Chapter 1

Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages

SINFREE MAKONI and ALASTAIR PENNYCOOK

This book starts with the premise that languages, conceptions of languageness and the metalanguages used to describe them are inventions. By making this claim we are pointing to several interrelated concerns. First, languages were, in the most literal sense, invented, particularly as part of the Christian/colonial and nationalist projects in different parts of the globe. From Tsonga, Shona, Afrikaans, Runyakitara, chiNyanja in Africa (Harries, 1987; Chimhundu, 1992) or Fijian in the Pacific and Bahasa Malay in Indonesia (Heryanto, 1995) to Inkha in Latin America (Mannheim, 1991) and Hebrew (Kuzar, 2001) in Israel, the history of language inventions is long and well documented. Our interest here is in the naming and development of these languages, not so much as part of a diachronic linguistic focus on the invention of languages but rather as an attempt to propose an alternative, more ‘useful notion of history’ (Inoue, 2004: 1), a critical historiography that allows for multiple temporalities rather than a linear progression of change and development.

Second, a related interest here is not only in the invention and naming of specific languages but also in the broader processes and contexts of linguistic construction. From this point of view, all languages are social constructions, artifacts analogous to other constructions such as time: The rotation of the earth on its axis is a natural phenomenon, but the measurement of time is an artifact, a convention. When we argue that languages are constructed, we seek to go beyond the obvious point that linguistic criteria are not sufficient to establish the existence of a language (the old language/dialect boundary debates), in order to identify the important social and semiotic processes that lead to their construction. Social processes include, for example, the development of colonial and nationalist ideologies through literacy programs. Semiotic processes, following Irvine and Gal (2000) include the ways in which various language practices are made invisible (erasure), the projection of one level of differentiation onto another
(fractal recursivity) and the transformation of the sign relationship between linguistic features and the social images with which they are linked (iconization). These different social and semiotic processes interact in complex ways, so that nationalism, for example, generates iconization and fractal recursivity, which in turn generate more nationalism as part of an ideological process of homogenization. As Irvine and Gal (2000: 47) describe the process of ‘linguistic description’ of Senegalese languages by 19th century European linguists, ‘The ways these languages were identified, delimited, and mapped, the ways their relationships were interpreted, and even the ways they were described in grammars and dictionaries were all heavily influenced by an ideology of racial and national essences’.

Third, in a parallel process, a linguistic metalanguage – or as we prefer, given its broader coverage, a metadiscursive regime (Bauman & Briggs, 2003: 299) – was also invented. Metadiscursive regimes are representations of language which, together with material instantiations of actual occurring language, constitute forms of ‘social action, social facts and can function as agents in the exercise of social and political power’ (Jaffe, 1999: 15). Alongside or, rather, in direct relation with the invention of languages, therefore, an ideology of languages as separate and enumerable categories was also created. In one of its extreme manifestations, this nominalist view becomes a biological essentialist one in which languages are posited as having identities that correspond to species (Jaffe, 1999: 121; Pennycook, 2004). In its most common guise, this metadiscursive regime treats languages as countable institutions, a view reinforced by the existence of grammars and dictionaries (Joseph, 2004). The enumerability of language has to be understood as part of a broader project of ‘governmentality’, part of a Eurocentric culture which ‘relentlessly codified and observed everything about the non-European ... in so thorough and detailed a manner as to leave no item untouched, no culture unstudied’ ( Said, 1989: 6; cited in Thomas, 1994: 38).

In addition to the enumerability of languages, other aspects of these metadiscursive regimes include the widespread view of language in terms of what Grace (1981; 2005) calls autonomous texts. Autonomous texts are those which the speakers would require very limited amounts of contextual information to process, the prototypical mode being the written.

Fourth, these inventions have had very real and material effects. On the one hand, by advocating a view of languages as constructions, our position may be seen as a non-materialist view of language: languages do not exist as real entities in the world and neither do they emerge from or represent real environments; they are, by contrast, the inventions of social, cultural and political movements. On the other hand, we would argue for the very real material effects of linguistic inventions since they influence how
languages have been understood, how language policies have been constructed, how education has been pursued, how language tests have been developed and administered, and how people have come to identify with particular labels and at times even to die for them, as the violent nature of ethnic rivalry in Africa, South Asia and elsewhere amply demonstrates. Thus, while the entities around which battles are fought, tests are constructed and language policies are written are inventions, the effects are very real.

Finally, as part of any critical linguistic project, we need a project not only of critique but also one of reconstruction. We need therefore to reconstitute languages, a process that may involve both becoming aware of the history of the construction of languages, and rethinking the ways we look at languages and their relation to identity and geographical location, so that we move beyond notions of linguistic territorialization in which language is linked to a geographical space. Given the real and contemporary effects of these constructions, our intention is not to return to some Edenic pre-colonial era (although we are willing to look to the past to seek inspiration; see Canagarajah, this volume). Rather, our intention is to find ways of rethinking language in the contemporary world, a need arising from an acute awareness that there is all too often a lack of fit between ostensible language problems and the languages promoted as part of the solution (Povinelli, 2002: 26). The broad discursive field of indigeneity and language maintenance, for example, has emerged from a set of particular constructions of the indigenous and of languages that frequently cannot address the current problems faced by disadvantaged people in the contemporary world (Povinelli, 2002). We need to rethink language in order to provide alternative ways forward.

