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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.

Looking at language creativity of unintelligible speech, soliloquy and noise puts precisely this into focus: the performers' play with power, context and positioning, by challenging and even transcending pre-existing semiotic concepts and cultural scripts. In the following sections, I argue that this very transgression is the basis of making speech spiritually powerful and prone to changing reality. I first provide a brief discussion of what unintelligible, noisy language actually is and how it can be seen as tantamount to magical language, before offering examples of how noisy performance is constructed as spiritually powerful and transformative language. My examples largely come from the Jukun languages Hone and Jibe¹, with a strong focus on women's performances.

2. Language as obscure performance and as soliloquy

In language practices associated with marginality and subversion, not much of what might be deemed 'good and correct language' may left intact, and critique and transformation can be so profound, and so present, that such creative practices acquire a very prominent place in meta-discourse. While speakers perform their experiences of marginalization and of inequality, they hurl ruined order before our feet, leaving us to evaluate the outcome. At the same time, this can provide new or different frameworks of evaluation, whereby meta-discourses may focus on creative noise as deliberate unintelligibility. This might be the reason for frequent perceptions of some of these reflexive, performative practices as being disturbing and anti-social: 'Noise does not have to be loud', sound theorist Salomé Voegelin writes, 'but it has to be exclusive: excluding other sounds, creating in sound a bubble against sounds, destroying sonic signifiers and divorcing listening from sense material external to its noise' (Voegelin, 2010: 45).

This re-interpretation of sonic sense into non-sense is often correlated with bad taste and low class: it is a marker of trash aesthetics, but also of 'youth culture' as a culture of disenfranchised people, of marginalized and marginalizing language practices (Kuipers, 2007). Creative noise, albeit being transgressive and norm-challenging, also, and paradoxically so, stabilizes pre-existing cultural scripts referring to social hierarchy and inequalities. Hence, when the production of speech utterances, or other communicative events, does not result in a conversation, but in *noise*, there is a kind of gap between performance and context, or between expectations on the side of the audience and the ways in which the performer uses linguistic resources. However, this gap does not restrict participants from meaning making, but simply requires much more knowledge about referential context, about what is not there, is invisible, inaudible, or unreal. Unintelligibility here very much emerges from performance, the type of audience addressed by the performer – for example, an imagined or invisible audience – and the ways in which the performer is presented as being different from others present. One particular effect of obscurity in performance has been studied intensively in contexts of ritual unintelligibility, where speech predominantly aims at the construction of the ontological Other (Kuipers, 2007). As ways of speaking back and of performing counter-images of the Other as an overwhelming experience of power, the negation of sense in language has strong symbolic meaning itself, as an expression of subversion and reflection, for example.

Changing the perspective a bit and turning the gaze to the linguistic creativity in unintelligible speech performed as a soliloquy – speech that is both deliberately unintelligible and deliberately uninviting, and performance that doesn't signify hospitality, leaves us with the task of understanding the semiotics of noise in speech and of the noisy, unintelligible voice. The sound of a person effectively uttering to nobody, uttering strange and incomprehensible words can signify many things, in different contexts and to different people; besides encoding connotations of derogatory otherness, such a use of language can also be read as a manifestation of aloofness, something that emanates from a myth, bearing ideological meanings and ideas about the divine (Barthes, 1957). By essentialising that what is said so that the sheer voice – the mere sound of it – remains as the only phenomenon left of which to make sense, a tremendous range of interpretations of the semiotics of noise opens up.

Mladen Dolar argues that 'it is also that the voice itself, the scream is already an attempt at interpretation: the other can respond to the appeal or not [...], and the voice is something which tries to reach the other' (2012: 549). The creativity that lies in the performance of this outreach is utterly provocative: it puts the potential of speech to create sociability and communality into question and can be analyzed as extremely radical social critique, in the sense of a sonic guerilla strategy (Hollington et al., forthcoming). Regardless of the possibility of its semantic opacity in solipsistic performance, the voice always bears in it the potential to reach out to the other, as a response cry – in the sense of Erving Goffman (1978) – which never is mere self-talk, but always, at least mimetically, is geared at some kind of audience. And where the unintelligible voice does not reproduce socially or culturally scripted communicative behavior, unintelligibility, as the outcome of linguistic creativity and originality, has the potential to reach out in a way that a performer gains, through the other's evaluation, agency to an extent that reality can be transformed.

