The Artificiality of Linguistic Boundaries: Evidence from Multilingual Urban Discourses in Lusaka, Zambia

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Abstract

The conventional understanding of languages has historically implied distinct demarcations between languages with predetermined contexts for usage. However, empirical evidence reveals that these linguistic boundaries are more fluid and malleable than previously assumed. Thus, this paper conducts a thorough analysis of linguistic data collected from various informal urban settings in Lusaka. The primary objective is to demonstrate how individuals amalgamate linguistic elements from diverse languages to establish a cohesive communication system that surpasses traditional linguistic constraints. Additionally, it emphasizes the unpredictable nature of language choices within specific domains, where conventional language forms are typically expected. This paper contends that the conventional concept of language domains inadequately captures the language practices of multilingual speakers across the varied social settings of Lusaka.

Keywords: multilingual, linguistic boundary, language practice, linguistic features, Lusaka, Zambia

1. Introduction

It has been traditionally believed that languages are distinct and separate entities with strict boundaries. This suggests that language practices are expected to conform strictly to traditional concepts of language, to speakers using language as if it existed in isolation. However, as this paper will demonstrate, there is growing evidence of a change in our understanding of the nature of language and language practices in modern, urbanized African settings, particularly in Lusaka (see Mambwe, 2014; Banda & Mambwe, 2024).

Since colonial times, Lusaka has served as the administrative capital of Zambia, making it a linguistic hotspot of the country. As the capital city, Lusaka hosts most of the commercial activities, attracting people from various parts of Zambia and the world, resulting in a diverse linguistic environment. With an estimated population of three million people (CSO, 2022), Lusaka is not only highly urbanized but also one of Africa's most urbanized cities (Banda, 2010). It is considered the prime city in Zambia, offering better job and business opportunities than elsewhere in the country (Mambwe, 2014). The population of Lusaka began to increase

in the late 1990s following the collapse of the mining industry in the Copperbelt province of Zambia, leading to a significant loss of employment and business opportunities (Banda & Bellonjegele, 2010). The growing population of Lusaka has brought about various social and economic changes, resulting in both positive and negative impacts. This has led to a range of adaptations, including linguistic transformations in everyday life. As McLaughlin (2009:2) explains, "the cultural adaptations to urban life in African cities frequently arise out of necessity rather than choice." The influx of people in the city has contributed to significant linguistic diversity and a broadening of communicative resources, enhancing multiculturalism and linguistic innovation, creating a more complex phenomenon than before in Lusaka.

There are various languages spoken in Lusaka, including Nyanja, which is the main language of the city (Njobvu & Mambwe, 2024), and Town Bemba, brought to the city by migrants from the Copperbelt region. Additionally, there are other languages spoken by urban speakers, such as Soli, Tonga, Lozi, Nsenga, and Lamba, among others. However, in urban settings, interlocutors do not use individual languages in the traditional sense. Instead, they combine elements from different languages to convey meaning. This practice is common in many African urban centers, and Lusaka is no exception. Despite Nyanja and Bemba being considered the primary languages of Lusaka, speakers blend linguistic features from these named languages to communicate and negotiate meaning.

In Lusaka, Nyanja and Bemba are the main languages, but English is also widely spoken as it is the official language and the main medium of instruction in schools. Besides being used for formal business, English is part of the urban vernacular for most speakers. This aligns with Higgins (2009:2) who states that "for many multilinguals in Africa, English is a part of urban vernaculars." Thus, in any study of this nature, English should be considered as part of the overall linguistic practices of urban speakers. All the highlighted languages, as will be demonstrated in this study, are used as amalgams rather than just code switches between languages. Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to demonstrate how individuals amalgamate linguistic elements from diverse languages to establish a cohesive communication system that surpasses traditional linguistic constraints.

2. Theoretical framework

This study is based on the concept of language as a social practice (Pennycook, 2007; Heller, 2007; Garcia, 2009; Blommaert, 2009; Makoni & Pennycook, 2007; Heller, 2007). The main argument in this theory is that language should be conceived as a social practice rather than a closed system. Language as a social practice means seeing language as a local activity that directly results from the social and cultural activities in which people engage. Thus, Pennycook (2010) suggests moving away from looking at language in broad abstract terms and instead focusing on language as a local activity embedded in people's everyday lives. Furthermore, Pennycook (2010) and Heller (2007) view language as a local practice beyond just language use in context. For Pennycook, thinking of practices involves placing social activity at the center and asking why we do things the way we do, and how activities are established, regulated, and transformed. Therefore, practices should not be limited to the things we do but should include "bundles of activities that are central to social life" (Pennycook, 2010:2). This

challenges the idea of language as a system and instead emphasizes language as an activity, a central organizing activity that people engage in. Thus, Pennycook (2010:9) argues that "to talk of language practices is to move away from attempts to capture language as a system and instead to explore the doing of language as a social activity, regulated as much by social contexts as by underlying systems" (cf. Higgins, 2009).