We are not, of course, the first to draw attention to some of these concerns. The invention of languages is reasonably well documented, the problematic assumptions underlying the metalanguage of linguistics have not escaped the attention of some linguists (e.g. Harris, 1980, 1981; Mühlhäusler, 1996; Yngve, 1996) and anthropological linguists have drawn our attention to the ways in which local language ideologies construct languages in particular ways (e.g. Blommaert, 1999b; Kroskrit, 2000). It is our contention, however, that the interrelationship between these elements, the implications for domains of applied linguistics, and the development of strategies for moving forward have not been adequately considered. It is one of the objectives of this book to outline how such strategies can take us beyond a framework only of critique. A central part of our argument, therefore, is that it is not enough to acknowledge that languages have been invented, or that linguistic metalanguage constructs the world in particular
ways. Rather, we need to understand the interrelationships among metadiscursive regimes, language inventions, colonial history, language effects, alternative ways of understanding language and strategies of disinvention and reconstitution.

Invention, Imagination, Co-Construction

Our use of the concept of invention locates this work within a particular tradition of historical and philosophical scholarship. In The Invention of Africa, Mudimbe (1988) critically examines the different Eurocentric categories that have been used to analyse Africa, dramatizing the distinction between an invented Europe and an invented Africa. Zeleza & Makoni (2006) enumerate seven origins of the name Africa, all of which are non-African in origin. The foreign nature of the origins of the term prompted African Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka (1976/87) to propose alternative names rooted in African languages, Abibirim and Abibiman from Akan, a language widely spoken in Ghana in West Africa. The term Africa was initially used in Roman times to refer exclusively to North Africa, an area roughly equivalent to modern Libya. Subsequently, Africa was then used to refer to the entire continent; more recently it tends to be restricted to sub-Saharan Africa and is divorced from its original usage.

The key issue is that the ways in which notions about Africa are understood have changed over the years, and that, in a very real sense, the idea of Africa is a European construct. The argument that Africa is a European idea is effectively articulated by Nyerere, as quoted by Mazrui (1967):

Thus, to use Nyerere’s rhetoric ‘Africans, all over the continent, without a word being spoken either from one individual to another or from one country to another, looked at the European, looked at one another, and knew that in relation to the European they were one. In relation to another continent, this continent was one: this was the logic of the situation’. (Mazrui, 1967: 47)

A similar point can be made for Aboriginal Australians’ identification with each other as Indigenous, or for the possibility of identifying as Indian (Krishnaswamy & Burde, 1998).

Crucially, however, it is not only the geographical and political space of Africa that was constructed through European eyes, but also African history, languages and traditions. As Terence Ranger (1983) argued in his influential essay, The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa, what came to count as tradition was often a retrospective image constructed in colonial interests. There are at least four distinct ways in which Africa is
constructed: Africa as biology, as image, as space, as memory. The invention of Africa and African tradition, furthermore, was part of the massive 19th century project of invention, with Europeans inventing both their own histories and those of the people they colonized (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; and see Pennycook, this volume).

The concept of invention is relevant to both colonial and contemporary post-colonial metropolitan contexts. Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983: 1) use the term to describe those traditions which on the one hand appear to be relatively old, but which ‘in reality are quite recent in origin’: ‘Novelty is no less novel for being able to dress easily as antiquity’ (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983: 3). The Scottish kilt, for example, which, as well as the Highland culture of which it is supposed to be an integral part, is often presented as if it has been part of Scots culture since time immemorial, is a relatively recent creation. In the 18th century, Gaelic, which is thought of as one of the defining features of Highland Scots, was referred to as Irish. The 19th Century Gothic style used for buildings such as the British Houses of Parliament was also part of the creation of an illusion of a long ‘factitious’ tradition: ‘A striking example is the deliberate choice of a Gothic style for the 19th century rebuilding of the British Parliament, and the equally deliberate decision after World War II to rebuild the parliamentary chamber on exactly the same plan’ (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983: 1–2)

A great deal of historical work has drawn attention to the common project of the invention of history (the processes by which we establish legitimacy, lineage and linkage by reference to a constructed past (see Hobsbawm, 1983, Ranger 1983, Wallerstein, 2000)). As Cohn (1996) and Wallerstein (2000) argue, a major aspect of the British colonial project in India was to turn Indian languages, culture and knowledge into objects of European knowledge, to invent an India not in Britain’s image, but in Britain’s ideal of what India should look like. This project of invention needs, therefore, to be seen not merely as part of European attempts to design the world in their own image, but rather as part of the process of constructing the history of others for them, which was a cornerstone of European governance and surveillance of the world. Although this process was perhaps most self-evident in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries in colonial times, it developed as a form of national-imaginary whose original focus was the European nation state.

It is this European national imagination that Ranger has in mind when he writes:

The 1870s, 1880s and 1890s were a time of a great flowering of European traditions – ecclesiastical, educational, military, republican and monar-
chical. They were also the time of the European rush into Africa. There were many complex connections between the two processes. (Ranger, 1983: 211)

As Ranger suggests for Africa, and Cohn (1983) for India, the invention of traditions became a crucial part of colonial rule as Europeans sought to justify their presence and redefined the colonized societies in new terms. According to Hardt and Negri:

British administrators had to write their own ‘Indian history’ to sustain and further the interests of colonial rule. The British had to historicize the Indian past in order to have access to it and to put it to work. The British creation of an Indian history, however, like the formation of the colonial state, could be achieved only by imposing European colonial logics and models of Indian reality. (Hardt & Negri, 2000: 126)

Invented traditions derive their strength from compulsory repetition, such as the wearing of wigs by British judges. It is important in this discussion of invented tradition to keep the notions of tradition and custom separate: ‘The object and characteristic of traditions, including invented ones, is invariance. Custom cannot afford to be invariant because even in traditional societies life is not so’ (Hobsbawm, 1983: 2). While custom is therefore a changing and dynamic space, tradition is all too often a retrospective construction of stasis, an invention of a prior way of being that is used to justify supposed historical continuity. Similarly, when we talk of the invention of languages, we are looking at the construction of linear histories that imply particular origins; we are not suggesting that language use itself is anything but dynamic and changing.

