as taking place at home, western scholarship takes the opposite view, defining what indigenous communities regard as education to the relegated status of socialization (Reagan, 1996).

More recently, the scramble for African languages has been dominated by a discourse of promotion and development (promotion of the languages, not a promotion of the speakers of those languages (see Simire, 2004, for a recent example)). The concept of language which forms the basis of the notion of language in language development is taken for granted. Our argument, however, is that unless we explore in much greater detail the material and political consequences of ways of talking and thinking about language, we will be unable to avoid unfortunate situations in which it is the languages which are developed rather than its speakers, and more resources are spent on languages than individual speakers as is apparent in the South African interest and commitment to multilingualism. Further, such a way of thinking in which languages are independent of their speakers may lead to situations in which rights are attached to languages rather than to speakers. When descriptions of language hegemony (language rights, linguistic imperialism and the like) reify those languages rather than account for the language users, when languages are developed and promoted without consideration of the speakers of those languages, and when all

this is done within a framework for understanding languages that constructs, objectifies, and normalizes those languages, then languages as inventions are being privileged over humans as agents. Descriptions of languages may disable the very speakers to which these languages are attributed. Our view of disinvention as a strategy is one in which languages are subordinate to their speakers, rather than hegemonic over individual speakers.

### **Disinvention and applied linguistics**

Our interest in the applied linguistic effects of invention is therefore concerned with the ways in which applied linguistics has adopted and perpetuates particular versions of language through its many arms of language imposition, amongst which language learning, translation, language policy and language testing are some of the most significant. The numerous discussions of linguistic imperialism, for example, tend to focus on the imposition of dominant languages such as English. But such a dominant focus overlooks other possibilities of imposition, such as how learning less widely spread languages might in itself be used as a form of linguistic imperialism, particularly when the ‘target’ language is the primary language of the less powerful, as is the case, for example, when the colonizer learns the language of the colonized. Jeater (2002) cogently demonstrates how the learning of African languages by European missionaries and administrators was aimed at creating opportunities through which European thinking could be articulated through African speech forms. The ‘bilingual’ colonizer may participate in far more insidious forms of imperialism than the ‘monolingual’ colonizer.

Translation from English into local African languages was a political exercise, as was translation from African and Indian languages into English (see, e.g., Niranjana, 1991). It was not merely a neutral technical exercise, as illustrated in the case of chiShona spoken in southern Africa. The general tendency was to use very few words to communicate a wide range of English words in translation. For example, *rudzi* serves to translate race, tribe, people, community, nation, despite meaning something akin to ‘species’; *mashoko* serves as a translation for almost anything that is written: notes, words, news, items, questions, problems and issues; *nyika* covers Earth, continent, the next world, land and material existence (temporal world), lending credence to the view that English was a much more expressive language than the local African languages. In translation different world views come into contact with each other. In colonial contexts, and in situations in which there is a social hierarchy (and most societies have one form or other of a social hierarchy), translation—particularly when translating from a ‘stronger’ language into a weaker one—entails simulating the original and expressing it in a different language.

Anthropologists and professional translators typically translate a foreign culture into their mother tongues; in colonial and some postcolonial contexts, the translation is from one’s mother tongue into a second language—let’s say from English into Swahili, from Afrikaans into Zulu. In such cases translation in-

volves inscribing European norms and values into the local language. The process of translating from English into Zulu is different from that of translating Zulu into English. In the former it entails inscribing European views into Zulu, while in the latter it involves an adjustment of Zulu to fit into English without English necessarily being Africanized. The key issue is that the consequences may radically differ depending on whether one is translating from a stronger language into a weaker one, or vice versa. Irrespective of whether the translation is from a stronger language into a weaker one, or vice versa, translation involves one form or other of ‘boundary’ crossing. The difference however lies in the objectives which the crossing is meant to serve. In translation projects such as bible translation carried out by the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the ‘boundary’ crossing is carried out for the purposes of rendering the language a tool for conversion. In cases where the translation is from a relatively weaker language into a dominant one, translation border-crossing may be aimed at understanding the other culture in terms of the dominant.