Pennycook adds that seeing language as practice means looking at language structure as deriving from repeated activity. The point is that language cannot be understood outside the context of practice. For example, Canagarajah (2006) argues that lingua franca English does not exist as a system but is constantly brought into being in every communication context. Pennycook also points out that to understand language, we need to understand the local meanings of language, which must be embedded in local ways of thinking. Pennycook neatly summarizes the idea of language as a practice in this way: "[to] look at language as a practice is to view language as an activity rather than a structure, as something we do rather than a system we draw on, as a material part of social and cultural life rather than an abstract entity" (2010:2).

Thus, to add to this theorizing, to look at language as social practice is to view it as unbounded, with no rigid forms or inflexible hegemonic systems (cf. Banda, 2010; Banda & Mambwe, 2024). Similar to Pennycook's theorizing, Heller (2007:15) views language as:

> Sets of resources called into play by social actors, under social and historical conditions which both constrain and make possible the social reproductions of existing conventions and relations, as well as the production of new ones.

In Heller's perspective, language is not only seen as a social practice, but also as a resource (cf. Banda & Mambwe, 2024; Mambwe, Mangi & Njobvu, 2024; Mambwe & Fernando, 2016; Blackledge & Creese, 2010; Banda, 2010; Schatzki, 2001; Rampton, 2006). This understanding of language as a resource allows us to go beyond language boundaries and focus on individuals in our analysis. Therefore, in this study, language is considered to emerge from the interactions of speakers and it is shaped by how they use it.

Emphasizing language practices is crucial in our comprehension of language as it shifts the attention from language as an independent system that exists before its use and competence as an internal capacity responsible for language production (e.g. Chomsky) towards perceiving language "as a result of the embodied social practices that bring it about" (Pennycook, 2010:9). In this context, Schatzki (2001) argues that understanding language as a practice necessitates moving away from both the structuralist emphasis on concrete system or structure and the abstract post-structuralist emphasis on discourse.

The above argument is particularly reflective of speakers in Lusaka where proficiency or competence in a language can no longer be used to account for the language practices of an average Zambian living in Lusaka (cf. Banda & Bellojengele, 2010). Therefore, this study also demonstrates how these urbanites use their ‘verbal repertoire’ in meaning making and negotiation of social life in different social contexts as they go beyond linguistic borders.

3. Research methodology

The study collected data qualitatively from informal settings. Therefore, we purposively chose Lusaka Intercity Bus Terminus, two Barbershops, and two Salons selected from Kalingalinga and Mtendere townships in Lusaka, respectively. We settled for these places because they represented similar settings within Lusaka, where different people from various backgrounds are found. From each site, we purposively selected at least four people each bringing the total sample size to 20 individuals.

The data from the Lusaka Intercity Terminus was randomly audio recorded from two public passenger buses during evangelistic sessions given to passengers before the departure of the buses. In contrast, data from Barbershops and Salons was collected from the selected participants through focus group discussions which were recorded using an audio recorder. The recorded data was then transcribed for further analysis. We used discourse analysis to identify the nature of discourse used in the conversations and preaching sessions by highlighting the linguistic structures used: words, phrases, and sentences. We then went further to identify the sources of the linguistic features used by speakers and link them to named languages.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1 ***Linguistic features as resources***

The following data (Table 1) shows how speakers in urban Lusaka use linguistic features drawn from Nyanja, Bemba, and English as resources to communicate.

Context (of the excerpt): This excerpt is taken from an evangelistic session on a public passenger bus from the Lusaka Intercity Bus Terminus, the biggest local and international transit bus station in Zambia. Note that we have numbered the evangelist's turns for analysis purposes.

In recent years, a new type of evangelization has been observed on public passenger buses. In addition to the traditional door-to-door or church-based Christian evangelism, a new method called "transit" evangelism has emerged. In this method, an evangelist spends a few minutes before a bus departs to preach to the passengers. This practice has become common in Lusaka and the Copperbelt provinces.

