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A Discourse-oriented Linguistic Study on Conceptualizations of Hospitality in Northern Uganda: Anticipating Challenges and Obstacles in a (Post-)Conflict Setting

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Abstract

Since the withdrawal of Joseph Kony's Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) from Northern Uganda in 2006, the Acholi region is no longer labeled as a 'no-go-zone' or 'red area' for visitors and researchers. However, decades of war and conflict in this region, the records of which can even be traced back at least to early colonial times, have left their psychological and physical marks on the Acholi people who currently strive to regain socioeconomic "normality" in a post-conflict setting. Additionally, ongoing conflicts in bordering South Sudan and Eastern DR Congo have recently led to an influx of large numbers of refugees to Northern Uganda, which poses new challenges to its residents, e.g. resulting in land grabbing by the widely unpopular Ugandan government and its reallocation to refugees. On the other hand, several sources – ranging from 19th century European travelogues to 21st century ethnographies including self-descriptions of Acholi thinkers and academics – laud an extraordinary hospitality of the Acholi people. A linguistic analysis of discourses of hospitality and hostility among the Acholi seems a promising approach to grasp the perception and conception of 'Others' from an emic perspective so that a better understanding of Acholi perspectives on this issue can be gained. However, conducting such research in a region where (past) conflicts were caused on the basis of ascriptions of 'Otherness' that led to stereotypical images of a militarized, war-prone and ferocious Acholi people that still inform contemporary discourses in Uganda, raises several theoretical and ethical questions. These invite a discussion in this presentation: How can such a study be conducted without reproducing colonially-made/ethnicized/racist stereotypes and without making resurface existing resentments towards Others in this war-torn region? Who is invited to talk and who desires to talk about hospitable (extra)linguistic practices? Which data is expected to be generated in a discourse linguistic study in the discipline of African Linguistics, struggling with its own academic heritage? How can a (transdisciplinary) collaboration with a local university enhance the understanding of specific concepts (hospitality vs. hostility etc.)? In how far can such an approach challenge and decolonize dominant epistemes of cosmopolitanism by adding a 'southern' perspective? Where does hospitality appear as mere ritualized communication (Senft & Basso 2009), as a genuine act of empathy or as individually performed solidarity towards different actors and how do these speak about it metalinguistically? Instead of presenting insights into the actual discourse analytical study, the present talk is rather concerned with theoretical matters and critical expectations paving the way to future empirically-oriented findings.

Keywords: Conflict, discourse, hospitality, Othering, reflexivity, research practices and challenges

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1. Introduction

The history of the region that is today known as Acholiland or as Acholi-speaking parts of Northern Uganda bears witness to countless fluid dynamics of intercultural contacts and multilingual encounters characterized by a continuous influx of migrants from neighboring regions as well as by internal diffusion (a concise overview of the precolonial history of Northern Uganda is given by Atkinson 1994). Thus, the region represents the prototype of what Kopytoff (1987) described as the internal “African frontier”.

These processes were also connected with subsequent periods of war that are deeply entangled with further conflicts in adjacent areas, e.g. the Congo Wars (1996-2003) or long-lasting violent tensions in South(ern) Sudan. Furthermore, these conflicts are embedded in an inner-Ugandan socio-political ecology that is characterized, among others, by ethnic tensions mainly between Bantu communities in Western and Central Uganda and Nilotic communities of (predominantly) Northern Uganda, one of which are the Acholi. Back in colonial times, the British “divided the Protectorate into productive and non productive areas where by the latter would provide labour for the former. The division was based on presumed natural qualities of the people of northern Uganda and those of the south” (Amone 2014: 143). In this regard, Ugandan northerners were stereotypically portrayed and perceived as “strong, muscular and hard working” (ibid.), while those from the south were characterized as “weak, lazy but intellectually superior.” A shared Acholi identity as it is known today emerged from several of such processes of ethnicization of formerly unconnected villages that were under the rule of their respective chiefs (cf. Amone & Muura 2013, among others). Meanwhile, these stereotypical ascriptions have become established as “colonial truism[s]” (Finnström 2008: 64) and are still informing contemporary metalinguistic discourses within Uganda, dividing the population along ethnic and ethnicized lines. An example of this is given by Nassenstein (2021) who shows how Acholi residents in Kampala represent themselves through ethnicized performances of “Northernness” drawing on these stereotypical ascriptions, but also how these people agentively mock and finally deconstruct them through their linguistic practices and discursive strategies. Especially these people based in the Ugandan capital (i.e., the country's south) seem to mimetically reproduce the experienced stigma and tend to transfer images of Otherness onto newly arriving “Other Others”, for instance South Sudanese and Burundian refugees, Congolese students and businesspeople etc. – here, discursive discrepancies between practices of lived hospitality and experienced coloniality seem to be increasingly witnessed. These contexts of (debated) hospitality and adequate research practices are centrally dealt with in this paper.