In questioning the invention of tradition, we should of course also be wary of casting notions of tradition aside. In African historiography it is not so much modernity that has been a source of controversy as the notion of tradition itself (Spear, 2003). Traditions have endured because (while creating the impression of timelessness) they have survived owing to an ongoing dialogical tension between social and historical realities. According to Vansina (1990), ‘tradition is a robust and enduring endogenous process which represents, contrary to ahistorical expectations, fundamental continuities which shape the futures of those who hold them’. In African historiography, it is not language per se that is of central importance, but discourse. Tradition is one type of discourse, with different traditions having different discourses through which their individual histories are articulated.

Our understanding of invention links closely with what Blommaert (1999a: 104) calls the ‘discovery attitude’, the defining aspect of which is
that, prior to colonization, the colonial territories were a blank slate on which Europeans had to map their categories. The categories that were created included names of ethnic groups, languages, and how they were to be described. The categories are of interest not only theoretically, but because of their impact on social life. Another concept related to invention is Said’s ‘being there’ (Said, 1985: 156–7). The very fact of having been present in Africa, in the Middle East, India or South-East Asia, irrespective of length of stay or nature of association, is deemed adequate to claim knowledge of the native languages and cultures. Everyone who had some knowledge could present this knowledge as ‘discovery’.

Missionaries, administrators and other colonial functionaries who wrote grammars and textbooks learnt their own versions of indigenous languages. The local languages that the missionaries and colonial administrators learnt were at times given special names by the colonized persons themselves. For example, in Zimbabwe, the variety of Shona spoken by the priests was referred to as chibaba – the language of the priest. These invented indigenous languages arose throughout the European empires and central to the claims being made is that the languages as they were described were products of the inadequate language skills of the missionary linguists. In other words, linguistic descriptions were what we might call interlinguistic descriptions based on European interlanguages (Fenton, 2004: 7).

There are substantial similarities between the notion of ‘invention’ and Anderson’s (1991) ‘imagined communities’: Both point to the ways in which nations are imagined and narrated into being, and both stress the role of language, literacy and social institutions in that process. While Ranger (2004) has suggested that Anderson’s use of ‘imagined’ may be preferable to his own use of ‘invented’, since it effectively captures the multidimensionality of the process of construction, we prefer to use what we see as the more dynamic, intentional and complex concerns that underlie the notion of invention. Thus, while Spear’s (2003) point is well made that the notion of invention runs the danger of downplaying the agency of the colonized, leaving us with an impression of a gullible and malleable populace, it is also equally (if not more) dangerous to exaggerate the agency of the colonized. Arguments about the agency of the colonized need to foreground the severe constraints within which that agency might have been exercised.

Unlike Anderson, furthermore, we regard both languages and nations as dialectically co-constructed, and thus concur with Joseph (2004) in his critique of the one-sidedness of Anderson’s formulation:
Anderson’s constructionist approach to nationalism is purchased at the price of an essentialist outlook on languages. It seems a bargain to the sociologist or political scientist, to whom it brings explanatory simplicity not to mention ease. But ... it is a false simplicity. National languages and identities arise in tandem, dialectically, if you like, in a complex process that ought to be our focus of interest and study. (Joseph, 2004: 124)

Important here too is Woolard’s argument that

‘the historicization of language ... had such profound political reverberations, specifically in relation to consciousness of nation and national belonging, at least two centuries earlier than the conventional dates given for the phenomena of historicism and nationalism on which Anderson depends. (Woolard, 2004: 58)

Thus, while Anderson’s notion of imagined community remains important here, it needs to be seen as both a dialectic process, with language and nation constructed together, and as located in a different time frame, with ways of thinking about time and language reframed in relation to nation.

Several important issues emerge here. First, the invention of tradition is about the creation of a past into which the present is inserted. Thus, these constructed histories are also about the constructed present. Secondly, a particular type of relationship between past and present is implied here, one characterized by linear development. Such a developmental view of history, which sees a continuous line of progress between the past and the present constitutes a very particular way of understanding time and change. We shall return later to discuss alternative and competing views of time and history that are equally plausible. Third, the process of invention was always one of co-construction. That is to say, the position from which others’ languages and histories were invented was not a preformed set of extant ideologies, but rather was produced in the process. Thus:

Even if the European national imaginary of colonial states were derived from European imagination of itself, European colonialists were more a work in progress than fully formed, multiple rather than singular, diverse rather than uniform, contradictory rather than consistent, and at times a reflection of the despotism which was produced under colonial rule. (Mamdani, 1996: 39)

European colonizers invented themselves and others in a reciprocal process.

Finally, then, it was not just colonized languages that were invented but
also the languages of the colonizers. The invention of languages such as French entailed forging relations between language, citizenship and patriotism, and the military and national service were crucial in that respect. A French Army manual in the late 1800s, for example, made these associations explicit by insisting that recruits be taught that:

(1) we call our mother tongue the tongue that is spoken by our parents, and in part, by our mothers (that which is) spoken also by our fellow citizens and by the persons who inhabit the same place as we do; (2) our mother tongue is French. (quoted in Weber, 1976: 311 cited from Jaffe, 1999: 84).

The First World War (1914–1918), with its large numbers of recruits and deaths, continued to reinforce these European associations between language and citizenship.