Table 1: An evangelistic session on a public bus

Turn	Speaker (preacher man)	Statements
1.	Call for prayer	Excuse me, excuse me, please. ***Natupepe [Bemba]*** 'excuse me please [English], [let us pray]
2.	Prayer	Our Father in heaven, we thank you for giving us this wonderful morning. We are come to your presence this morning asking you for travelling mercies. Grant your people safety…. Amen! [English]

3.	Audience	Amen!
4.	Session	***Natotela mukwai. Tuletasha kabumba lyonse pakutubusha kabili tumutashe namulwendo [Bemba]***. God is good all the time…I thank you [English]. [I thank you. We should thank our creator each time he causes us to wake up. We should also thank him during while on a journey….]
5.	Session	***Mulungu watu niwabwino maningi. Atipasa zonse zamene tipempa [Nyanja].*** Even in our journey, he provides his grace. He is faithful [English]. [Our God is very wonderful. He provides us with everything we ask him….]
6.	Session	***Lyonse ilyo tuli pabulendo, twibukishe Lesa. Ii bus muleendamo, yapangwa nefyela kabili yapangwa noomuntu [Bemba].*** We ask God to protect you [English]…. [Each time we are traveling, [we] should remember God. This bus you are travelling in, is made by man [implying it is susceptible to accidents]]
7.	Conclusion & collection of offerings	The work (of God) I am doing requires material support. So whoever has a little (money) to support this ministry, I am passing through to collect whatever you will give [English]…. ***Mulungu amidaliseni amai [Nyanja], Lesa apale [Bemba].*** [May God bless ma'am…May God bless you]

NB: the data was collected from an open preaching session on a Bus at Lusaka Intercity Bus Terminus.

In Table 1, the preacher begins the session by using English phrases like 'excuse me, excuse me please' to get the attention of the passengers. He then switches to Bemba, saying 'Natupepe' (shall we pray) to signal that he wants to pray. The audience complies, and the prayer continues entirely in English. After the prayer, the audience loudly affirms its end. Then, the preacher continues, seamlessly using both Bemba and English phrases. He uses Bemba phrase 'Natotela mukwai. Tuletasha kabumba lyonse pakutubusha kabili tumutashe namulwendo' and English phrase 'God is good all the time.' In his next turn, he deploys linguistic features from Nyanja, saying 'Mulungu watu ni wabwino maningi. Atipasa zonse zamene tipempa' and uses English, 'Even in our journey, he provides his grace. He is faithful.'

In turn 6, the speaker once again chooses to use linguistic features from Bemba, saying "Lyonse ilyo tuli pabulendo, twibukishe Lesa. Ii bus muleendamo, yapangwa nefyela kabili yapangwa noomuntu" and from English, "We ask God to protect you." By incorporating these languages, he amplifies the message he is sharing with his audience. In turn 7, he combines linguistic features from all three named languages: English, Nyanja, and Bemba, in that order Therefore, the findings in Table 1 reveal that speakers in Lusaka regard the different linguistic features from different languages at their disposal as resources for communicating their

messages. This is evident with the affirmation from the audience who all seemed to understand the message couched in a variety of languages or a combination of linguistic features taken from different languages.

4.2 Fluidity of linguistic 'borders' and language domains

The findings show that a speaker does not have to be proficient in any of the three linguistic systems mentioned above. Instead, he or she can use different aspects of the languages to convey meanings and achieve communicative goals. More importantly, the study shows that a speaker is not limited by the setting or the linguistic features he or she chooses to use. For example, in Table 1, the preacher incorporates formal English along with informal urban forms of Bemba and Nyanja uniquely and unpredictably. For example, in turn 1, he starts with English and then switches to Bemba, in turns 2 & 3, he uses English only, and in the remaining turns, he combines different elements. In turn 5, he starts with Nyanja and switches to English; in turn 6, he begins with Bemba and switches to English, and in turn 7, he starts with English, then uses Nyanja, and ends with Bemba.

This approach disregards the conventional domains of language use that determine which language should be used in a specific social context. The priority is to create meaningful messages rather than strictly adhere to linguistic boundaries between languages and their domains of use.

4.3 Fragmentation of linguistic structures

The findings in Table 1 also demonstrate that the speakers use chunks of language in the form of complete words, phrases, or sentences from different languages, combining them to create a meaningful stretch of language. This suggests that the seamlessness of linguistic structures assumed to belong to a rigid language system is evident in the way chunks of language forms drawn from different languages are used.