2. The Acholi and hospitality

In various accounts about the people of Northern Uganda, recurrent reference has been made to their hospitality. Even early European travelers like John Hanning Speke (1863) and Samuel W. Baker (1874) mention the outstanding hospitality of inhabitants of this region in their travelogues, despite their otherwise racist and contemptuous depictions of their sociocultural practices, economic activities and political system. This image reemerges in contemporary anthropological studies, e.g. in Porter (2017: 18) who mentions a “sacrificial hospitality” as a main feature of the Acholi people. However, these accounts content themselves in casually mentioning this observation without further elaborating on the concept of hospitality and its contextual implications from an Acholi perspective. Girling (2019[1960], in a reprint edition by Allen 2019) at least enlarges upon the topic and describes hospitality “as both a duty and a privilege” (ibid.: 129). The principal duty is said to revolve around offering guests protection from attacking enemies, while a successful grant of hospitality to a visitor helps to raise the

host's reputation. Girling also mentions the symbolic importance of served food shared with visitors in this regard as a key factor of social life among the Acholi, which is also reflected in common idiomatic expressions. However, the example he provides is first of all erroneous¹, in the second place his remarks on this topic just pass as a sidenote and are sketchy in nature, and thirdly, the sociopolitical ecology of Northern Uganda has undergone massive processes of disruption and change in the past 60 years so that his findings generally call for revision or an update. Nevertheless, hospitality plays a vital role in the self-definitions of an Acholi identity up to the present day as we noticed during ongoing ethnographic and sociolinguistic research with Acholi speakers. Hospitality is hereby especially connected with attempts of cultural revitalization after long periods of war and armed conflict in the region. But, as already briefly addressed in the Introduction, the uncritical and unquestioned adoption of concepts and truisms may easily lead to a blossoming of stereotypes and thus to essentializing ascriptions and Othering. Therefore, it appears necessary to take a closer look at the multifaceted realizations of a semiotics of hospitality, embedded in sociocultural contexts of contemporary Northern Uganda. To account for the complexity of this ecology and for the multifarious ethical challenges that may occur during fieldwork, we consider it advisable to engage in critical thinking about methodological and ethical issues before embarking on the actual collection of data during fieldwork.

3. Major challenges and obstacles

Major challenges and obstacles when researching hospitable behavior, discourses around hospitality vs. hostility and the semiotics of hospitality in Northern Uganda revolve around a) consent and ethics of data production in North-South encounters; b) layers of representation in the field and the observer's paradox; c) the danger of reinforced schisms and divisions, stronger categorizations and ruptures due to specific research designs.

In African linguistics, consent in the endeavor of empirical data collection based on interviews with speakers and interlocutors under missionary or colonial surveillance was to a large extent rooted in and based on unequal encounters. Speakers seldom had a right to fully "contribute" to the research design in the work on their own languages, and usually only provided "raw" linguistic material (see Blommaert 2008, Irvine 2008, among others). Many of those interviewed found themselves in entirely precarious conditions at the moment of their involvement in linguistic projects and were e.g. workers in the colonial administration, depended on the church and clerical power, or were war refugees and imprisoned at the time of production of the recordings (as occurred in early fieldwork in the by then colonial discipline of "Afrikanistik" in Germany). These contexts and inequalities in the history of linguistics (and adjacent disciplines) are critically reflected in the work of Bauman & Briggs (2003: 72), who discuss the production of modernity (in the North) against the emergence of a "discursive Other" or "Oriental Other" in the South. They claim that European processes of knowledge production – and, of modernity (see also Appadurai 1996) – worked even more efficiently due to clear and construed oppositional contrasts, e.g. orality vs. literacy, communicative vs. epistemological modalities, antiquity vs. modernity, often addressed and studied in discursive and metadiscursive frames (ibid., pp. 23-24). Also in contemporary grammars, for instance, the help of language assistants is often gratefully acknowledged, but ownership of data and ideas may not always be made very clear, and hierarchies between linguist and assistants are not only implicitly perceptible but very striking.

¹ *Welo kelo yelo*, as he puts it, does not mean 'guests bring repletion', but 'guests bring disturbance'. A commonly used expression that is consistent with his translation is *Welo okelo yengo*.