3. Unintelligibility as a means of coding transformation

In Nigeria's culturally and linguistically diverse northeast, the Jukun are claimed to form a coherent, albeit geographically scattered group: they are speakers of a number of closely related languages, and all of them trace their historical origins back to the empire of Kororofa, one of Africa's large pre-colonial political entities (Meek, 1931). Today, most Jukun communities are small and settle in rural areas, even though there are large urban centres as well, such as Wukari, where some of their

¹ Both spoken in northeastern Nigeria; Jukun is classified as a sub-entity of Benue-Congo (Dimmendaal and Storch, 2016).

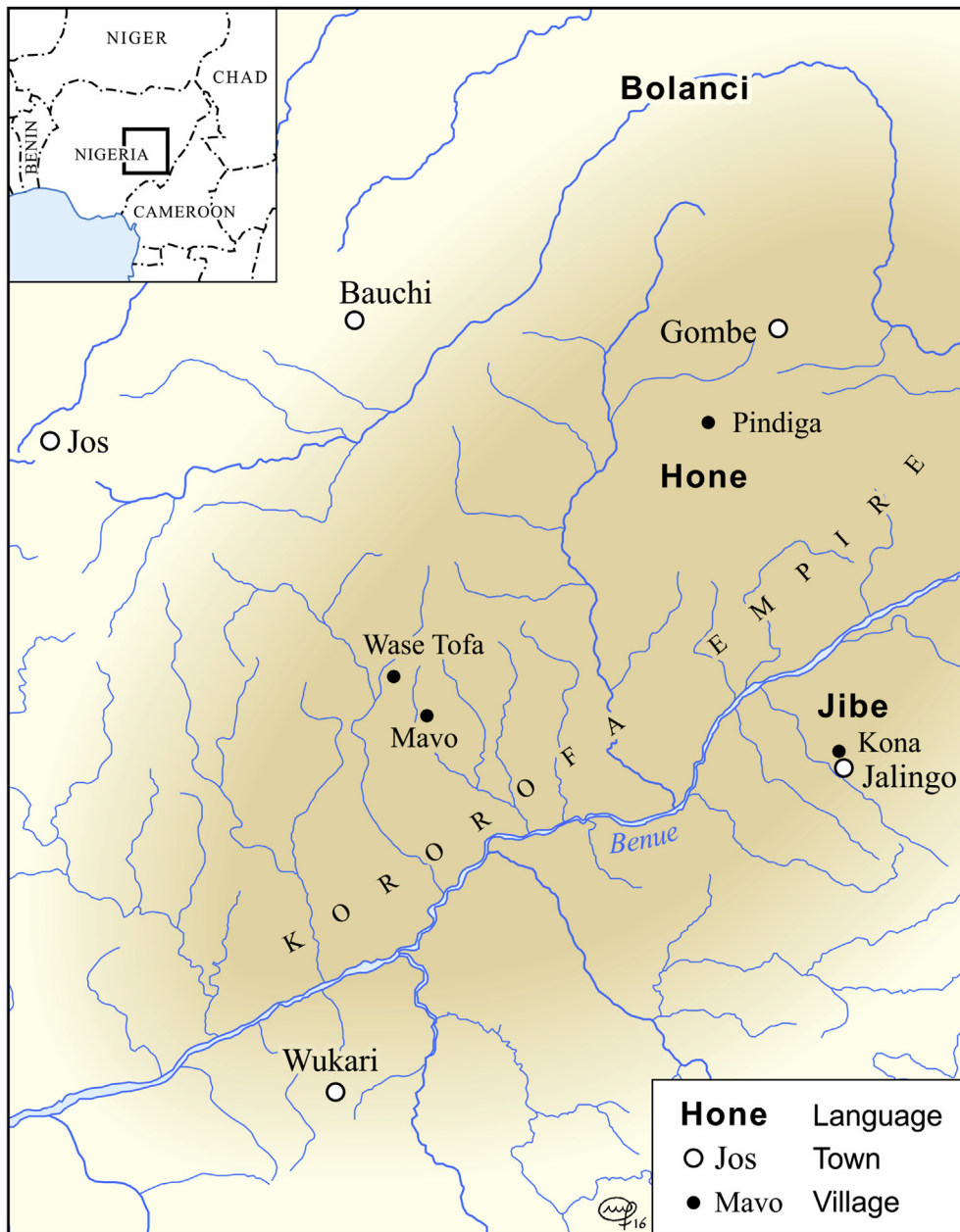


Fig. 1. Jukun in Nigeria.