Language testing also plays a crucial role in this process. It is one of the ways in which languages are regulated and language learning imposed. Language tests privilege particular versions of what constitutes language proficiency/expertise and devalue other types and forms of language expertise resulting in a form of ‘epistemic violence’ (Spivak, 1993). A key outcome of Shohamy’s (2001) argument that a critical approach to language testing “implies the need to develop critical strategies to examine the uses and consequences of tests, to monitor their power, minimize their detrimental force, reveal the misuses” (p. 131) is the need to look at how all forms of language testing imply very particular versions of language. This is not merely a question of a standardized version of a language over other possibilities but the more general denial of difference. For example, in a series of studies of the Kashinawa people, Lyn Mario de Souza (2004) shows that language learning for the Kashinawa people has to be multimodal because knowledge construction for them is predominantly visual. Forms of assessment and indeed language teaching which therefore do not reflect the visual nature of the Kashinawa people’s learning orientations are indeed a form of epistemic violence.

We are not only interested in disinventing languages in contexts such as southern Africa, Papua New Guinea, or Indonesia, where the census ideology suggests large numbers of languages are spoken. We also want to argue that this concern over the ontological status of languages affects all contexts of language use. Indeed, there is an urgent need to address not only what are considered ‘small languages’ but also that mother of all invented languages: English as an International Language (and see Reagan, 2004). Here we want to question both the imagined communication implied by the Myth of English as an international language (Krishnaswamy & Burde, 1998, p. 19) and the equally problematic construction of so-called World Englishes. As Krishnaswamy and Burde (1998) suggest about Indian English: , “it is easy to understand why the construct ‘Indian English’ is easily defined by outsiders like Peter Strevens or Larry Smith



and Indians like Kachru who live outside, and so elusive to those who look at it from the inside. Like Indian nationalism, 'Indian English' is 'fundamentally insecure' since the notion 'nation-India' is insecure" (p. 63; see also Dasgupta, 1993, Parakrama, 1995). The pluralization strategies of world Englishes do not do enough to question the central assumptions about language on which they draw. As Canagarajah (1999, p. 180) points out, by "leaving out many eccentric, hybrid forms of local Englishes as too unsystematic" a world Englishes perspective "follows the logic of the prescriptive and elitist tendencies of the center linguists." Just as the notion of multilingualism may leave intact the monolingual assumptions about language that it aims to critique, so a world Englishes perspective may support rather than oppose the tenets of centrist linguistics.

For southern Africa we would like to argue that since the notion of what constitutes African languages is open to contestation, the claims being made about the nature of African languages which are ostensibly the basis of African American English and African English need to be clarified. It is not conceptually clear what would constitute African English. And if what constitutes African languages is open to contestation currently, it is difficult to see how specialists in African American vernaculars can claim with such certainty the African language base of African American Vernaculars. For us one way out of the impasse would be to redefine the notions of African language which ostensibly act as a way of imagining African languages: a cross-Atlantic invention of African languages which do not necessarily have to coincide with either historically or contemporary 'objective' descriptions of African languages. Hence the argument that the African language base of African American vernaculars is 'flimsy' at best (McWhorter, 1998) is a fundamental misunderstanding of the socially constructed nature of African languages as Trans-Atlantic inventions.

All societies are in one form of transition and they cannot be changed by using modes of thought which produced the problems with which they are still confronted. Change requires new thought, new ways linguistically of conceptualizing problems. As a South African literary critic and novelist put it:

The past cannot be corrected by bringing to it the procedures and mechanisms and mind sets that originally produced our very perception of it. After all, it is not the past as such that produced the present or poses the conditions for the future...but the way we think about it. Or even more pertinently, the way in which we deal with it in language. (Brink, 1998, p. 23)

By looking at a wide range of contexts and modes of understanding language, we are arguing for the need to pose fundamental questions for linguists, sociolinguists and applied linguists: If a dominant understanding of language in many parts of the world is a result of the mapping of European colonial and neocolonial constructs onto diverse contexts, how might languages start to look if an alternative conception were mapped back onto the centre from the periphery? For example, what would English look like if we were to analyze it using

metadiscursive regimes from languages such as Hausa, or if other local perspectives were adopted? What are the political consequences when notions about language in concepts such as language rights, mother tongues, and bilingual education are disinvented?

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