Creativity in Language and Beyond: Introduction to *Ahyu* Special Issue
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The special issue *Creativity in Language and Beyond* explores the way languages, literatures and popular culture in Africa, on the one hand, adapt to changing social and political contexts in Africa, but, on the other, also actively question, mock or provide alternative views on living together. So far, much emphasis has been put on how the colonial languages, English, French and, to a lesser degree, Portuguese, have been molded by speakers, writers, and artists in Africa to speak to their own realities as well as back to the colonizer. For instance, as early as 1975, Achebe proudly claimed and wrote in a "new English" that would "be able to carry the weight of my African experience" (Achebe 1997). Finding creative responses to a postcolonial but also changing cultural and social context was a major task of the independence period for many writers, for whom literature and the construction of new postcolonial societies in Africa went hand in hand. For Simon Gikandi, modern African literature has a complex relationship with colonialism. Gikandi (2000: 379) finds that "not only were the founders of modern African literature colonial subjects, but colonialism was also to be the most important and enduring theme in their works." Political intervention and the search for a new language that speaks of the people and stirs the imagination of a suppressed past and a possible new future were considered to be inextricably linked. Harry Garuba, in his reflection on the role of the African writer and the artist in the reconstitution of contemporary Africa, emphasizes the important role of writers and artists in society:

> For most postcolonial literatures or literatures from emergent literary spaces, literary value inheres as much in the teachability of the text as it does in whatever other aesthetic qualities it may possess; that is, the text's ability to illustrate, rework, or represent some theme or issue considered to be of major significance and to open it up for teaching—about empire, nation, and identity, or post nation, diaspora, and globalization, for instance—is as much a source of value as any of its other formal qualities. (Garuba 2017: 10)

Garuba links the ability to reach the people, and hence society, with literary creativity, i.e. "the text's ability" through its very form to speak to the people's imagination. Creativity, often also discussed with regard to the productive adaptation of African oral traditions (see Ricard and Veit-Wild 2005), is here assigned a major task to challenge the status quo. In African literary history, both what Gikandi calls the "traumatic encounter between Africa and Europe" and the closely following abuse of power in the new African nations have elicited creative reactions. It also became a main topic of African language literatures, including popular literature and culture often ignored in literary studies on postcolonial literature (Barber 1995), as if creativity and subversive ways of questioning power were a

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task confined to the novel in the former colonial languages (for an important exception see Ricard and Veit-Wild 2005).

Accordingly, in this special issue, creativity in African languages, spoken, written, published in audiovisual genres, or written in response to social change take centerstage. For African languages, linguistic research on urban youth languages (see for instance, Kießling and Mous 2014) as well as research on popular culture (e.g. Newell and Okome 2014, Musila 2022), which cut through dichotomies of the urban and the rural, the traditional and the modern, orality and writtenness have played probably the biggest role in working out/showcasing the subversive creativity in language use – in 'the streets' but also in a variety of media. The constant creation of new words with a proliferation of semantics and the modulation and play with syntax, often also used to circumvent the police, are typical examples of creativity in African popular culture and settings, defined by heavy social change. Also through the mushrooming of new genres fostered by the constantly changing media and their extension into the digital realm, speakers, poets, and writers have found constantly new ways of making themselves heard, expressing their own identities in a changing world. Against the standard of languages used in schools or demanded by elders, as well as the monopoly of state-owned TV, radio channels and publishing houses, especially the marginalized and the younger generation explore the digital media and the use of non-standard varieties of languages, recurring to spoken language. Particularly in the context of artistic practices, like song lyrics, poems or proverbs, speakers, poets, and musicians twist the language and bring in new lines and words, opening up or undermining worlds, as many contributions to this special issue show.

This special issue is the product of a conference and school hosted by the Federal University of Wukari and the research project *Recalibrating Afrikanistik* (RecAf) in January of 2023. RecAf, which is funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, began in October 2019 with the aim of shifting the German "rare subject" of *Afrikanistik*, a field which entails the study of both African languages and literatures. The goal is to ensure the future of the discipline, firstly structurally, by promoting young scholars and giving them opportunities for academic exchange and personal growth. Secondly, RecAf also has a conceptual goal to move from homogenizing, globalist discourses and narrow, structuralist views of language to a broader, heterogenous scope that includes sociolinguistic, textual, and media practices rooted in African lifeworlds. In other words, we seek to move from asking "How do African languages work?" to "What are people doing in African languages?" The study of literary expression in African languages, whether oral or written, also provides unique insight into different worldviews and ways of knowing. What is more, it provides insight into the variety of ways in which language is used creatively and how it engages with other forms of expression such as music, dance, and drama. By encouraging the wider study of languages and literatures in Africa, we aim to make them and their associated bodies of knowledge more visible to the wider academic world with a view to contributing to debates which are dominated by the use of European languages.