politically influential leaders reside. My own research largely took place in the northern Jukun settlements, where I spent lengthy sojourns in the then small villages Pindiga, Kashere, Kasan Dare, Gwana, Kona, Wase Tofa, Mavo, and Abinsi from the mid-1990s onwards. Even though the study of linguistic structures had been the primary goal of my research, the study soon focused on sociolinguistic processes, linguistic creativity and metalinguistic epistemologies, in which I still continue to be interested (see Fig. 1).

Metalinguistic discourse in these Jukun communities tended to be normative in terms of treating unintelligible and so-lipsistic speech as equal to noise, disturbance and as a form of utterance that is outside the linguistic and social order. This normative discourse was presented, often in a very performative manner, as a commentary to the reactions of one's audience – an evaluation of the evaluation of one's performance. The carpenter Adamu Akara, an elderly inhabitant of the village of Pindiga, commented on his audience's behavior to his narrative on Pindiga's decline and marginalization in a very

characteristic way – that none of the young people present understood any Hone, one of the languages spoken by the Jukun, that they all were noisy and hostile:

- (1) ɔ-máá-zìn néy bə-táátáa lerè m̀̀-dáb séy-bè
 2SG-COND-speak voice 3PL-jump:RED vigorously CONS-beat thigh-POSS:3PL

If you speak they jump vigorously all the time and make gestures of rejection.

Experiences of marginalization frequently translated into regretful discourse about the younger generation's inability to communicate in the language ('loss'). Many older people, however, also continued to point out that Hone (and Jukun languages as a whole) has a sacred quality and is a powerful, agentive code that must not be shared needlessly with those who might use its power for harmful purposes. And even though places like Pindiga had always been linguistically diverse, with inhabitants often not sharing communicative repertoires, wives being married in from elsewhere, and salient social and cultural changes going on since colonial times (Harnischfeger et al., 2014; Kopytoff, 1987; Storch, 2011), notions of power, difference and otherness were important topics in the recorded meta-discourse.

A group of older women², who spoke, like men such as Adamu Akara, about the problems that arose out of the recent social changes in their village, expressed their concerns in quite different ways than Adamu. They did not so much emphasize the ongoing loss of social cohesion and the change of linguistic practices, but rather their troubles with spiritual aspects of this change. This particular perspective on change is based on the social construction of women and their position in community: in pre-Islamic Jukun societies (which prevailed until the 1930s, when Islamization, in the course of the colonial remaking of the regional polities, firmly took hold), women, who joined their husband's households in exogamous marriages, were considered 'guests' in their matrimonial homes. According to Meek (1931), marriages often did not last very long, and women married subsequently into several matrimonial homes, where they joined polygynous households and experienced different – often conflicting – family settings. Rivalry between co-wives, married women and their mothers-in-law, or between neighbours was a frequent problem that could always result in witchcraft accusations and in practices such as magic, poisoning and spirit possession (Harnischfeger, 2004; Dinslage and Storch, 2000; Storch, 2011, 2017).

Yet, there was also another aspect of being a 'guest', and if remaining foreign and thus marginalized in one's social environment as an adult: women had little or no access to shrines and other places where religious practices were performed. Being excluded from participation in the pre-Islamic *maam* religion, however, did not mean that women had no part in its performance; they had to play the role of the spectators of the men's shared secret, which consisted in hidden shrines and ancestral spirits. This helped to turn secret practices into a *public secret* – one about which excluded people know – and which only unfolds its power through not being fully hidden (Storch, 2011; Taussig, 1999). The spirits and sacred powers residing in hidden places could, in other words, only be conceptualized as dangerous and powerful if some part of their existence and energy was revealed and fear was created (or at least performed). Such concepts of secrecy and power were not only crucial to the construction of power and gender relations in small-scale societies (such as the community of a relatively small village such as Pindiga), but were also part of the entire orchestration of sacred kingship, which was the prevailing form of political organisation in this part of Africa (and beyond; Harnischfeger, 2014; Apter, 1992; Heusch and Luc de, 1997; Muller, 1981; Young, 1966).

