WHOSE AUTOBIOGRAPHY? A LOOK AT THE UNLOST

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> Sie, die Sprache, blieb unverloren, ja, trotz allem.
> [This thing, language, remained unlost, yes, in spite of everything.]
> Paul Celan, 1958

1. A VISION. LINGUISTICS AS A WHALE. As a critique on the discipline, contributions to the colonial history of linguistics and to postcolonial linguistics were written in a way that treated linguistics as an agentive, autonomous subject: linguistics did certain things, made and unmade, constructed and erased. Consider, as one example among many, Joseph J. Errington's introductory remarks on his *Linguistics in a Colonial World* (2008:viii): 'Knowingly or not, willingly or not, colonial linguistics carried out projects of physical and symbolic violence, some of them counting clearly as […] unspeakable evils'.

Here and elsewhere, the discipline acts and behaves like those who get disciplined into it, work in it and write about, or for it: a whale that swallows prophets. And as time passes and the whale swims here and there, it becomes the topic of writing. And as in much older visions of what happens in the interior of whales, this writing takes place within — mostly within: who else but linguists (and historians of course) would write on the history of linguistics - and tells stories and narrates history from the perspective of those who have for a long time been internalized by it. And therefore, writing about disciplinary history tends to resemble autobiographic writing: one identifies with the discipline, in a way.

FIGURE 1. Whale with coins inside.

[1] I am grateful to the editors of this journal for the inspiration, to the participants of the workshop on the colonial autobiography of linguistics (Cape Town 2018), in particular to Ana Deumert and Ingo Warnke, and to Chris Bongartz, Angi Mietzner and Nico Nassenstein for all the ideas. I am grateful to an anonymous peer reviewer for revolutionizing the genre.

Thinking about this for a moment, one might want to conclude that there is a strong and positive affirmation of linguistics among its experts. Being a linguist, one studies that what creates relationships between people, what constructs sociability, makes worlds: language. Yet, linguistics is a field where experts and their subjects as well as language itself all undergo processes of alienation and commodification in complex ways. This is explored in the following essay.

2. WHERE TO START? This is a difficult question. For the disciplinary and the canonic do have their certain places and forms. This also holds true for the ways in which memories are stored and life stories are told: one does not simply have an autobiography, because one has to first consider the form in which it might be appropriately presented, and one has to think about what is in it and what not. We do not tell things the way they are, but the way we wish they were, I assume. And some things remain unremembered, left behind as a whole great wealth for men to come. The ideal of this is clear: the autobiography sustains an image one wishes to show to others, to the outside world. It is a gift, a memory shared, as an act of hospitality, a gesture of appreciation. There has been a life that might serve as a lesson to others, experiences from which we can learn, perhaps.

Because of its particular way of being in the world, linguistics (unlike rhetoric, for example) inevitably writes its autobiography as a COLONIAL autobiography. The word 'colonial' thereby means different things. In complex ways, it refers to history, thought, power (over bodies and words), space, class, race, and time. Linguistics cannot exist without working with the concept of difference. It needs to construct otherness, THAT-WHAT-IS-NOT-THE-SELF: in order to describe anything as fundamental as a word, we need the safety of our own language (which is there, we claim) in order to be able to describe the other language. Of course, otherness does not even need to come from elsewhere. The idea that language is something that it closed, THAT HAS ITS OWN WORDS, already gives way to pointing at that what is the other. Thinking about poems of Paul Celan—in particular *Sprachgitter* and *Tübingen, Jänner*—Anne Carson (1999:134) reflects about the words in these texts that are not easy to know, or to understand. 'Why are neologisms disturbing?', she writes. 'If we cannot construe them at all, we call them mad. If we can construe them, we raise troubling questions about our own linguistic mastery. We say "coinages" because they disrupt the economic equilibrium of words and things that we had prided ourselves on maintaining'.

FIGURE 2. Space for neologisms.

We cannot even work with language as something that is constantly disrupting itself, that is varied, complex, fluid, et cetera. No 'translanguaging' without 'language'; we seem to want these boundaries. Being so much forced into an epistemic framework that ultimately is rewriting its own coloniality ad infinitum, linguistics presents its autobiography as a narration of RESULTS. Memory-making in linguistics differs from telling a life story in diaries and fieldwork notebooks. Michael Taussig (2011:5) notes that in notes, 'chance determines (what an odd phrase) what goes into the collection, and chance determines how it is used'. Notebooks therefore just get filled, somehow. Writing text and collecting the notes is what counts, not so much the composition of the text—therefore, Taussig suggests, a fieldwork notebook resembles a fetish: 'What is meant to be a mere instrument or a tool, a mere notebook, ends up being an end in itself'.

