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A sociolinguistics of Africa – southern conviviality, reciprocity, and scholarship

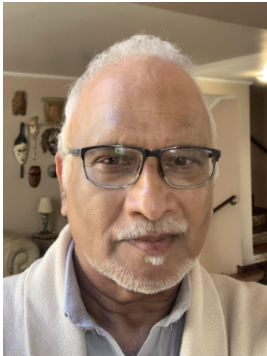
Africa, the cradle of humanity, is also the cradle of language in spoken, signed, and written forms. The most prominent field in sociolinguistics – the study of language as used in society – is multilingualism. With one third of the world's languages, Africa has long provided the poets, playwrights, and storytellers of the continent with rich multilingual resources for their craft in recording histories, and systems of belief, culture, and knowledge. They remind us of at least six historical phases of African multilingual social systems from which to recall, learn and pass on to others. So, there is little that can be taught to the citizens of Africa from the Euro-North about multilingualism/s, whether as continua of language chains or as languages of difference that our scholars, wise elders and writers do not already know.

In this paper, I offer a brief overview of African multilingualisms as pluriversal phenomena, as I've learned from archival sources, scholarly elders, colleagues and students in conversations that criss-cross Africa and the Asia Pacific for several decades. The focus is on how African knowledge of multilingualisms, as dynamic and multidimensional, has much to contribute to northern narratives of socio- and applied linguistics.

Multilingualisms are much more than language – they are about how human beings who want to get along are the *homo sapiens amans* referred to by Maturana and colleagues in Chile. They are about keeping balances in society – and how multilingual citizens take care with words in convivial conversations and reciprocal exchange. Multilingualisms are how people recognise and exercise their linguistic agency and citizenship when choosing how to communicate, depending on the purpose and with whom they converse. Human migration out of Africa was only possible when people used their multilingualisms for reciprocal exchanges and translation of knowledge, a Process of 'transknowledging'.

Northern narrators of 'multilingualism' have seldom recognised knowledge of African and southern multilingualisms, how these shift along both horizontal planes of conviviality and reciprocity, and change to vertical planes of differentiation for purposes of exclusion, entry to the formal economy and higher education, and during conflict. Africa's gift to the academy is to demonstrate that multilingualisms are multidimensional. They are intimately associated with keeping triangular relationships (ethos, logos, pathos; cosmology, epistemology, and ontology; pasts, presents, futures) in balance. These are the balances that multilingual citizens navigate while exercising their linguistic agency, citizenship and versatility every day.





Prof Lynn Mario T. Menezes de Souza
University of São Paulo, BRAZIL

Southern Sociolinguistics, Potentiated Double Consciousness and the Politics of Locus of Enunciation: Toward a Decolonial Ethics of Language

This address outlines an onto-epistemological framework for a “southern sociolinguistics” capable of confronting the structural onto-epistemological asymmetries and violence of colonial modernity. Operating against the “epistemology of the zero-point” (Castro-Gomez 2007), the modernist illusion of disembodied and transparent knowledge systems, this paper argues that all language is embodied and inherently historical and relational. By conceptually weaving together Gilroy’s (1993) contrapuntal consciousness, Jane Gordon’s (2006) “potentiated double consciousness”, and Ngũgĩ’s (1986) vitalist framework of decolonization, the address explores how the colonial matrix organizes global “audibility”. It examines how Ngũgĩ’s concept of the “cultural bomb” functions as the systemic apparatus that pathologizes local indigenous vernaculars while leaving metropolitan European languages “unmarked” (de Souza 2018, 2024, 2025) as universal standards of reason.





Dr Naledi Mbude-Mehana

Department of Basic Education, SOUTH AFRICA

Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTbBE): The unfinished consonance in a Dissonant Architecture: DBE's struggle to tackle Foundational learning through MTbBE

Dr. Naledi Mbude-Mehana is a distinguished sociolinguistics and a leading voice in the field of African language education (especially bilingual Science Education), multilingualism, and language policy in South Africa. With over 26 years of academic and community-based research experience, she has dedicated her career to advancing the visibility, intellectualization, and equitable use of African languages in education, public life, and in the economy.

Currently serving as a Deputy Director General (DDG) in the Department of Basic Education (DBE); Dr. Mbude-Mehana specializes in the sociolinguistic dynamics of multilingual societies, with particular focus on the intersection of language, identity, power, and social justice in education. Her groundbreaking work explores how language ideologies shape educational outcomes, particularly for learners from historically marginalized communities. She presents extensively in local, regional and international platforms on language and education; challenging the historical marginalization of African languages pre- and post-apartheid in South Africa.

Dr. Mbude-Mehana has played a pivotal role in shaping national language policy, contributing to the Department of Basic Education's Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MTbBE) strategy. She sits on the panel of advisors to the CHE Review on ITE standards related to multilingualism. Having established the Eastern Cape Department of Education's Language Unit, a first in the country (2012). She established the DBE's Language Unit, in line with UOOLA, 2012. The National Language Unit leads public education campaigns on multilingual pedagogy and MTBBE as a vehicle to widen epistemic access.