Hone, from a woman's perspective, was not only a language that must be treated with care, as it was connected to ancestral spirits and their secret cults, to sacred kingdom and the men's powerful shrines, but also something they were not fully entitled to. Language, to woman as a 'guest', remained a loan that one as the borrower was not supposed to fully control, manipulate and play with. Yet, the women did precisely this. Remaining in their socially marginalized position even after Islamization, women had only little access to qur'anic schools and other institutions of religious learning (Storch, 2017). They consequently continued to focus on pre-Islamic religious practice, as well as on Islam as the religion they officially had embraced in spite of a certain lack of instruction, in their accounts and narratives on the village and the many changes happening to its inhabitants. The groups of elderly women who had agreed to tell me their stories spoke, like Adamu Akara, Hone when they talked in front of my microphone. Yet, it turned out that, after transcribing, there was a lot of what had made much sense in its aural form that would now, in its visual, reduced, written form, not provide any means for translation. My notebook documents the opacity resulting out of attempts to transcribe and translate: pages remain blank or are filled with brackets, question marks, and words that later were crossed out. Transcription and translation to me always had seemed to be

² These women joined several storytelling sessions arranged by Mohammed Hama Dada and his mother, Aya Amina, among others. Not everybody present at such events was introduced by name. I, therefore, refer to the entire group of people who came around at these gatherings as 'the women'. The names of individual storytellers are provided together with the relevant examples further below.

unsatisfactory as a means of grasping speech and meaning, and now they ceased to be of any help – transcribed words (how did I know these were words?), void of meaning, and sounds for which there was no sign.

A solution would have been to throw this out of the corpus. Suggestions by a teacher who had helped me considerably to arrange for and translate recordings, Mohammed Hamma Dada, suggested that perhaps, because all women who participated in the storytelling event lived in matrimonial homes that were different from those they grew up in, might have confused the different languages they had spoken in the course of their lives. It could be, my teacher further suggested, that they had even forgotten most of their former languages, with the exception of these incomprehensible bits in their stories. He assumed it was Bolanci, but then, later on, no Bolanci speaker had been able to make sense of the sequences in question.

Like other, clearly translatable parts of the texts, some of these sequences were performed as songs. This is a frequently employed stylistic element, but here it sounds a bit different: the women's voices mimic musical instruments, the call for prayer (*adhān*), the footsteps of a ghost – they seem to do something similar as the sound designers at a broadcasting studio: they furnish a stage on which the actual play will be performed, where the props are not tangible objects, but audible ones. But what kind of auditory simulacra are present in the stories presented by the elderly women in Pindiga? What did they need to reconstruct, and what triggered the need for the insertion of these pieces into their stories? There certainly are several semiotic layers here. First of all, mimicking sounds make speech complete, and they help to turn the attention to the individual voice, the talent of a specific storyteller, and the rhetoric shared by a community.

But then, they also belong to language, as a form of other speech that constantly interferes with 'normal, real' speech, like interfering waves on the radio. They appear suddenly, in the midst of a story on a hyena and a goat, or a mother and her child – in other words, in the midst of life, interrupting it. And these observations are crucial; the objectified sounds that are artfully placed in between 'regular words' are used as mimetic interpretations of spirits, which are frequently encountered in the environment the storytellers lived in.

(2) by Akunu:

bə-naa yènè nuyu wo iyi yaya

3PL-PROG [NONSENSE SYLLABLES]

They are [doing/saying] *yènè nuyu wo iyi yaya*.

(3) by Laraba Maina:

àwáywáy òkeeree nón rí-yak nèè?

alas [OPAQUE WORD] 2PL FUT-go where

Alas *òkeeree* where will you go?

In (2), a storyteller mockingly introduces her audience to the sounds made by ancestral spirits: 'it is done like: [some kind of gibberish]'. Example (3) begins with woeful sounds made by some spirits.

As people who had experienced various forms of marginalisation, the storytellers shared multiple experiences of otherness, strangeness, and insecurity. At the same time, living in a household together with a group of co-wives also required strategies of gaining superiority over others. The creation of agency through spirit possession rituals and witchcraft discourse is therefore an important, though not an explicit, motif in folktales. Here, objectified sounds that mimic spirits are used to turn experiences of strangeness and lack of agency into sonic scenery. The spirits themselves, however, are not there. Their representations remain artistic creations.