It is important to make this clear, because we need to be aware that the autobiography of linguistics is something else than what can be found in a collection of field notebooks; which I first thought were perfect sources for retrieving autobiographic information; but they are not. The autobiography of linguistics tells a different kind of story: it is about results, that is about how things started, how something was unknown first and got discovered then, language families made existent, space, structure and time filled with meaning, and language being made and unmade (into translanguaging, if you want). This is a story that has a beginning and an end, a tale with a purpose. But where will we find it?

I do not think that textbooks dedicated to the history of linguistics will offer any autobiography; this is something else again. Thinking of the autobiography within the

boundaries of linguistics as an institution, the first thing that comes to my mind is the festschrift. This conservative genre conserves much: there is usually a short biography of the person to whom the volume is dedicated, and the selection of contributors and the topics of the texts illustrate the form and size of the network in which the honored person operated or operates. Another likewise conserving genre is the commemorative volume, which is structured in similar ways. An example that has a very promising title is this one: *The Complete Linguist* (Traill et al. 1995). Here, we may think, everything that was part of the professional life of Patrick Dickens as a linguist is somehow reflected, mentioned, present:

The Complete Linguist: Papers in Memory of Patrick J. Dickens (1953–1992)

CONTENTS: Megan Biesele: Patrick John Dickens — 1953–1992. APPLIED H. Russell Bernard / George Ngong Mbeh / W. Penn Handwerker: The Tone Problem. Megan Biesele: Patrick Dickens's Ju|'hoan Linguistics Work – Educational and Political Implications. Melissa Heckler: The Whole Village Classroom – a Portrait of a Linguist and a People. ORAL LITERATURE: Wilhelm J.G. Möhlig: The Architecture of Bantu Narratives – an Interdisciplinary Matter Analysis of a Dciriku Text. Sigrid Schmidt: Representatives of Evil in Khoisan Folktales. PHONOLOGY: Richard Bailey: Issues in the Phonology and Orthography of Chopi (ciCopi S 61). Toni Borowsky: Hausa Plurals and Optimality. G. Tucker Childs: Tone and Accent in Atlantic. Robert K. Herbert: Prenasalized Consonants and Dahl's Law – Questions of Representation and Subclass. J.A. Louw: Xhosa Tone. MORPHOLOGY: J.S.M. Khumalo: CV Templates in Zulu Morphology – a Multilinear Approach. Andrew van der Spuy: Morphological Case-Marking in Zulu. Susan M. Suzman: The Discourse Origin of Agreement in Zulu. SYNTAX: Wilfrid H.G. Haacke: Instances of Incorporation and Compounding in Khoekhoegowab (Nama/Damara). Mark Sebba: Some Remarks on Ju|'hoan Serial Verbs. Thomas Widlok: The "Irrealis" at Work in Hai||om. SEMANTICS: Sabine Neumann: Static Spatial Relations in SheNgologa (SheKgalagadi). SOCIOLINGUISTICS: Tore Janson: The Status, History and Future of Sekgalagadi. Gabriele Sommer / Rainer Vossen: Linguistic Variation in Siyeyi. PHILOLOGY: Mary C. Bill: Berthoud's Leçons de Sigwamba (1883) – the First Tsonga Grammar. Anthony Traill: Interpreting |Xam Phonology: the Need for Typological Cleansing.

And indeed, the carefully edited volume offers much in this respect. Yet, one might conclude that Patrick Dickens never left his office, or home, never spoke to anybody, never befriended anybody but his colleagues. Like any other such book, *The Complete Linguist* excludes those who are not academic linguists but experts of a different kind: knowledgeable people who have contributed greatly, I assume, to this book and to Dickens' career, and to the careers of the authors of the various chapters of the book. They are called informants by

some, assistants, language consultants, team members or simply speakers by others. Never colleagues of course, and never linguists. And yet ...: this is not meant to suggest that those who study the languages of other people (African languages) are not aware of the tremendous contribution by the speakers.

But they are missing. The speakers/informants do not form part of the autobiography of linguistics. They do not have a festschrift. There is no festschrift and no gedenkschrift dedicated to a particular speaker. If speakers receive books, then these books might be collections of folktales, primers, translations of world literature; education materials in other words, often Eurocentric and of symbolic meaning in the sense of a contribution to some kind of development.