An important starting point for understanding the invention of and specific ways of imagining language is, therefore, within the broader context of colonial invention. Our position that languages are inventions is consistent with observations that many structures, systems and constructs such as tradition, history or ethnicity, which are often thought of as natural parts of society, are inventions of a very specific ideological apparatus. To claim authenticity for such constructs, therefore, is to become subject to very particular discourses of identity. That is to say, while lived contemporary practices may create an authenticity of being and identification with certain traditions, languages and ethnicities, the history behind both their construction and maintenance needs to be understood in terms of its contingent constructedness.

Inventing Languages and Constructing Ways of Thinking about Language

It was the metadiscursive regimes of European thought that produced the histories and the languages of the empire from the materials they found in the field. One of the great projects of European invention was Sir George Abraham Grierson’s massive linguistic Survey of India, completed in 1928. A central problem for Grierson, as with many other linguists, was to decide on the boundaries between languages and dialects. Dialects tended to be considered spoken forms, while languages were accorded their special status according to other criteria such as regional similarities, family trees or literary forms. One of the problems with this, however, was that while people had terms for their dialects – or at least terms for other people’s dialects (their own being considered the way one speaks) – they did not
have terms for these larger constructions, ‘languages’. As Grierson explained:

Few natives at the present day are able to comprehend the idea connoted by the words of a language. Dialects they know and understand. They separate them and distinguish them with a meticulous, hair-splitting subtlety, which to us seems unnecessary and absurd, but their minds are not trained to grasp the conception so familiar to us, of a general term embracing a number of interconnected dialects. (Grierson, 1907: 350)

Grierson makes several important moves here. He positions himself as able to perceive the reality of languages while local knowledge is dismissed as on the one hand an irrelevantly hair-splitting obsession with difference and on the other an inability to grasp the broader concept of languages. Having thus opened up a position in favour of a European understanding of superordinate languages, he is then able to explain why:

... nearly all the language-names have had to be invented by Europeans. Some of them, such as Bengali, Assamese, and the like, are founded on words which have received English citizenship, and are not real Indian words at all, while others, like ‘Hindostani’, ‘Bihari’, and so forth, are based on already existing Indian names of countries and nationalities. (Grierson, 1907: 350)

While it is interesting at one level to observe simply that the names for these new entities were invented, the point of greater significance is that these were not just new names for extant objects (languages pre-existed the naming), but rather the invention and naming of new objects. The naming performatively called the languages into being. As suggested above, this invention of Indian languages has to be seen in the context of the larger colonial archive of knowledge. The British, as Lelyveld (1993: 194) points out, ‘developed from their study of Indian languages not only practical advantage but an ideology of languages as separate, autonomous objects in the world, things that could be classified, arranged, and deployed as media of exchange’. This whole project was of course a cornerstone of the Orientalist construction of the colonial subject. Orientalism, suggests Ludden (1993: 261), ‘began with the acquisition of the languages needed to gain reliable information about India. Indian languages became a foundation for scientific knowledge of Indian tradition built from data transmitted to Europeans by native experts’.

At the heart of the problem here is the underlying ideology of countability and singularity, reinforced by assumptions of a singular, essentialized language-object situated and physically located in concepts of space
founded on a notion of territorialization. The idea of linguistic enumerability and singularity is based on the dual notions of both languages and speakers of those languages being amenable to counting. It has been widely attested that there is a massive disparity between the number of languages that linguists believe exist and the number of languages people report themselves as speaking. Ethnologue, the Christian language preservation society, for example, notes the disparity between the close to 7000 languages that exist in the world according to their ‘approach to listing and counting languages as though they were discrete, countable units’, and the 40,000 or so names for different languages that are in use. As they point out, ‘the definition of language one chooses depends on the purpose one has in identifying a language’ (Ethnologue, 2005: np).

Nevertheless, many linguists interested in preservation are content to deal in terms of enumerative strategies that on the one hand reduce significant sociolinguistic concerns to the level of arithmetic, and on the other overlook both the problematic history of the construction of such languages and the contemporary interests behind their enumeration:

Over 95% of the world’s spoken languages have fewer than one million native users, some 5000 have less than 100,000 speakers and more than 3000 languages have fewer than 1000 speakers. A quarter of the world’s spoken languages have fewer than 1000 users, and at least some 500 languages had in 1999 under a hundred speakers. (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2003: 32)

Mühlhäusler (2000: 358) views this position as a continuation of the tradition of segregational linguistics, which insists that ‘languages can be distinguished and named’. To abstract languages, to count them as discrete objects, and to count the speakers of such languages, is to reproduce a very particular enumerative strategy. Yet the enumeration of speakers of a language is founded on a ‘monolingual norm of speakerhood’ (Hill, 2002: 128), a paradoxical state of affairs given that many language counters are also proponents of multilingualism. At the heart of such language enumeration is the same census ideology that has been such a cornerstone of the colonial imaginary (Anderson, 1991; Appadurai, 1993; Leeman, 2004).

Discussing language use in Papua New Guinea, Romaine (1994) asks how we come to terms with the problem that speakers may claim to speak a different language when linguistically it may appear identical. She goes on to point out that the:

... very concept of discrete languages is probably a European cultural artifact fostered by procedures such as literacy and standardization.
Any attempt to count distinct languages will be an artifact of classificatory procedures rather than a reflection of communicative practices. (Romaine, 1994: 12)

If the notions of language that form the basis of language planning are artifacts of European thinking, language policies are therefore (albeit unintentionally) agents of the very values which they are seeking to challenge:

Like hygiene (the control of diseases often introduced or spread by colonization), ‘vagabondage’ and alcoholism, the language question belonged to those problems of largely European making whose relative importance lay in the fact that they legitimatized regulation from above. (Fabian, 1991: 82)

A census ideology founded on the enumerability of languages masks the differences in the way the objects have been conceptualized. For example, although there has been a language question focusing on mother tongues in the Indian census since 1881, the conceptualization of what was being counted has changed radically as the following illustrates (see Pattanayak, 2000: 40):

1881 the language spoken by the child from the cradle;
1891 the language spoken by the parents;
1901 the language of general use;
1921 the language spoken by the parents;
1961 the language spoken by the mother. If the mother is dead, then write the name of the language used in the household.

