

Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju (ed.)

# **Gendered Dichotomies in African Youth Language and Language Practices**

With a Foreword by Mokaya Bosire  
and a Postscript by Fiona Mc Laughlin

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## Foreword

*Mokaya Bosire*

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*A man who lived on the banks of the Niger should not wash his hands with spittle.*  
Chinua Achebe

In a continent where upwards of 2000 languages are spoken, one is constantly exposed to incredibly diverse ways and means of expressing oneself at home and at the marketplace, formally and informally, publicly and privately. From a young age, you are a member of a speech community and of discursive practices that construct and perform both contextualized and imagined identities that are both individual and collective. From using distinct languages (codes), to choosing dialects and variants of a particular language down to a particular accent, African peoples who live in these plurilingual realities may choose to use one code or mix and mesh codes in their utterances for effect. In many places on the continent, multi-lingual practices and language-contact outcomes like bilingualism, code-meshing, mixed languages, pidgins and creoles, “trans-linguaging” and other extra-normative discursive practices are therefore a common phenomenon. These diverse ways of using language find full expression in Youth languages, both rural and urban. Such was my experience growing up in Nairobi that eventually led me to research the expressive, novel and surprising vitality of Sheng, amid all the codes Kenya had to offer.

Because languages track and index cultures and cultural change, the complex intricacies of language that can arise in such a language-rich place as Africa with rapid cultural and technological change are exciting and interesting to investigate. “Hot-button” issues of our time: politics, the economy, climate change and local controversies all jostle for discussion and expression with global issues and trends in food practices, style and fashion, gender and sexuality. In a young continent where the median age is less than 20 years in most places, where most young people are increasingly connected with the world through social media networks and the internet, the international is at once local and subject to interpretation and adaptation. Given their repertoire of codes, one basic question then becomes: in which

codes are different African demographics discussing these issues? For example, are all genders using the same codes?

The youth of Africa, both men and women, use language in the new, extra-normative and rich-in-metaphor youth languages. The chapters in this volume cover the gamut of African youth language practices, revealing that, across the continent, young people are constantly morphing their linguistic repertoires in surprisingly comparable ways in disparate areas – Kenya, Cameroun, South Africa and everywhere in-between. The volume not only shows that there are nuances in the issues that young men and women in Africa are speaking to, but also that the discursive ways in which they are utilizing available codes to bolster their positions and perform evolving identities are gender-sensitive. My own research on Sheng shows that language practices align with individual, cultural and global conceptualizations of gender as construed through local power dynamics and contestations. I have found, for example, that, while all genders speak Sheng, men may use particular expressions in Sheng to project street-wise masculinity, while women would use Sheng to project different identities, including transgressing taboo rules for women in every-day life and in genres like music and stand-up comedy routines.

The authors of this volume, many of them accomplished researchers in youth languages and other extra-normative language varieties on the continent, have interrogated not just the different contemporary issues that young people in Africa are speaking to, but also the innovative ways in which language is performed by different genders. The volume is a must read for all African language researchers and youth language enthusiasts everywhere.

**Mokaya Bosire**  
*University of Oregon*