

SOCIAL NETWORKS AMONG MAKERERE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN UGANDA:  
RECONSIDERING THE ANALYSIS OF COMMUNITY, VARIATION AND STYLE IN  
URBAN KAMPALA

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While social network analysis (SNA), as developed and applied by Milroy (1985) in the famous Belfast study (cf. also Marshall 2004), constitutes a fruitful approach in order to understand the dynamic ties among speakers in interaction and serves as a social model to depict innovation processes in linguistic practice, it also opens up new discussion in regard to its applicability in urban African settings, where speakers reveal multilingual and metrolingual repertoires as reflections of surrounding linguistic superdiversity. Especially young speakers all across the continent are increasingly influenced by global phenomena such as US-American hip hop, Latin American *telenovelas*, ‘new spaces of performance’ in form of computer-mediated communication on Facebook, YouTube and Whatsapp as well as by glocalizing styles that emerge among local rappers, radio commentators and others leaders of linguistic change. Social networks are thus much more complex and multi-faceted in contemporary urban landscapes than in more homogenous rural settings.

The present paper aims to present examples from Makerere English, a new emerging style among Ugandan educational elites who come to study at MUK, Kampala, whereby they actually originate from all parts of the country. Makerere English, first mentioned by Namyalo (p.c. 2014), and also Storch (p.c. 2012), can be considered an innovative variety of English which makes use of semantic manipulations that are innovated and spread within and across students’ hostels and the university landscape. It includes terms such as *booked* (meaning ‘to be engaged’), *paper* (‘money’), *waragi* (‘plain tea without food as a side-dish’; referring to the banana spirit *Waragi*), *transport* (‘a girl’s legs’) as well as *come tomorrows* (‘employees in the MUK administration offices’). By providing linguistic examples and discussing first insights into students’ networks, the question will be addressed whether –or which– answers SNA can provide the researcher with in terms of innovation processes in urban language. Moreover, the paper seeks to mention apparent problems, which SNA as a theoretic approach may not overcome. Other techniques which seem to be necessarily applied in order to fully grasp socially triggered variation in urban settings include more ethnographic approaches as suggested by Mendoza-Denton (2008), Paris (2011), Buchholtz (2011) (taking gender(ization), ethnicity and multimodal means of differentiation into account) and the focus on ‘style’ as the third wave in the study of variation (Eckert 2012, based on Eckert 2000).

The paper raises the question how these approaches can be possibly combined in order to understand urban variation (among predominantly young speakers) more as a dynamic, multimodal semiotic process that equally affects speakers’ networks, new concepts of community (and practices), matters of style – and how variation thus has to be seen as a reflection of global fluidity that requires new merging models of description.

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