What an irony this is: those whose presences are strongly felt in these grammars and dictionaries (etc.), and without whose contributions such work would never have been of relevance, and not possible at the same time of course, do not form part of the historiography of linguistics, it seems.

Of course, there are exceptions: we may find personal autobiographical texts (e.g. Dixon's *I am a Linguist* 2010) where reference of the informant is made. But this is rare. Moreover, such texts are usually about the life of the linguist, and how the speakers became part of it (for some time), and not about the lives of others and how the linguist suddenly appeared in these lives (for some time).

Of course, there are other, much older sources as well, where the life stories of informants do get told. Koelle's *Polyglotta Africana* (1854) is a good example, which contains biographic sketches of the recaptives he worked with during his stay in Freetown. Other abolitionist texts offer comparable information; the lives of those whom these missionaries set out to save or to make better were central to the narrative told in early linguistic work.

Yet, this does not even seem to be the point.

I find it hard to think of other places where the autobiography of my discipline might be found. I have little else to offer but to return to the festschrift and the memorial volume. Perhaps the handbook too. Wherever I turn: not complete. No complete linguist. Linguists strapped of their social ties, strange nerdy people who do not seem to share anything, have no desires, sexualities, fears, homes, strangenesses, samenesses, real lives. Because the other is missing: the other person one needs to talk to in order to be able to understand a thing so fundamentally other as the other language. This is the other reason why the autobiography of linguistics is colonial: it bases on the construction of difference, and yet excludes the other; seems to erase the other from memory.

3. HOSPITALITY. I do not mean to say that linguists – who are, at least, responsible for the autobiography of linguistics – do not know about this. We know the people with whom we have discussed language, produced data, spent time. We remember each other, stay in contact. The erasure is contextual; a matter of the medium, the genre, and disciplinary canonic knowledge. There are also apocryphal texts, which are different, and where erasure of the other is not the point. This is where we can be hospitable to the other, embrace otherness, and make different memories.

Anne Carson (1999:13) makes an interesting comment on the apocryphal. Before poets could be paid and skillfully composed language had its price, there was the concept and practice of XENIA:

> Take for example the mode of gift exchange that the ancient Greek call ξενια (*xenia*). Usually translated 'hospitality' or 'guest-friendship' or 'ritualized friendship', the institution of *xenia* pervades the socioeconomic interactions of the Homeric, archaic and classical periods. Gabriel Herman defines *xenia* as 'a bond of solidarity manifesting itself in an exchange of goods and services between individuals originating from separate social units'.

Gifts of poetry, Carson writes, were exchanged for gifts of livelihood by people who know a mutual and ritual connection: 'We can only imagine its delicate internal workings' (1999:15). Money changed all this. Using Marx, Carson analyses the introduction of money into this system of connectedness of different people as 'the externalization of all capacities of humanity' (ibid.). Money alienates, Marx said. 'Marx believed that money makes the objects we use into alien things and makes the people with whom we exchange them into alien people. [...] Money becomes the *Other*' (ibid.:17).

A commodity differs from the object (that it previously was) by being a quantity of value: 'In commodification its natural properties are extinguished. Extinguished also is its power to connect the people who give and receive it: they become like commodities themselves, fragments of value waiting for price and sale. They take on 'commodity form.' [...] Commodity form is not a simple state of mind. It fragments and dehumanizes human being. It causes a person to assume a 'double character' wherein his natural properties are disjunct from his economic value, his private from his public self' (ibid.:18 f.).

Language, in linguistic disciplinary practice, is paid for. The creation of the informant involved the introduction of money into an exchange of two people originating of two separate social units. The linguist has a project. The project has funding, and the funds are used for the production of data. In projects, informants are needed. Not anybody can be an informant. An informant needs to be knowledgeable in the language, has to be a good networker—know many people and have access to them (like elders, local authorities, etc.), and has to speak clearly. An informant, I was told during my first semesters, needs teeth so that we can hear consonant qualities very well.[2]

An informant is a commodity, we may conclude with Anne Carson. Like a poet who is paid not given, the informant is alienated from that other person in the connection (aristocrat and linguist, respectively). Through the ways in which the informant-poet is selected, measured and paid, the goods that he supplies, are commodified as well. The supplied goods are, of course, language.