Additionally, we observed that the breakdown of linguistic boundaries is also apparent at the level of morphemes from one language combining with lexemes from another. Contrary to the common belief that speakers in language mixing contexts use actual words as code switches from one language and combine them with similar forms from another language to convey meaning, the study shows that this is not always the case. Speakers may also incorporate bound morphemes from different languages as fragments, which they combine with lexemes from other languages, particularly English, to convey meaning. An example of this is seen in the plural formation in Lusaka urban discourses, as depicted in the following extracts from different sets of data taken from Barbershops and Salons (Table 2).

NB: In the data below, the grammatical forms for number are underlined in both instances and the English words are in bold for ease of reference and analysis.

Table 2: Extracts illustrating plural marking using bits and pieces from different sources

	Sentence	Meaning of the plural form

1.	*Ma**farmers*** are not being given a priority by the government	*ma* - plural marker in urban Bemba and urban Nyanja, and *–s* for number in English =farmers
2.	*Ama**dresses*** *nayanina* **because** *ya* **demand** *ku ma-customer-s.*	The price of dresses has gone up because of high demand from customers' (where *ma* and *ba* are being used for number (plural) and *–s* in English).
3.	*Ma**ministers*** *bakudya ndlama zatu.*	Ministers are wasting our resources
4.	*Ma**coffins*** 'coffins', *ma**ton**s, ma**allowances***	-Macoffins 'coffins' -Matons 'tons' -Ma-allowances 'allowances'
5.	*Umuntu… mu ma***cells**.	'a person in prison cells'
6.	*Mu* Uniturtle *muli **ma*****coffin**.	'There are nice coffins in Uniturtle'

The data in Table 2 shows that speakers have on their disposal lexemes from English and bound morphemes or class 6 Bantu nominal prefixes drawn from Bemba e.g. 'ama'- and Nyanja 'ma'- (which attach to words referring to things). The speakers are using the English lexemes as radicals or roots in the same manner that they would do with those that are originally Bantu. However, unlike in situations where the 'loanwords' would have their structure adapted to suit that of Bantu languages, they retain their English structure as in sentences 1 to 6 in Table 2. Speakers then attach bound morphemes such as 'ama'- and 'ma'- to the English lexemes in their plural forms e.g. *ministers* for *ama-ministers*.

The bound morphemes to mark number (plural) are attached at the word-initial position, unlike the in case of English where this is attached at the word-final position. However, the English plural form –s would either be maintained like in 5 'ma-cells' in which case, the plural form -*s* is either rendered meaningless or hardened to become part of the lexeme (root) as it cannot be analysed independently as a morpheme. The loss of meaning of the English plural form *–s* is evident in 6 in the word: 'macoffin' for coffins in which the missing plural form *–s* has no bearing on the meaning being expressed. As stated, both plural forms of a noun in the different languages involved are used, for example, the prefix *ma-* from urban Nyanja and Bemba is attached at the beginning of the word *farmer* and *–s* (with the same meaning) is also attached to it in order to have *ma-farmers* 'famers' (cf. Mambwe, 2014).

Note also that there is a shift in the manner in which the prefix *ma-* has been used; in that, it is

ordinarily attached to nouns that denote things and not persons in Bemba and Nyanja as the case is in the word *farmer*, a derived noun. This notwithstanding, the grammatical function, that is, of expressing number is still maintained. This form is consistent in (2), (3), (4), (5) and (6) above. It is from such examples that Chisanga (2002) has referred to it as 'natural harmonization' of local 'languages' in urban Lusaka involving urban Nyanja and Bemba whose grammatical rules are crystalizing into a harmonized grammatical system. However, the examples highlighted in (1) to (6) above show that such harmonization is not restricted to urban Bemba and Nyanja but also includes English.

The data also shows that speakers can choose to use one plural morpheme, for instance, *ma-minister* 'ministers' which is consistent with plural formation in Bantu languages, to mean the same thing as *ministers* or they could combine the two morphemes from the two different grammatical systems with the same meaning as in ***ma****-minister-****s*** 'ministers' where *ma-* and *-s* are both indicating number or simply, one might use the English only lexeme with its word form *ministers* depending on context.

5. Conclusion

The study indicates that speakers utilize elements of language as tools to create new linguistic forms, without strictly adhering to the grammatical rules of the original languages. In informal face-to-face conversations in urban Lusaka, speakers blur traditional linguistic boundaries by deploying a diverse range of language expressions. The paper illustrates how speakers draw from this varied repertoire and merge them. It suggests the need for further research on urban language practices that challenge conventional understandings of languages, particularly in multilingual and urban areas of Africa.

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