Interestingly, many of such unintelligible utterances can also be read as comments of female performers, being very different from those of the men (as in example 1). They deal with the narrator's own inability to be understood rather than by the failure of the audience to communicate in the relevant language. The women presented themselves as the Other, as being noisy and leading a life apart. Moreover, their commentaries were presented in diverse and original ways, sometimes in the midst of the storytelling event, sometimes while getting up and walking away. Some of the women would rather sing such commentaries, in a mocking fashion, while others just talked. Examples of their utterances are given in (4)–(6).

(4) by Akunu:

ko be go nar kɛn nɔ na nɔ zə ke nɔ aka mina ki mɔ

[NONSENSE SYLLABLES]

ábababababab úú áy kídɔŋ

blah blah blah wow oh god

(5) by Tauraru:

nón-nù-ku wóò ku-rí-yak máné lɔk? wuyi ara nèn wuyi wo

2PL-escort-O:3SG oh 3SG-FUT-go whose house [NONSENSE SYLLABLES]

You escort her, oh she will go to whose house? *Wuyi ara nen wuyi wo.*

(6) by Aya Amina:

dáyá wóò lá ilá dáyá biyà wá ìsa àwó là là

[NONSENSE SYLLABLES]

These utterances convey different context-related meanings. In (4), a bit of singing suddenly interrupts a story of a ghost and a girl, and after stopping herself again, the storyteller comments on the song as 'blah blah, oh my god'. Example (5) is the ending of a story about a girl getting married, which the storyteller concludes by asking: 'you escort her – oh, whose home is she going to?' before concluding with some kind of gibberish that can also be interpreted as pointing at the bride's anticipated inability to adapt to her new linguistic environment. In (6), this experience is referred to again – here, a woman mocks Qur'anic readings and prayer, as a practice she doesn't share with others in her matrimonial household (Storch, 2011).

Considering the social situation of these women and their means of expressing themselves, it makes some sense to put the sections that in isolation (as transcribed speech) are incomprehensible into the center and frame them as language being art. However, even though there are notions of the performers' self-reflection and context-related meaning that audiences could refer to in their attempts to semiotise these utterances, people still tended to emphasize another aspect of incomprehensible speech, namely its potential to obfuscate some real, deeper meaning. Even though it was maintained by almost everybody I interviewed after the storytelling events that the women performed – by speaking 'gibberish' – their experiences of marginalization in their matrimonial families, many people said that their speech was, perhaps precisely because of these women's frustrations, more powerful than comprehensible speech: it had magic qualities, was portrayed as prone to changing reality if only the storyteller wanted this. A few seemingly nonsensical words murmured during a performance, a song performed while turning away from the audience in order to look after household chores always held the possibility of actually being a curse, as part of witchcraft or the sound of a spirit speaking through a woman.

Here, divergent, unintelligible and solipsistic language unfolds considerable transformative power, and there is inter-personality in making such noisy comments, as a form of negation and critique. In his work on the agency of language in Ottoman Damascus, James Grehan (2004: 1006 ff.) observes that it is precisely this transgressive, often obfuscating speech which is identified as 'speaking as doing' – speech that has the potential to transform reality. In its power to transform, noisy language is as a concept very similar to speech as magic. In Grehan's study, it has the power to 'produce very real consequences ... Vituperative speech ... [could result in] sudden death, or in despair ..., bouts of depression, dementia, or prolonged illness and enervation' (Grehan, 2004: 1008). The act of speaking here is portrayed as being something more than communication, as being magic and tantamount to having effects – positive or negative – on bodies and minds. However, in Grehan's study, outrageous language and the magical tongue are still located in an interpersonal framework. They are no sonic

attacks (unlike the behavior of the young people Adamu Akara refers to in (1)), but rather part of conversations between people, and between humans and the spiritual. Hence, while unintelligible and solipsistic speech was quite uniformly deemed 'noise' in Jukun metalinguistic discourse, the semiotics of noise would be diverse: there was anti-social noise of misbehaving children, and there was the noise of the outsider, a spiritually risky noise that could have serious repercussions.