Not money, but language. Carson mentions that Marx has not seen language as being like money, but has suggested an alternate model, in which money is like TRANSLATED LANGUAGE: 'Ideas which have first to be translated out of their mother tongue into a foreign

[2] Last year, I went to the Wild Coast and found dentures by the sea. I still wonder how they got there. Did they fall out of somebody's mouth, and is this person not a good informant anymore?

language in order to circulate, in order to become exchangeable, offer a somewhat better analogy. So the analogy lies not in language but in the foreign quality of strangeness of language' (Marx 1973:80, cited in Carson 1999:28). Strangeness—FREMDHEIT in German—is worth exploring a bit more here. Otherness and strangeness, I have suggested before, are among the prerequisites of linguistic research. The first thing that comes to my mind here is language that is in need of translation in order to be made sense of, to be analyzable and researchable. The informant's language, in other words. But strangeness can also be turned onto oneself, Carson writes. Citing an oft-quoted speech by Paul Celan, Carson writes that after having survived the holocaust, Celan used language as if he was translating; he describes his language with the word *unverloren*—unlost.

We are, in other words, not safe in our roles as experts, PIs, project conductors, et cetera. Language may be unlost, like those who have spoken it to us are unlost. And this we know of course, and of course we speak about it. Not in the grammars and festschrifts we prepare, but elsewhere. Because we know about these erasures and where and when they take place, there is always also language that is social action, some messages quickly exchanged during an academic talk, disciplinary critique, embodiment, acknowledgement of the other within a more balanced relationship. In other words, there are other genres, of other spaces: more liminal and less institutional, where the autobiography of linguistics is also made. I want to think of LIMINAL spaces because I want to look for spaces where it is possible to tell of a disciplinary autobiography that ALSO is about the colonially founded relationship between alienated and commodified experts and speakers, theory-makers and data-makers.

4. SO LET US START WITH A BEACH. The beach is a strong metaphor. It is the where the sea ends and where the unlost is washed up: flotsam brings back what remains. The unlost with which we might deal here are the non-presences of the refugees, prisoners, travelers, informants to whom we owe translated language. Who are not given a festschrift or a memorial volume, but whom we can, in this different space, also speak of.

FIGURE 3. Littoral space.

The beach creates an interesting possibility: it is, Taussig (2006:97 ff.) writes, very much a fantasy, a repression of memories of experience. Therefore, we may just sit there, in this liminal space, where language is cheap if not free. Talk, gossip, chat. Apocryphal yet making us human. Of course, this is what we do during our leisure time, this is not academic writing. And yet ...: isn't leisurely spent time very often the context in which are most productive? Where empathy and critique happen? And isn't its outcome also some kind of oral history making? To me, it is. Also some kind of poetry: playful, inventive and rich in its subtext. Not orderly text, not a well-structured essay, but full of knowledge and presence.[3]

As stated in the beginning, experts tend to write and speak about disciplines – namely linguistics – as agentive and living, as huge and powerful creatures, and not as concepts, epistemes and rented office space. It is of relevance in this context that linguistics, and sub-disciplines such as African linguistics in particular, are conceptualized in expert writing not only as creatures, but as ageing creatures: once powerful and menacing, now old and feeble. Even though African linguistics (or, AFRIKANISTIK), to stay with this example, today is a small field with only few chairs and small numbers of students, it is portrayed as once having been very potent. Sara Pugach, in her volume on the colonial history of Afrikanistik in German-speaking Europe and beyond, argues that the discipline itself shaped the ways in which Africa could be constructed: 'What is significant is how *Afrikanistik* allowed Africa to be parceled out into discrete, easily definable categories that could then be hierarchically arranged' (2012:193). This, Pugach concludes, had lasting effects: 'From its origins on the mission field through its institutionalization in Germany and application in South Africa, Afrikanistik served to harden stereotypes and contribute to classificatory schemes that ultimately had a very destructive effect on Africans, even as its practitioners believed they were saving them' (2012:195).

Writing about Afrikanistik and its status after the first hundred years since its colonial beginnings, the linguist and Africanist Mechthild Reh portrays the discipline as potentially endangered; no longer the powerful beast of its portrayals as a colonial episteme and practice, but work that is no longer adequately supported by its institutions – universities, research labs – and no longer appropriately received by others:

> Kann ein Experte für europäische Fragen ohne europäische Sprach- und Kulturkenntnisse auskommen? Diese Frage klingt absurd, weil das 'natürlich nicht' so selbstverständlich ist. Doch wenn es sich um Afrika handelt, scheint sich weiterhin das Vorurteil zu halten, die Kenntnis afrikanischer Sprachen und der mit ihnen verbundenen Kulturen seien für Afrikaexperten – zumindest solcher aus dem politologischen Sektor – verzichtbar. Diese Ansicht ist um so bedauerlicher, wenn sie auch noch verbunden wird mit falschen und abwertenden Bemerkungen zur inhaltlichen Arbeit derjenigen, die sich mit diesem Bereich befassen, sowie mit impliziten Forderungen nach weiteren Kürzungen von deren ohnehin bereits unzureichender Ausstattung. (Reh 2003:251)

[3] How about looking for the autobiography of the discipline in form of a WhatsApp communication, or in a podcast from the beach?