Here, we anticipate potential problems in the study of hospitable discourses in Northern Uganda, too. Especially in contexts of conflict migration where an influx of refugees from South Sudan and DR Congo challenges notions of hospitality due to pressing and increasing social issues (scarceness of land, jobs, difficult modes of cohabitation in rural areas around refugee camps), directing the focus of investigation directly to ‘hospitality’ may fuel a conflict that is subliminally present in society due to the major social and economic burdens. This may concern interlocutors’ (lack of) willingness to speak about these topics, or to act reluctantly when being observed or interviewed. Moreover, the role of the researcher in the field is specifically complex in a (post)conflict setting where numerous foreign representatives (of NGOs, international organizations, foreign institutions and foundations) are self-proclaimed experts and analysts, roles that stand in a longer colonial tradition in processes of knowledge production. Especially Northern Uganda turned into a promising eldorado for humanitarian actors after the defeat and expulsion of LRA fighters in the process of reconstruction and reconciliation. In this context, researchers may be perceived (and may be expected to act) differently than in other contexts where social hierarchies are still intact and unaffected by war, while in Acholiland forced migration and resettlement involuntarily led to a reorganization of society with new roles and hierarchies. Due to the ubiquity of humanitarian staff, the observer’s paradox can be another challenge: Observation and participation may trigger staged and unnatural behavior, and one’s own presence may be a strong disruptive factor when researching ‘hospitality’ (also due to the fact that hospitable behavior may unconsciously be shown in different ways toward South Sudanese refugees than to researchers from the Global North etc.). Finally, research on hospitality and discourses of welcoming strangers among people who since colonial and early ethnographers’ times were characterized as ‘hospitable’, could either be understood as a colonial continuity being based on mere fantasy and fiction around “tribalism” and stereotypes, or could enhance ethnicized images of “strong/militarized” yet “hospitable” Acholi, which have been reactivated by the present government since 1986. The delicate topic could enhance and strengthen the schisms and ruptures found in Ugandan politics and in people’s Selfing and Othering discourses in everyday life in Northern Uganda. Research practices could, at their worst, meddle with actual politics and manipulate the research output.

Hitherto collected data and experience have recurrently brought our attention to three different contexts which are intended to stress the anticipated challenges while conducting fieldwork in a (post)conflict area:

In 2015, we carried out research in Acholi-owned bars and restaurants in the Ugandan capital Kampala. In the course of several “quiz nights”, a popular nocturnal event in the bars of the capital, some groups would playfully adopt ethnicized group names, as counter-images to ostracism and stereotypes, often hinting to a specific Acholi (or non-Acholi) pronunciation, such as “Norzerners”/ “Northerners” and many more. In the course of self-ironic mockery and mimetic play with identities and ascriptions of Otherness in the context of hospitality, we anticipate difficulties in differentiating ludic bar talk and jokes from real and serious exchanges. While we consider pragmatics of bar talk and humor as potentially conflict-solving and shame-attenuating strategy, addressing these practices in hospitality research contexts may contribute to a resurfacing of widespread stereotypes that are restricted to specific (night)spaces and in-group interactions.

In 2013-2015, while researching language practices of so-called Rwandophone speakers in Eastern DR Congo, a conflict area since the mid-nineties, we encountered difficulties that mostly centred around interlocutors’ fear to openly reply to questions and have conversations in public spaces about Banyabwisha identity and Kinyabwisha language. The silence that was noticeable in our recordings was meaningful but hard to address in metalinguistic discourse.

Similar responses have been reported from research on discourses around the Rwandan Genocide and its perpetrators, ethnic clashes in Kenya in 2007, and other conflict areas, but very few studies are hitherto available (Wright 1998 as theoretical overview, and Mugiraneza 2011, 2014 examining the language of genocide).

In early 2018, we were able to visit ruins in rural Northern Uganda – remnants of LRA fights with the national army – and often to some extent demolished and now practically uninhabitable. In one house outside of the village of Mucwini, we found a group of more than ten orphans, some of them formerly abducted or recruited youth during the conflict, who now lived in the empty rooms and had written and drawn all over the walls. These ruins of former mansions showed similar difficulties in accessing them during fieldwork as the deciphering of the discursive ruins, when speaking about the conflict or trying to make sense of the writings on the walls as semiotic landscapes that told their own stories of conflict and hospitality/hostility. We thus ask ourselves: How and why would researchers claim hospitality for themselves or access to be granted to these precarious sites of (verbal and material) ruination? How do these two relate and are interconnected? How has the concept of ruination been included in former conflict-ridden contexts (Stoler 2013)?

4. Ideas and strategies: How to research hospitality and carry out hospitable research in Northern Uganda?

In this chapter, we focus on two major strategies of researching hospitality and conducting it in a hospitable fashion, namely an appropriate methodology and a planned collaboration with Makerere University in Kampala.