She cautions on African languages just being used as medium versus being used as meaning making systems. Her thesis is that there is a difference between the two: As a medium: the language is mostly a channel for instruction, translation, or classroom delivery. For meaning making: the language is a tool for reasoning, discussion, concept-building, and academic expression. She believes that the difference matters; as if African languages are only used as a medium, lessons can still stay teacher-centred and superficial, with little deep understanding. If African languages are used for meaning making, learners can connect new ideas to what they already know, which improves comprehension and literacy. Meaning-making use also supports intellectualization of African languages, because the language grows through use in higher-order thinking; this she says is central to the learning, teaching and assessment of mathematics and science. Part of the challenge we have with the low outcomes in the Foundation Phase; is the use of African languages just as medium. She coined the term Mother Tongue-based Reading Literacy (MTbRL, 2024) for the DBE's new Reading Literacy Strategy (2024 – 2030).

Her work has been recognized nationally and internationally, she was invited by UNESCO twice in 2025; to accompany the Minister of Basic Education to present on South Africa's MTBBE implementation on International Mother Language Day celebrations (21 February 2025); and to present her work on Leveraging AI to develop African Languages with Prof Vukosi Marivate (UP) and Prof. Langa Khumalo (SADILAR, NWU) at the Digital Learning Week (2025) at the UNESCO Headquarters in Paris, France (September, 2025). Dr. Mbude-Mehana is committed to decolonizing education through language justice, advocating for curricula that center African knowledge systems and linguistic diversity.



**Prof Stef Slembrouck****Ghent University, BELGIUM**

The interactional activity-specific take on sociolinguistic enquiry. Situatedness and its language-policy contingencies

My keynote is rooted in an interactional perspective on sociolinguistics, foregrounding situated language use in real-time activity, noting both the complexities of in-the-moment practices and the gaps within language-specific policy debate. While asking the question what the contours might be of a context-responsive LPP framework which aligns with the lived sociolinguistic realities of today's multilingual world, we cannot avoid the interdisciplinary implications and inevitable social organizational responsibilities that come with language policy work in civil society. I will draw on various case studies from secondary and higher education in multilingual Flanders/Belgium.





Prof Marcelyn Oostendorp

Stellenbosch University, SOUTH AFRICA

Refiguring the languaging human

In this keynote I reflect on the position of the human in sociolinguistic thinking. In sociolinguistics the 'human' has mostly remained un/under-theorized. To theorize the human and language in cohort, I use the framework of linguistic citizenship specifically developing a black, feminist, decolonial perspective. Using data from a number of projects focused on the linguistic repertoires of African participants, I develop the idea of the repertoire as both inhibiting and fostering linguistic citizenship. The linguistic repertoire is thus seen both as a space of dystopia (or dehumanization) and a space of utopia, where a new humanity is possible. I argue that a linguistic citizenship approach not only provides new understandings of the entanglement of language and humanity, but also gives insight into how to 'do language otherwise'. I conclude with some proposals on how those of us in sociolinguistics who are concerned about thinking the languaging of human otherwise might work towards it.





Prof Shaila Sultana

BRAC University, BANGLADESH

Chronotopic Rapture in Pursuit of Desperate Hope for a Reimagined Nation: July 2024 Student Uprising in Bangladesh

Historically, students have acted as catalysts in challenging autocratic regimes and have inspired populations worldwide through the dissemination of nationalism and optimism. In 2024, a nationwide student-led uprising received international recognition by challenging and ultimately overthrowing an autocratic government in Bangladesh. Throughout this uprising, various media outlets served as a dynamic, contested arena in which students passionately articulated their sentiments regarding fifteen years of authoritarian rule and systematic silencing. The keynote presents data collected from both digital platforms and public spaces, including linguistic landscapes, cartoons, rap songs, memes, placards, and protest slogans, and critically reflects on how the protest movement was discursively and non-discursively constructed.

With reference to Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, the presentation shows that linguistic and semiotic resources enabled young students to reference historical, political, social, cultural, and religious ideologies and to create raptures across diverse temporal and spatial contexts. By transcending the boundaries of time and space and through their polyphonic layering of voices, they positioned themselves against the political repression and corruption, killing and persecution of journalists, opposition leaders, and activists, and violations of human rights and justice. Their affective stances—particularly anger, grief, and frustration—circulated across chronotopes, seemed to provide them with catharsis that assisted them in constructing agentive portrayals of a transformative future of hope: a reformed egalitarian nation, free from corruption, extremism, and exclusionary nationalism, linguisticism, gender discrimination, and ethnicism. Most significantly, the chronotopic rapture empowered them, as exemplified by Heller & McElhinny's (2017) metaphor of "walking backward into the future," enabling them to draw on painful pasts to imagine new possibilities. In summary, deeply embedded in memories of violence, loss, and state repression, the chronotopic rapture kindled students' hope for a more promising and equitable future—envisioning a reimagined Bangladesh in which human rights are integral to its national identity.