Although the notion of mother tongue has also been used in other parts of the world it has been conceptualized radically differently as the following census categories from Slovenia show.

1923 the language of thought;
1934 the language of the cultural circle;
1951 the language of day to day;
1961 the language of the household.

The advantage of the term ‘invention’ is that it points to specific contexts – as well as the specific agendas and conceptual beliefs – in which institutions, structures, language and languages are produced, regulated and constituted. One aspect of colonial governance, as Cohn (1996) points out, was relating the language of command and the command of language. Assuming on the one hand that European languages were identifiable, separable and countable entities, European colonial administrators sought,
on the other, to map this same belief onto the contexts they governed. This belief was later extended to include other languages such as sign languages (Branson & Miller, this volume).

The invention of other languages ties in closely with mythologies of origin. Thus an important dimension of understanding invention is to trace the ‘harmonies’ in the linguistic description of language—in particular, the ways in which the historiographies of speakers of those languages are written. Thus, there are connections between, for example, the various ways in which the linguistic descriptions of Hebrew are written and the histories of Jewish people are written (Kuzar, 2001). In southern Africa,

... the shying away from pidgin and Creole linguistics in discussing the genesis of Afrikaans has been an essential component of the invented community of Afrikaner culture and neo-social Darwinist explanations of the origins of Afrikaans which have dominated Afrikaans historical linguistics. (Brown, 1992: 78)

The linguistic analysis of the origins of Afrikaans corresponded with the social and political theories about the origins of the Afrikaners that they encouraged.

In Africa, after languages were decreed into existence, the first generation of linguists spent their energies writing grammars for their ‘own’ languages and dialects, a process that provided opportunities for turning ‘tribalized’ material into describable objects and granting them social and intellectual legitimacy (Chimhundu, 1992). The process of converting the ‘tribalized material’ also took place in other disciplines, such as ethnography, history, literatures. From the muddled mass of speech styles they saw around them, languages needed identification, codification and control: they needed to be invented: African languages were thus historically European scripts (Makoni, 1998a). The legacy of African languages as European scripts is still felt in the general tendency to regard the representations of languages as synonymous with the languages themselves.

Once the success of the European project of invention was established, other empires sought to emulate it: As Heryanto (1995; this volume) suggests in his discussion of the imposition of Bahasa Indonesia:

The newly acquired meanings of bahasa were derived from one or more European languages... At least in the two most widely spoken and influential languages in Indonesia (Malay and Javanese) there was no word for 'language' and no way of, and no need for, expressing its idea until the later part of the past century. (Heryanto, 1995: 28)
As he goes on to argue, the process of making bahasa ‘a generic, abstract, and universal category strips off people’s vernacular world views’ (Heryanto, 1995: 30). Indeed Heryanto argues that Bahasa Indonesia was introduced into language free communities.

Samarin (1996) makes a similar point when he suggests that Africa was ‘a continent without languages.’ This is not of course to suggest that Africans or Indonesians did not use language, but rather that languages as they came to be invented were not part of the linguascape:

Africans used language in a linguistic sense to communicate with each other, and we have learned that these are beautifully complex and awesomely elegant means of verbal expression, not the primitive jabberings that they were first taken to be. But they were not languages in the socio-cultural sense. There is little in our knowledge of Africa to suggest ethnolinguistic self consciousness. Thus we can say before literacy there were no languages. (Samarin: 1996: 390)

In speaking of ‘language free communities’ or a ‘continent without languages’ the point, to be sure, is not that these contexts involved any less language use, but rather that these language users did not speak ‘languages’. We need instead to view this through a different lens, not in terms of discrete items but rather in terms of stylistic inventories, stylistic commons, where people ostensibly from different ‘language backgrounds’ use language.

While many of these invented languages were projected onto their putative speakers as indigenous languages, they were often experienced as mixtures of local and foreign discourses. These constructed languages were administratively assigned to colonized populations as mother tongues and went on to form the basis of so-called mother tongue education and vernacular literacy. The constructed languages in such cases might have inhibited rather than facilitated literacy. When the constructed languages were introduced into local communities they had the effects of creating, and at times accentuating, social differences. Since the constructed languages could be acquired only through formal education, frequently coupled with Christianity, those who had acquired them tended to have a higher social status than those who were not exposed to them.

Many of the constructed languages were not only based on external norms like Fijian, but more importantly were written in terms of metalinguistic categories derived from other languages, a process that had consequences for the valuation of those languages (Rafael, 1988: 26). That analytical categories are translated from English into Yoruba, for example, does not change the nature of the problem since the translated terms have their origins in a language other than Yoruba (in most cases Latin). If
anything, the translation masks the analytical dependency of Yoruba on Latin via English, leading to a misguided conclusion that Yoruba as a linguistic system is equivalent to English. If the objective, as is the case in many language planning projects, is to make Yoruba as a language equivalent to English, then the intervention has to take place at an analytical level and must not be restricted to shifting the sociolinguistic status of Yoruba only, while retaining the use of analytical categories derived from languages other than Yoruba.