In today's digitally mediatized communication, there are comparable semiotics of noise at work. Ana Deumert more recently has transferred the concept of noise to disruption in digital communication. In the digital space, noise is deliberately introduced into a system that is based on specific norms, rules and epistemologies:

Noise, in other words, refers to unwanted auditory sensations within any given system – it is undomesticated and excessive; it is the sonic equivalent to filth, foul smells and dirty matter. [...] Noise – as a sonic experience – tends to be associated with 'the Other', a core figure in post-colonial theory, and certain types of bodies and spaces are commonly associated with noise: foreigners are 'noisy', African markets and bars are 'noisy', the working classes are 'noisy', genres of music – from jazz to hip hop – have been called 'noisy', political protests, demonstrations and crowds are 'noisy', and so forth. (Deumert, 2015: 12)

Used as a globalized resource, social media here allow for various ways of negation and transgression: 'In other words, noise produces disorder within a system, it transgresses, and, as such, it allows for transformation, for change, for revolution' (Deumert, 2015: 10).

There is a connection between the acoustic design of the transgressive female voice and the noisy post-colonial Other. As if there was a continuous motif in discourse, noise signifies and emerges out of otherness, and consequently needs to be silenced and negated. But an interesting twist has occurred. Like in Pindiga, noise in the digital space is not a disturbance we cannot help noticing, but a powerful concept. *Making noise* here is a highly agentive verb, referring to an ongoing process, which is a continuing reaction to and a consequence of suppression and subjugation.

4. Noise as reflexivity and objectification

I do not consider the performances of the women and men who had talked to me in Pindiga simply as some kind of 'data', and the examples provided in the previous section are not just part of an empirical study. Rather, I understand their comments and creative constructions of opacity as forms of metapragmatic discourse, and as a way of representing metalinguistic knowledge. There is, in other words, no real boundary and no relevant difference between (Western) academic linguistics and the performative meta-discourse in terms of the work both do in (socio)linguistic theory-making. What the women's play with opacity and 'nonsense' reveals is that there are complex concepts of linguistic subversion: language – Hone in this case – is something people like Adamu Akara may claim ownership of, and as a reaction to undesirable social change, may also keep away from people who are not entitled to it. Yet, women, who are denied such entitlement, make this language theirs, namely by bending, breaking, destroying it.

Because their practice is transgressive and decidedly violating norms (even outdated ones that stem from pre-Islamic contexts), there is something unsettling in their linguistic creativity, which forces us to turn to the fringes of intelligible language. It bears in itself the possibility of disruption and challenging of established power relations. At the same time, the unintelligible soliloquy in their stories is a decidedly reflexive and also – albeit often indirect – interpersonal performance. What is of particular interest, especially against the background of Baumann and Briggs' model of performance as a highly reflective form of producing meaning, is the notion of noise: talking gibberish is a speech event that, although it is meaningful to performers and audiences and has the potential to be positively indexicalized, is often conceptualized as noise. It is reflected upon as an utterance that is not speech but othered sounds – precisely what Voegelin (2010) determines the precondition for being able to define a sonic event as noise. Noising as self-alienation is therefore a powerful yet transparent practice.

What the women's performances also help to understand is that the reflexivity that lies in the act of turning voice into noise can also be used for the reverse. Sonic events thus can be turned into expressions of one's personal voice, made part of performance and part of languaging. Dolar (2012) points out that the differentiation between voice and noise is generally fragile, as it depends on cultural conceptualisations of sonic events. The contrast between Adamu Akara's idea of the noisy and those of the different women illustrate that conflicting concepts co-exist even within small communities, and that they are, like interpersonal noise, part of complex experiences and messy social interactions. The intermediacy of voice and noise allows for the creation of considerable distance between voice and speaker, providing a means to turn the voice into an object that is no longer tied to the body, whereby the objectification of the voice here differs from the treatment of voices in spirit possession (Werbner, 1973; Colleyn, 1999; Stoller, 1995; Storch, 2011). At the same time, sonic objects can be created out of experienced environment and memories, and these have the potential to gain momentum as events tantamount to voice (Chow, 2014: 112 f.).

Mimicking the Other is, therefore, not a simple practice. It is a practice that entails complex mediatization and reflexivity. And by treating sound as an object, as something that can be collected and utilized, this practice acquires a multi-layeredness that speech otherwise doesn't have: sounds are not simple disturbances, of course, and are neither part of a register, but are aural accompaniments of speech, in the sense of a theatrical scenery; a metapragmatic comment, an expression of hidden

knowledge and the possibility of subversion and control. The objects that are mimicked and at the same time used as tools for making the mimicking sounds are not real objects, but imitations of them. Auditory simulacra, as Chow (2014) calls them, are evoked by precisely the objects and people that are at the same time created, but they are not made by real objects and people, but by their copies. They are incorporeal, they don't have any real existence.