Since we believe that this task shouldn't be done by European scholars alone, the project is made up of six partner universities, three in Europe and three in Africa: the University of Leipzig (Germany), the University of Bayreuth (Germany), the University of Naples, l'Orientale (Italy), the Federal University of Wukari (Nigeria), Moi University (Kenya), and Stellenbosch University (South Africa). Across these locations, RecAf primarily seeks to support and promote young academics, because they are the future of the discipline and responding to the interests and needs of young scholars and students means to offer them possibilities of training and career paths. In line with this, a central feature of the project was that each African partner university would have the opportunity to host a 'school' during the course of the seven-year project. A 'school' refers to a short collection of classes for students and young scholars, particularly PhD students, to voluntarily attend and better themselves in a particular area. These events are molded by the partner university hosting them and the educational context in which they take place. Since European universities offer more support for PhD candidates but significantly less for master's students, those seasonal schools have been focused on master's students and advanced bachelor students since the beginning. Since our African partner universities have less support for PhD students, their seasonal schools have tended to focused on scholars at this level.

RecAf's seasonal schools in Africa were heavily postponed by the coronavirus pandemic, and it was thus not until three years after the project began that we hosted our first one in Nigeria in January 2023. Unfortunately, the security situation was deteriorating around our partner institution, the Federal University of Wukari, in Taraba State, so we moved the event to the capital city, Abuja.

Our partner at the Federal University of Wukari, Prof. Judith Mgbemena, decided on the title *Creativity in Language and Beyond*, which called on scholars to share their thoughts on the intricate relationship between language and creative disciplines and on how language, literature, popular culture, African Studies, and related disciplines in different ways adapt to new social modes in Nigeria and across Africa.

The organization of the event was impressive. Despite being located seven hours away from Abuja, Prof. Mgbemena organized everything on the Nigerian side and did an incredible job. She had control over how the event would be structured, and she chose to do more of a conference structure than a summer school because she believed it would be of greater service to the students and other attendees. She reserved an excellent space at the National Universities Commission (NUC) in Abuja, handled all the invitations within Nigeria, arranged everyone's accommodations, helped construct the program, organized the catering, and a hundred other things that went unnoticed by most, but made for an exceptionally smooth event. The conference also benefitted enormously from the efforts of Ojo Blank, the RecAf coordinator, who dealt with a mountain of administrative tasks the whole way through; Kaitlyn Medina, the RecAf digital content manager, who ran all things design and

digital; as well as Brady Blackburn, the research associate in the project, who documented the event and dealt with issues that arose with the program.

International attendees came from the other five partner universities—the University of Bayreuth and University of Leipzig in Germany, the University of Naples 'l'Orientale' in Italy, Moi University in Kenya, and Stellenbosch University in South Africa. This actually marked the first time we had all met physically—for three years, the pandemic had forced us to collaborate via videochat, and it was thus surreal to meet in person. Getting to spend the week with people we had worked together but didn't really know illuminated just how much we had been missing out on by researching and collaborating only in the digital realm. The spaces between the conference proceedings—meals especially—gave us chances to hang out together, to learn about and from each other. We were not just getting know *people* during the conference; our worldviews were being reshaped—recalibrated, if you will.

The central location in Abuja also allowed a great number of Nigerian scholars to travel from all over the country for the event,. This diversity of people, combined with the broad topic "Creativity in Language and Beyond", allowed for a great variety of presentations and conversations. During this engaging four-day conference, participants presented papers on a myriad of modes in which African creativity in language is manifested, from oral proverbs to children's online videos. Additionally, in a complementary one-day workshop on children's literature led by Prof. Dr. Flavia Aiello and Prof. Sule Egya, young scholars discussed the relevance of children's literature for indigenous languages, cultures and values, literacy skills, and pedagogy. In the end, we had 32 presentations by scholars from 14 different universities and 50 participants in total. True to RecAf, almost three quarters of the attendees were young scholars, mostly doctoral and master's students, many of whom were attending their first conference and all of whom received a bump upwards in their academic training.