Rafael's (1988) study of the Spanish descriptions of Tagalog in the later 16th and early 17th centuries is another good example of this. Latin, as Anderson (1991) also notes, became a language bound up with notions of truth, legitimizing these language descriptions while also acting as both a means and ends for propagating faith.

As the paradigm of written language, Latin was a descriptive resource: an ideal icon, template, and source of analytical categories for written (mis)representations of Tagalog speech. Castilian mediated this theolinguistic hierarchy as the language of secular authority, used to frame discursively the ‘reduction’ of Tagalog to writing. (Errington, 2001: 22)

Within this hierarchy of languages, a written version of Tagalog based on Latin categories was then used for the propagation of religious materials. ‘Latin texts licensed descriptive deployment of Latin categories, grounding the division of linguistic descriptive labor in which written European vernaculars mediated between pagan tongues and sacred writ’ (Errington, 2001: 23).

Epistemologically, one of the key rhetorical moves of colonialism was to foster, then to mask, the artificiality of indigenous languages and so-called customary laws, presenting them as if they were a natural part of local contexts (Mamdani, 1996; Thomas, 1994). An analysis of the ways the indigenous languages were represented reflects a shift in understanding language from one predicated upon a belief that languages exist in and of themselves outside relations of power, to one in which languages and their descriptions are seen as ‘suffused with power relations’ (Thomas, 1994: 44). Lest this focus on colonial and Christian contexts suggests that our argument pertains only to colonial epochs, we extend it to postcolonial eras when we focus on the work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) (Pennycook & Makoni, 2005; Makoni & Meinhof, 2004), which can be regarded as a ‘postcolonial American successor to colonial era missionizing’ (Errington, 2001: 21). For the SIL there is a clear connection between linguistics and Christianity: Christian phonetician Pike, for example, saw phonemics as ‘a
control system blessed of God to preserve tribes from chaos' (quoted in Hvalkof & Aaby, 1981: 37).

The ‘writability’ (Errington, 2001: 19) or conversion of speech forms into writing and representations of languages such as Tagalog or Yoruba in metalinguistic terms more familiar to Europeans was conducted by Europeans as part of their diverse, and at times conflicting, colonial and Christian interests. By reformulating indigenous languages in terms consistent with their own beliefs and underwritten by comparative philology, the colonial regimes were able to interact through indigenous languages with the colonized in terms not of the choosing of the colonized, but that of the colonizers (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). Applying disinvention, by situating language within the total Christian and colonial contexts in a manner partially reminiscent of Fabian (1991), we aim to shed light on how these intellectual and political contexts contributed towards the emergence of specific conceptualizations of language, and how these in turn have shaped our understandings of diverse areas of sociolinguistics, from language planning and language rights to language loss and language maintenance.

Part of our argument, then, is that current approaches to diversity, multilingualism and so forth, all too often start with the enumerative strategy of counting languages and romanticizing a plurality based on these putative language counts. It is our contention that, while opening up questions of diversity with one hand, at the same time such strategies are also reproducing the tropes of colonial invention, overlooking the contested history of language inventions, and ignoring the ‘collateral damage’ (Grace, 2005: np) that their embedded notions of language may be perpetrating. By rendering diversity a quantitative question of language enumeration, such approaches continue to employ the census strategies of colonialism while missing the qualitative question of where diversity lies.

**Metadiscursive Regimes and Epistemic Violence**

The construction of metadiscursive regimes to describe language and languages has implications for both language (as a general capacity) and languages as entities. That is to say, although we acknowledge that all humans have language, the way in which both senses of language are understood is constructed through a particular ideological lens dependent in a large measure on specific metadiscursive regimes and the analysts’ cultural and historical ‘focus of enunciation’ (Mignolo, 2000: 116). These metadiscursive regimes are significant because linguists, perhaps more than any other scientists, create the objects of their analysis through the
nature and type of metadiscursive regimes that they deploy in their analysis. As Yngve argues, language and grammar:

... are theories of theories in the logical domain representing imaginary objects introduced by assumption. Being fictions, they are not the sorts of things that could be innate. To argue otherwise is to confuse fiction with reality, to confuse the logical domain and the physical, to confuse philosophy with science. One cannot have a science that invents its own objects of study and introduces them by assumption. (Yngve: 2004b: 34)

Disinvention here is tied to a question of rethinking understandings of language (such as language as a medium of communication, language as system, language as a describable entity, or language as competence) that tend to be predicated upon notions of uniformity and homogeneity (Canagarajah this volume; Kyeyune, 2004). Drawing attention to new and alternative metaphors is an important strategy aimed at finding a way in which linguists and applied linguists can avoid being imprisoned by their own semiotic categories. In order to understand the development of these regimes, we need to return (as with the invention of languages reviewed above) to the historical origins of particular modes of thought, and the history of linguistic ideologies.

In their discussion of the work of Latour (1993) and Michel Foucault (1970), both of whom, in their different ways, sought to understand how it is that we came to be modern, Bauman & Briggs (2003: 8) suggest that Latour ‘misses language, that is, the role of its construction as autonomous and the work of purification and hybridization this entails in making modernity’. By viewing language as only a mode of mediation between the primary domains of science and society, Latour remains ‘simply modern here, having succumbed to the definition of language as real and its relegation to the role of carrying out particular modernist functions, such as conveying information’ (Bauman & Briggs, 2003: 8). They argue, therefore, for ‘the full recognition of language as a domain coequal in this enterprise with Latour’s society and nature’ (Bauman & Briggs, 2003: 10).