I find this perspective very liberating. First starting out with language as monolingual, ordered speech, we are, finally, invited to look at language as art, noise and copy. There is subjectivity in this language, authorship, and also community, in the sense of how voice and sounds are put together. And very clearly, the women of Pindiga who told their stories investigated context and historicized it by *placing* these incorporeal signs in text, as well as associating them with lived-in environment and remembered life.

The sound artist Cathy Lane in her work *The Hebrides Suite: Mapping the Islands in Sound* (2013, also 2011) reflects upon such means of sonic knowing: 'Can place be investigated through sound? Do past lives and past events leave sonic traces and how can we hear them in the present?', she asks.³ What we hear is a complex tapestry of sounds, voices, noises:

The voices start to crowd the countryside, bringing facts and memories to the rhythm of the lived and laboured place. They overlap and make clearer in that way how things fit together here in mobile and undulating rhythms, intense and peaceful. The sounds are intimate, not in a feeble way but with great intention, they are tender but not faint, a bit like the gusty breeze that starts it all off. (Voegelin, 2010: 22)

Voegelin, in her brilliant analysis of the piece, makes an important observation of how the artist teaches us not only about the history of now remote islands, but also about listening: 'listening', Voegelin writes, 'is a practice, a practice of hearing, inventing, imagining and knowing' (2010: 23). And such listening produces

sense that is lonely and isolated as is the island as well as the artist in her pursuit to build the place in a sonic composition. And from this lonely sense of experience, I go and visit the place and other places, and from this listening I find an aesthetic appreciation in relation to ideas of rhythm, category, genre, as well as in terms of political and social issues behind the heard rather than in front of it. (Voegelin, 2010: 23)

It seems that the actual transformative, sometimes unsettling power of sonic creativity – binding together voice, noise and sound – lies precisely here: in the truth found behind the heard, regardless of the performance itself. The practice of listening, as a counterpart of the soliloquy, and as lonely work is what the women in Pindiga relied on: this counter-reflection and telling forth the stories that they were not able to tell.

5. In conclusion

Noise is a semiotically complex phenomenon. It encodes Otherness and the transgression of societal norms, unintelligibility, voice, but also the acknowledgement of a reality beyond the world that can normally be perceived and controlled by people. Noisy, sometimes unintelligible speech has the potential to become indexicalized as powerful, especially in contexts where marginalization and othering saliently come into play. The voices coming from a Jukun-speaking community have illustrated that there are good reasons for emphasizing such an interaction between noise, marginality and creativity: language in those communities is conceptualized as ancestral and spiritually agentive, belonging to a specific place and its (male) inhabitants. Women, but also outcast people (Nojiri, 2000), have no right to talk to the ancestors, worship their shrines and control language in its entirety. Secret codes used by the men, spirit language and other forms of 'deep language' (which is very much associated with linguistic creativity) are not available to them. Using noise instead as a means of both mimetically performing the creativity and control over language as exerted by the men and expressing their own exclusion from such resources is an outlet for the critique of marginalized people.

As a means of gaining agency, creativity and originality in language consequently don't just target linguistic resources such as words and their meanings. They also make use of sonic phenomena that are usually considered to exist outside proper language: auditory simulacra, 'nonsensical' utterances, screams and so on. These offer considerable space for individual performances, but also for individual readings. Linguistic creativity takes on many forms, in different ways and different media. Here, the scream, like writing (Deumert, 2014) and playing, is a voice that tries to reach the other⁴, in order to convey something about the Self that otherwise seems to remain hidden. Listening to these voices and to other noises, and decoding what they aim to say is another part of linguistic creativity.

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³ <http://hebrides-suite.co.uk>.

⁴ Much better in French: *le cri, l'écrit ...*; I thank Penelope Allsobrook for reminding me about it.

Abbreviations

COND – conditional
 CONS – consecutive
 FUT – future
 o – object
 PL – plural
 POSS – possessive
 PROG – progressive
 RED – reduplication
 SG – singular

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