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## At the fringes of language: On the semiotics of noise

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## ABSTRACT

'Words and alternative ways of talking [...] have served as weapons against oppressive authority, vehicles for solidarity among all manner of disenfranchised peoples, and instruments of extraordinary art', Ana Cara observes (Cara, A.C. (2011). Creole talk. The poetics and politics of Argentine verbal art. In R. Baron & A.C. Cara (eds.), *Creolization as cultural creativity* (pp. 198–227). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi). Linguistic creativity doesn't have to be playful and amusing; it can also be about experiences of marginalization, injustice and pain. There are, consequently, different creativities and different indexicalities of creatively manipulated speech. In this article, the focus is on noisy, nonsensical, sometimes unsettling performances of linguistic creativity and on their contexts. These are only slightly different from those Cara refers to – sociolinguistic settings of inequality, based on a history of experiences of othering and subjugation among women in a small northeastern Nigerian village. The artful unmaking of words and meaning that is in the center of this contribution addresses reality in a variety of ways: it aims at evoking ideas and memories of what cannot always be seen and heard (such as spirits), of a performer's feelings of otherness.

Noisy and messy communicative practice such as 'gibberish', screaming and swearing need to be seen, I argue, as performances rather than as deviations from 'proper linguistic practice'. They might digress from certain norms, but nevertheless remain interpersonal in their communicative design; they are powerful yet individual and original attempts to reach out to the other, in order to say something which might otherwise not be said. The noisy and unintelligible in language can be an attempt to retrieve what has been discarded and to put the marginal into the center. It is art that intends to remind audiences of the powers of horror, disgust, and ugliness. In practices that highlight linguistic creativity, a particularly radical way of transforming language into such abject art is to make speech (at least initially) incomprehensible, to work with obscurity, noise and disruption. The strategies used in these pieces of art are diverse: utterances are interrupted by made-up speech, and spoken text turns into sung, screamed or murmured text; noise is presented as that what belongs to the Other, and audiences are left with the task not just of listening and evaluating these performances, but also with the task of decoding them. However, noise bears in it the potential of rejection: audiences have to power to decide whether they accept, after all, the invitation to decode whatever meaning the sound of a voice may have.

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It's not so easy writing about nothing. [...]  
 It's a lot easier to talk about nothing.  
 Patti Smith

## 1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with language that seems to be void of meaning, and about the creative practices, and the semiotics of the same, that are employed to construct such communicative voids. It seeks to argue that these practices are used alongside of other creative ways of doing things with language, and that the seeming messiness of speech emerging from such coexistences – of voids, cracks, and structure in language – actually has the potential to make speech powerful and agentive. This is not an entirely novel observation: 'What we have [...], rather, are different creativities', Janet Maybin and Joan Swann comment in their discussion of everyday creativity in language (2007: 514). It is precisely this notion – the observation that there are different possibilities of creatively dealing with and using linguistic resources – that helps us to come to terms, descriptively and theoretically, with practices that seem to obscure rather than enhance communication. Besides playing with meaning and structure, I suggest, there is also the possibility to play with obscurity in language, in order to deliberately make oneself unintelligible. This paper consequently addresses practices of working with obscurity by considering the way subaltern people's performances of noise relate intimately to connections with powers of the spirit world. The interaction between noise, marginality and creativity is an important aspect of women's performances in Jukun-speaking communities of Nigeria, which are in the focus of this contribution. Different linguistic phenomena are at play here: for instance, unintelligible speech used by women in exogamous marriages (which is the dominant marriage strategy in Jukun communities), mimicking a language others might not understand, the play with the unspeakable in taboo language, and non-linguistic sounds in 'response cries' (Goffman, 1978). There is nothing too unfamiliar in these forms of communicative obscurity; the hissing of a person who angrily walks out of an encounter, a loud outburst in the midst of an argument, or the gleeful interruption of the speech of others by imitating them or making distracting sounds, all are everyday operations. They simply stand out because they seem to remove the speaker a bit from his or her audience, as they resemble some kind of self-talk that is unintelligible to others, as is noise. At the same time, there is considerable creativity at work here, to an extent that such utterances are frequently considered 'noise' instead of speech.

In this contribution, precisely the concept of 'noise', in a more abstract sense (and not referring to physical or vocal phenomena) is put in focus. A description and analysis of the 'noisy' in intentional unintelligibility and as a linguistic phenomenon benefits considerably, I intend to demonstrate, from the strong focus on performativity and interpersonal practice that has been crucial in much work on linguistic creativity. Noise is, just as other forms of expression part of language, and without noise language would not be conceivable as a concept. This perspective relates to Bakhtin's thinking about the dialogic relationship each communicative event and each word has with preceding ones, which is of particular relevance in understanding interpersonal noise and the power associated with it in Jukun (and other West African) communities. Michael Holquist (2014: 18) notes more broadly on this notion in language:

Bakhtin's metalinguistics grows out of his conception of human beings as persons who share the task of being responsible for their own situatedness in a particular time and place – the language of each of whom, then, is part of an ongoing exchange with others, who must also answer for the unique place that they occupy, in existence. In so shared an environment, there is no first word and no single word.

Creativity is thus a process that emerges out of the interpersonal, out of shared language, and out of its mimetic nature. Creative performance requires both a look in the mirror and a turn to the other, in order to achieve its various aims: the creation of imagined realities, transmission of ideas about the self, and obtaining the other's evaluation of the same.

This is precisely what Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs have shown in their classic paper on poetics and performance (1990). Linguistic creativity as performance is not a creative act that emerges *ex nihilo*, but rather out of norm and transformation, display and evaluation. Creativity in language is only meaningful in a context where it can be conceived of as divergent, or simply different, from other ways of languaging, and where there is critical potential to evaluate what has been performed. It is within and through these very basic processes that 'individuals gain rights to particular modes of transforming speech' (Bauman and Briggs, 1990: 61). The notion of performance as a highly reflexive mode of communication is crucial here:

Performance puts the act of speaking on display – objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience. Performance heightens awareness of the act of speaking and licenses the audience to evaluate the skill and effectiveness of the performer's accomplishment. By its very nature, then, performance potentiates decontextualization. (Bauman and Briggs, 1990: 73)

Those practices of communicative performance allow for precisely this: evaluation and objectification. Therefore they are interesting and meaningful not because of the information on specific topics they convey, but because of the multi-layered meta-discourse they transport – this is all about reflexivity, about evaluating the underlying meaning, context, and power.

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