

Understanding 'secret' urban languages

April 23 2015



Research into a 'playful' and increasingly popular urban language that grew out of the necessity for criminals to hide their true intent could help organisations in Uganda communicate better with the country's huge young population.

Uganda has one of the world's largest percentages of people under 30 – more than 78% of its 37 million citizens, according to a report by the United Nations Population Fund. Many do not use the commonly spoken languages of Uganda (Kiswahili, English and Luganda) in everyday speech but instead express themselves in an ever-evolving street language called Luyaaye.

Originally a 'secret language' spoken by [criminals](#), Luyaaye has grown in popularity because it's seen as more playful and less traditional by many of its speakers, with its "joyful" use of English, Luganda and other languages.

Many of those who use Luyaaye are concentrated within Kampala, the capital city of a country that faces many challenges, including serious health problems. To combat these threats to health – and to get other social messages across – the government must communicate with its [population](#) effectively. This means using Luyaaye alongside the official languages, argue researchers from Africa and Cambridge who are working collaboratively as part of the Cambridge-Africa Partnership for Research Excellence (CAPREx).

Dr Saudah Namyalo from Makerere University and Dr Jenneke van der Wal from Cambridge's Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics have joined forces to understand how this increasingly popular, yet currently undocumented, urban language is built. The need is increasing, said Namyalo, as more people come to use forms of Luyaaye to communicate. "It is currently classified as an Urban Youth Language but it is becoming more widespread and used by some older people."

Such languages are not unique to Uganda – elsewhere, forms of multicultural British English, the Dutch street language 'straattaal' and the 'Camfranglais' of the Cameroon are all examples of languages that have evolved out of, and usurped, the country's mother tongue in certain communities, explained Namyalo.

These languages are fast-moving in their appropriation of new words, often borrowing them from TV, films and music. "I love the speed at which Luyaaye changes," she said. "For instance, the World Cup was seen as a very positive thing. So world cup quickly became a shorthand

for 'a good thing' or 'excellent'.

"For a lot of people, Luyaaye is for fun – it is just for laughs! It often uses metonymy [calling something not by its own name but by a name linked to it] with surprising and comic results. So a Professor is someone with 'street smarts' who has learned to beat the authorities, to get away with anything."

However, the language also has its darker side. The growth of Luyaaye began in the 1970s during the Idi Amin reign. "Illegal trade grew and it is thought that the language provided a code to serve those people who were involved in trade between Nairobi and Kampala. It was mostly spoken by the illiterate, young business community," Namyalo explained.

Even today its past continues to influence its development as Luyaaye helps criminals conduct business and exclude the uninitiated from their ranks, said Namyalo. "Kampala is divided into five divisions and they are Luyaaye territories. If you are a criminal you are not supposed to cross into another territory – or you risk being burnt alive. The Luyaaye you use can show which division you are from or it can be used to uncover if you do not belong."

Namyalo points to these past links with criminality as a factor in the reticence of the establishment in accepting Luyaaye: "Higher society does not take the language, or those who use it, seriously. When you use Luyaaye you are thought of as uncultured, and yet it is the more meaningful language for the youth than Luganda or other formal languages used in Uganda."

She has begun the process of documenting this little-studied and evolving language, and would like to produce a dictionary. From her research, she now thinks of the language in terms of 'layers', each layer

representing a slightly different set of vocabulary. The secret language used by criminals is what she calls 'core' Luyaaye, while the second layer is spoken by the youth, and the outer layer is the 'ordinary' Luyaaye, easiest to understand and popular with the general public.

Her work has so far concentrated on the lexical (word meaning) aspects of the language, but her collaboration with Van der Wal will allow them to examine the syntax (how sentences are constructed) of Luyaaye as compared with Luganda.

An expert in Bantu languages like Luganda, Van der Wal is also a member of a large-scale project to investigate the basic building blocks that underpin how languages of the world are structured – the Rethinking Comparative Syntax (ReCoS) project funded by the European Research Council and led by Professor Ian Roberts, also in the Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics.

"The ability to speak a language is something very special – it is unique and part of what makes us human beings," explained Van der Wal. "I want to find out what allows us to make grammatical sentences and how this varies between languages. For instance, unlike in some neighbouring languages, in Luganda you can say a word in two different ways: you can talk about eating rice (omuceere), but leave off the first vowel (muceere) and it suggests you are only eating rice – it gives an exclusive focus on the rice."

Namyalo's visit to Cambridge and Van der Wal's recent visit to Uganda were funded by CAPREx and the Alborada Research Fund, both of which are initiatives within the umbrella Cambridge-Africa Programme at the University of Cambridge. The Programme aims to strengthen Africa's capacity for research by equipping African researchers with skills and resources, and to promote mutually beneficial, long-term collaborations with African researchers across a wide range of

disciplines.

For Van der Wal, research in Africa with African academics has been vital for enabling her to carry out meaningful research: "I loved working with Saudah in Uganda and listening to the languages as spoken. It was great to do field work together and get my hands dirty – well, get my ears dirty – and learn about yet another Bantu language."

Namyalo sees the project as vital for helping her country combat some of its most challenging difficulties. "Programmes have been carried out to spread information about AIDS but even with increased dissemination there was a decrease in the take-up of that information. When asked what would help, people said 'speak our language'."

Luyaaye

While the basic syntactic framework for Luyaaye is Luganda, it borrows words from English, with dashes of Sheng, Kiswahili and Sudanese.

As well as borrowing whole words it also borrows suffixes and affixes such as the English –ing which becomes –inga in Luyaaye.

Quite often when speakers use English words they do not alter the spelling, so that front page is used to mean 'forehead' and blood used to mean 'brother' or 'sister'.

The [language](#) also uses metaphor, thus okusunagitta literally means 'to play a guitar' but actually means 'to scratch', and I would like to kill a chimpanzee means 'I would like to go to the toilet'.

It also uses tricks like antonym – making the meaning the opposite of what is said, so okwesalaobuwero means 'dressed in old cloth' but actually means to be smartly dressed.

Provided by University of Cambridge

Citation: Understanding 'secret' urban languages (2015, April 23) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-04-secret-urban-languages.html>

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