> Can an expert of European studies get along without any knowledge of European languages and cultures? This question sounds absurd because the reply 'of course not' is self-evident. But when Africa is concerned, the preconception remains valid that the knowledge of African languages and of the cultures related to them is expendable for the experts of Africa – at least for those working on political science. This point of view is even more regrettable as it includes pejorative and false remarks on the work of those who work in this field, and when it involves requests for a further cut of its already insufficient infrastructure. [translation AS]

The trope keeps resurfacing. In its episodes after the colonial autobiography of linguistics, the story of its life is one of endangerment and disruption.[4] Biographers cast a fearful eye in the discipline's situation: if its merits are not to be valued any longer, what would become of it? A solution seems to be to produce milestones, volumes that contain canonic knowledge, visible evidence. And as discussions on the decolonization of academia and on postcolonial linguistics gain momentum, an increased demand for handbooks and comprehensive overview work appears to be felt. In the comparatively small field of African linguistics, the following work has been published or announced as forthcoming within a couple of months:

> AUGUSTINE AGWUELE and ADAMS BODOMO. (eds.) 2018. *The Routledge Handbook of African Linguistics*.
> TOM GÜLDEMANN. (ed.) 2018. *The Languages and Linguistics of Africa*.
> EKKEHARD WOLFF. (ed.) 2019. *The Cambridge Handbook of African Linguistics*.
> RAINER VOSSEN and GERRIT J. DIMMENDAAL. (eds.) forthcoming. *The Oxford Handbook of African Languages*.

At the liminal beach, there is time and space to read all this. At the beach, linguists can not only read what they should read, but also wear beach costumes. The linguist's body, the researcher's body: also unlost, never the topic of linguistic texts, never touched. The bodies of the speakers differ—they are, as Don Kulick (1995) observes, bodies that are described, shown and analysed. And their experts—linguists, for example—he continues, 'peddle polyandry, puberty houses, *baloma* conceptions, subincision, ghost marriage, ritual defloration, chiefly incest, homosexual insemination, and sleep crawling. Merchants of astonishment indeed' (Kulick 1995:3). But at the liminal space of the beach, in the bathing suit and on that heap of orthodoxy, the expert's body is equally visible. Perhaps this body becomes the subject of commodified hospitality there. Perhaps somebody offers a good time for some gift in return. And then, the linguist obtains erotic subjectivity that would inscribe itself into her or his reading at the liminal beach, perhaps even into her or his writing: like that of an informant-poet, maybe, who knows.

[4] However, disruption does not translate into a change of the genre. It remains a trope that is not moored on poetic form. 'Is stammering a waste of words? Yes and no', Anne Carson concludes her thoughts on the economy of the unlost.

And as we peddle our everyday triviality, sunburnt noses and ice cream-stained beach costumes, the aged and withered whale swims on. Linguistics, Ingo H. Warnke suggests, has aged indeed. Born 1820,[5] it has reached a stage in life where it might be called SPÄTLINGUISTIK 'late linguistics', he observes. And he asks whether some of its topics have been explored in such a depth by now that they are ready to be retired.[6] The withered whale, in other words, gets a bit disoriented and longs for shallow waters here and there. Beaches, Virginia Richter writes, are both bountiful and terrible:

> While beached whales used to signify bounty or spectacle, today they stand for an ecological disaster that is not fully understood. It may be man-made, the effect of sound pollution, but it has the impact of an inexplicable tragedy. For whales, the beach is a thanatotope: they come to the beach only to die, thus profoundly disturbing our vision of the beach as a site of regeneration. (Richter 2015:160 f.)

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[5] Through Wilhelm von Humboldt's lecture on June 29 on the *vergleichende Sprachstudium in Beziehung auf die verschiedenen Epochen der Sprachentwicklung*.

[6] Warnke (2019) calls this 'researched to exhaustion'.