First, with regards to our research methods, we propose that qualitative methods from the wide-ranging interdisciplinary field of linguistic ethnography serve our purpose best. A multimodal data collection through various methods like participant observation, go-along, sociolinguistic interviews and group discussions at different sites and with diverse actors is supposed to be complemented by autoethnographic reflections and a dialogic involvement where boundaries/confines between researcher and researched may become blurred. As researchers, we understand ourselves not as “experts” eliciting data from the field, but as actively involved in embodied and intersubjective processes of knowledge production. Collecting various vignettes or “small stories” (Storch 2017) from our encounters and experiences with regards to multifaceted realizations of a semiotics of hospitality, we will bring multilayered and multivocal discourses of hospitality among the Acholi from different angles to the fore. In the sense of Gallop’s (2002) anecdotal theory, we aim at assembling these vignettes to heuristically gain insights into the macro perspectives and contexts of hospitality. A continuous reflection of our own discursive presumptions throughout the whole research is required. Besides, we need to make transparent the criteria for the selection of our data, our “motivational relevancies” in the sense of Sarangi & Candlin (2001). Here it will prove helpful to follow the interests and motivations of our consultants and interlocutors to better represent those aspects of hospitality that appear relevant to them. This assures that emic perspectives are not concealed by the researcher’s foci on their self-reflection of methods and discursive structures. On the other hand, in a post-conflict area such as Northern Uganda, we may also encounter an uneasy silence as a response to certain aspects that may be of interest to us, or we may be granted limited access to precarious sites like refugee camps – uncertainties which inevitably need to be accepted. In sum, we consider a flexibility to adopt methods of linguistic ethnography and discourse analysis according to circumstances and challenges during the research process as a key to produce valid as well as ethical data about hospitality in Northern Uganda.

Secondly, we intend to arrange a research collaboration with Makerere University in Kampala. Involving an interested PhD candidate or MA student from a related discipline and conducting joint but also individual research in the field will benefit the gathered data in several respects. This collaborative approach addresses a criticism addressed by scholars like Hountondji (1995) with the term “extroversion” (also “extraversion”). Rather than seeing Uganda, a country located in the Global South, as the mere field of data production and collection addressed for and made available for a potential audience in the Global North, it will also itself become the place of analysis and theorizing of these data. Moreover, by seeking an open and reflexive dialogue with a colleague from Makerere about our respective data, our own work will also become data for our colleague to reflect upon. His/her perspective, for instance as a Muganda from Central Uganda, will probably be productive in unveiling our positionality and discursive position as well as vice versa. It remains to be examined in how far our encounters with Acholi speakers in the field resemble or differ from those made by our colleague. An analysis of these experiences may shed light on the question in how far and towards which actors hospitality appears as mere ritualized communication or as genuine empathy and along which lines these distinctions are made. However, such a collaboration will also face challenges, e.g. regarding intercultural communication between the researchers or if different opinions about the planning of the joint research emerge that need to be anticipated as much as possible. Thus, it requires thorough preparation, sensitivity, and a good dialogic communication between all research partners throughout the whole project. If this is the case, a collaboration will add valuable insights and discussions to the research and enrich the overall picture of hospitality that can be drawn. It makes knowledge production a joint undertaking of both institutions in the Global North as well as in the Global South by reflexively locating the positions of all researchers involved and thus provincializing the Western/Northern one in the sense of Chakrabarty (2000).

5. Conclusion

If applied successfully, we hold that these strategies will contribute to hospitable research or “linguistic hospitality” (Kearney 2019 after Ricoeur 1995). Adopting Kearney’s main characteristics, we first aim at “narrative flexibility” by adopting a multimodal and participatory way of data collection to allow space for a plurality of perspectives. Secondly, we intend a “narrative transfiguration” by seeking potentials and unexplored opportunities in the vestiges of the past, entering into dialogue with different actors and stakeholders and reflecting on the power and effects of colonial ascriptions, stereotypes and processes of Othering. Ideally, this can make an impact by contributing to a discourse change regarding these issues among Ugandans to somehow come to terms with the past. However, this thirdly requires “narrative pardon”, forgiving enemies, showing empathy, and respecting wounds of the past. Here, it also needs to be respected if people voice their concerns over talking about certain issues as well as if they remain silent or show no interest in raising and answering certain questions. Rather than being top-down experts, we should be good listeners and follow the interests of our collaborators and interlocutors so that this work becomes meaningful to them and not only to a closed academic circle in the Global North. To facilitate this and to involve another perspective, we consider the envisaged cooperation with Makerere University as a key to the success of this study. We will also need to ensure that the output of this study will be written in a language and a style that is accessible for people in Uganda and outside academia in particular. Only by applying “linguistic hospitality” ourselves, by heuristically exploring and then applying what it means to be a good guest, we can decolonize existing Eurocentric epistemes of cosmopolitanism and hospitality by adding perspectives from a site in the Global South, thereby discussing and expanding already existing conceptualizations of hospitality.

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