While Foucault (1970) acknowledged the significance for modernity of the construction of language as a separate realm in the 17th century, Bauman and Briggs contend that he constructs too unified a view of language. They demonstrate the struggles over the construction of language by comparing contemporary folk and institutional perceptions of language and the role these competing constructions of language have on impacting the production of modernity:
While Foucault’s account of language thus provides an excellent starting point for discerning how reimagining language was crucial for imagining modernity, we suggest that the story needs to be retold if its broader significance – particularly for understanding how modernity produces and structures inequality – is to become more intellectually and politically accessible. (Bauman & Briggs, 2003: 10; emphasis added).

For Bauman and Briggs (2003: 7), the key question is how modernism (through the work of philosophers such as Locke) created language as a separate domain, how language ‘came into being’ and the ‘process involved in creating language and rendering it a powerful means of creating social inequality’ (2003: 9). This, then, is a crucial step prior to the rise of the European nation state’s production of languages as separate and distinct, national entities. This latter point has been widely discussed and observed, from Anderson’s discussion of the role of language in the construction of the nation state (though, as suggested above, he fails to observe that this was a bidirectional construction, involving both language construction and nation constructing language) to observations such as Mühlhäusler’s (2000: 358) that the notion of a ‘language’ ‘is a recent culture-specific notion associated with the rise of European nation states and the Enlightenment. The notion of “a language” makes little sense in most traditional societies’. Bauman and Briggs, however, are pointing to the period that precedes this, when language itself was constructed, philosophically as well as politically, as an entity separable from the social world. Crucial to this project was Locke’s ‘positioning of language as one of the three “great provinces of the intellectual world” that are “wholly separate and distinct’’ (Bauman & Briggs, 2003: 299). As they go on to explain, ‘separating language from both nature/science and society/politics, Locke could place practices for purifying language of any explicit connections with either society or nature at the center of his vision of modern linguistic and textual practices’ (Bauman & Briggs, 2003: 299–300).

This construction of language, either as an autonomous object or a linguistic system, has been challenged both from the inside by the integrational linguistics of Harris (1981) and the hard science linguistics of Yngve (1996, 2004a, 2000b), and from the outside by critical localism (Geertz, 1983; Canagarajah, 2002) and studies of language ideologies (Blommaert, 1999b; Kroesk, 2000), which aim to understand how language may be understood differently in different contexts. Harris has argued that linguistics (or segregational linguistics as he calls orthodox linguistics) has profoundly misconstrued language through its myths about autonomy, systematicity and the rule-bound nature of language, privileging supposedly expert,
scientific linguistic knowledge over everyday understandings of language, which, following Geertz, we are referring to as ‘local knowledge.’

An integrationalist redefinition of linguistics, Harris (1990: 45) suggests, can dispense with at least the following assumptions: (1) the linguistic sign is arbitrary; (2) the linguistic sign is linear; (3) words have meanings; (4) grammar has rules; and (5) there are languages’. As both Mühlhäusler (2000) and Toolan (2003) argue, an integrationalist view of language suggests not merely that language is integrated with its environment, but rather that languages themselves cannot be viewed as discrete items, rejecting as a ‘powerful and misleading myth, any assumption that a language is essentially an autonomous system which humans can harness to meet their communicational needs’ (Toolan, 2003: 123). Thus, drawing on Harris’ work, this version of linguistic ecology takes seriously Harris’ (1990: 45) claim that ‘linguistics does not need to postulate the existence of languages as part of its theoretical apparatus’. As Harris goes on to argue, the question here is whether ‘the concept of a language, as defined by orthodox modern linguistics, corresponds to any determinate or determinable object of analysis at all, whether social or individual, whether institutional or psychological. If there is no such object, it would be difficult to evade the conclusion that modern linguistics has been based upon a myth’ (Harris, 1990: 45).

An alternative perspective is provided by Yngve, who argues for a ‘hard’ scientific approach to language study rather than the ‘soft’ science offered by linguistics:

Accepting language as an object of study leads to accepting the scientifically unjustified special assumptions involved in continuing a philosophically-based program of grammatical and semiotic research that can be traced back to the ancients ... If we give priority to studying language we cannot have true science. If we give priority to science, we must give up the goal of studying language. Giving up language in favour of science would be victory for linguistics, not a defeat. (Yngve, 2004a: 16)

For Yngve, in a parallel move to Harris’ integrationalist linguistics and our arguments here for ways of reconstituting language, linguistics needs to become the ‘study of how people communicate rather than the scientific study of language, which is impossible. It becomes a human linguistics rather than a linguistics of language’ (Yngve: 2004b: 28)

From the perspective of linguistic anthropology, with a particular interest in the notion of language ideologies, or regimes of language (Kroskrity, 2000), the question becomes one of asking how it is that languages are understood locally. As Woolard (2004: 58) notes, such work
has shown that ‘linguistic ideologies are never just about language, but rather also concern such fundamental social notions as community, nation, and humanity itself’. For linguistic anthropologists, the problem was that the ‘surgical removal of language from context produced an amputated language that was the preferred object of the language sciences for most of the 20th century’ (Kroskrity, 2000: 5). By studying language ideologies as contextual sets of belief about languages, or as Irvine (1989: 255) puts it, ‘the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests,’ this line of work has shown the significance of local knowledge about language. Put together, the internal and external challenges to notions of language embedded in the language sciences suggest on the one hand that there are no grounds to postulate the existence of languages as separate entities and on the other, that in order to understand language use, we need to incorporate local knowledge.