As part of its research objectives, Recalibrating Afrikanistik released a call for paper submissions for this conference publication, with particular emphasis on papers by advanced master's students, PhD students, and postdoctoral researchers who also presented at the conference, and they enthusiastically took up the challenge. This special issue is the product of these submissions, but also a fair deal of mentorship and academic exchange. Another product of the Covid-19 pandemic is a monthly digital RecAf reading group, which takes place every first Tuesday of the month. During the course of 2023, the young scholars who submitted papers to this special issue were invited to present them in the reading group again, where the group read their research beforehand, met on a video call, and gave them constructive criticism on both what was working well and what could be improved. Several of the papers in this special issue improved dramatically after focused discussion in the RecAf reading group and open-minded reception by the authors.

The papers were then subjected to a review process. Since the goal of RecAf is to invest in the development of young scholars, the aim of this special issue was to help these researchers improve in their analysis and academic writing, not to create a world-class volume with rigidly controlled quality. Thus, what you will find within these pages are good ideas and interesting observations about African languages and literatures which are still being refined by young scholars who are new to the academic publishing environment.

The papers in this special issue investigate creativity in language popping up all over African lifeworlds, but with a predominant focus on Nigeria. We've arranged them by five different themes. The first theme is **"Childish Humor"** as a critical device to question power but also morality in popular culture. As interesting internet content for children or portraying children is on the rise in Nigeria, so too is young scholars' interest in it. Bizuum Yadok shines the spotlight on the YouTube comedy series *Frank Donga versus Baby Landlord* and illuminates not only the intriguing use of language, but the ways in which power is ascribed the invisible, American-English-speaking, child character of Baby Landlord. These power dynamics are inverted in the *Mark Angel* comedy series, where, according to Vivian Ijeoma Ogbazi and Victor Elendu Frederick, adultism is played out in the verbal abuse hurled haphazardly by grownup Nigerian characters. Lastly, Ignatius Chukwumah's paper examines the Facebook/YouTube videos of *Uncle Wowo*, wherein the eponymous character uses Idoma sensibilities to hilariously mispronounce English words, begging the question of whether mispronunciation can be a decolonizing linguistic practice.

In Part two, we see two papers exploring **community creation through verbal arts**. Cletus Emmanuel Sharndama and Justman Kwadas Bumna document the peculiarities of riddling among the Həba in Adamawa State, Nigeria, showing that the genre not only has its own organizational structure (what happens when in the performance), but also its own syntactic structure (what happens when in the sentence). After that, Azetu Azashi Agyo's paper analyzes Jukun proverbs through a feminist lens and finds counter-hegemonic discourse underneath prevailing gender norms in Jukun culture. This also gives a sense of the dynamic nature of oral literature, which changes over time rather than being static.

Next, you will find two papers that treat certain **encounters between African language use and digital media**. Jannis Kostelnik begins this section by describing an alphabetic script called Minim, created by Mahamadi Ouédraogo in Burkina Faso, and how it's been proliferated on social media. Victor Elendu Frederick and Vivian Ijeoma Ogbazi then bring the conversation back to Nigeria with a discussion of how students at the Federal University of Wukari express their difficulties and commiserate in the digital space, and the kind of linguistic devices they resort to in doing so.

Part four of this special issue concerns **semiotic subversion and substitution**. This is introduced by Edirin Sylvester Otegbale's and Amos Iyiola's paper on the strategies of naming in *African Pyscho, Verre Cassé,* and *Black Bazar* by Alain Mabanckou, showing that

Mabanckou's use of names is not only a stylistic choice, but a way of subverting the code and sending critical messages. Next comes a semiotic analysis of road signs in Nigeria by God'sgift Ogben Uwen and Ugento Lucky Ohonsi, who show how Nigerians actually substitute legal, official signs with communally recognized alternatives in their lived reality speaking back to power.

The last section is comprised of two papers containing the theme of **generational change and conflict**. The first, by Cassandra Ifeoma Nebeife, analyzes communal child raising in the novel *Imagine This* by Sade Adeniran with eye toward the various forms of abuse carried out by adult characters on their wards and poses broader questions about African parenting and human dignity. Omotolani Ebenezer Ekpo's paper deals with language and tone in a whole different way by analyzing the ways that the popular music being consumed by Jukun youth in Wukari, Nigeria is affecting the inter-generational transfer of the Jukun language. Is popular culture in this area simultaneously allowing for creative expression and threatening the local language? Both papers portray communities facing such a tremendous social change which music and literature mirror as sites of conflict and negotiation.

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