Branson and Miller (2000: 32) argue that we ‘must not only revel in linguistic difference but cope with that difference analytically. Let us recognize the culturally specific nature of our own schemes and search for new modes of analysis that do not fit other languages into a mould but celebrate and build on their epistemological differences’. While pluralist (socio)linguistics and applied linguistics focus on linguistic differences, they fail to address the metadiscursive concern of how we understand linguistic difference, avoiding thereby an engagement with the ways in which languages and differences have been constructed. As Branson and Miller (2000; this volume) argue, the problem for many languages previously dismissed as non-languages (dialects, sign languages, creoles) is that they have had to submit to the regulatory apparatus of linguistics in order to achieve the status of ‘real languages.’ The possibility of understanding language differently, from the local perspective of the users of those sign languages, dialects and creoles, is thereby dismissed as languages are brought into the universalist paradigm in which similarity and difference have already been assigned.

From a creolist perspective, Degräff (2005: 534) berates linguists for perpetuating the ‘most dangerous myth’ of what he calls creole exceptionalism: ‘the postulation of exceptional and abnormal characteristics in the diachrony and/or synchrony of creole languages as a class.’ Degräff argues that creole exceptionalism was posited in order to resolve the contradiction of how, on the one hand, slaves could be regarded as speaking fully-fledged languages whilst on the other hand they were not regarded as fully-fledged human beings. While we are sympathetic to the overall objectives of Degräff’s critique of creole exceptionalism, we want to push this insight
further. Since we are skeptical of the notion of language itself, the solution is not to normalize creole languages by seeing them as similar to other languages, but to destabilize languages by seeing them as similar to creoles.

Similarly, the critique of the myth of sign language exceptionalism should not then render sign languages just like any other language, but should start to undermine the ways in which languages are understood. If anything we would like to argue that all languages are creoles, and that the slave and colonial history of creoles should serve as a model on which other languages are assessed. In other words, it is what is seen as marginal or exceptional that should be used to frame our understandings of language. Furthermore, since most communities have been affected by colonialism and slavery at one time or other, languages without a colonial history are an exception. From such a perspective, creoles therefore should provide a prism through which we can view other languages, hence our argument that all languages are creoles rather than all creoles are languages.

Our overall argument, then, is that the metadiscursive regimes that emerged to describe languages are part of a process of epistemic violence visited on the speakers of those languages as they were called into existence. Unless we actively engage with the history of invention of languages, with the processes by which these inventions are maintained, with the political imperative to work towards their disinvention and with the reformulation of basic concepts in linguistics and applied linguistics, we will continue to do damage to speech communities and deny those people educational opportunities. Languages were posited as separate entities at a particular moment in European philosophical and political thought. After so much harm has been done to communities through this epistemic violence, it is time to put languages back into the world.

The Material Effects of Inventions

While it is useful to understand languages as inventions, it is also crucial to recognize that the effects of language inventions are very real. As we suggested above, this is where we generally part company with those fighting for language rights and multilingualism, since the struggle is all too often conducted on a terrain on which the existence of languages as real entities is left unquestioned. While we may support some aspects of these struggles as political movements, we would argue that the battle also has to be an epistemological one, and that unless this issue is adequately addressed, the very real effects of language inventions will continue to be felt by different communities.

Having stressed the epistemological nature of the problem, we also need
to emphasize that our position does not take up some supposed idealist side of a realist/idealist dichotomy. While we are indeed arguing that languages are invented, we locate the implications of such inventions not only in the abstract domain of language definitions but also in the very material domain of language effects. Thus, while our argument is not one that could be described as materialist in the sense that languages are nothing but the product of real social and economic relations, it may be seen as materialist in that it is a way of conceptualizing language that focuses on the real and situated linguistic forms deployed as part of the communicative resources by speakers to serve their social and political goals (see Blommaert, 1999b; Baumann & Briggs, 2003, for related views). Thus, we focus not only on the real and situated forms of language, but on what the speakers believe they should and ought to talk about, and how they analyse their talk as well. We are arguing therefore for an understanding of the relationships between what people believe about their language (or other people’s languages), the situated forms of talk that they deploy, and the material effects – social, economic, environmental – of such views and uses.

The view of language we are suggesting here has serious implications for many of the treasured icons of liberal-linguistic thought. Not only do the notions of language become highly suspect, but so do many related concepts that are premised on a notion of discrete languages, such as language rights, mother tongues, multilingualism or code-switching. It is common in both liberal and more critical approaches to issues in sociolinguistics to insist on plurality, sometimes strengthened by a concept of rights. Thus, there are strong arguments for mother tongue education, for an understanding of multilingualism as the global norm, for understanding the prevalence of code-switching in bilingual and multilingual communities, and for the importance of language rights to provide a moral and legal framework for language policies. Our position, however, is that although such arguments may be preferable to blinkered views that posit a bizarre and rare state of monolingualism as the norm, they nevertheless remain caught within the same paradigm. They operate with a strategy of pluralization rather than questioning those inventions at the core of the discussion. Without strategies of disinvention, most discussions of language rights, mother tongue education, or code-switching reproduce the same concept of language that underpins all mainstream linguistic thought; multilingualism may, therefore, become a pluralization of monolingualism.

Sonntag (2003: 25) makes a singular point when she argues that the rights-based approach to support for linguistic diversity and opposition to
the English-Only movement ‘has not fundamentally altered the American projection of its vision of global English ... because a rights based approach to promoting linguistic diversity reinforces the dominant liberal democratic project rather than dismantling it’. The point here, then, is that while on the one hand seeming to promote a progressive, liberal cause for diversity, rights and multilingualism, such arguments, by employing the same epistemologies on which monolingualism and the denial of rights have been constructed, may simultaneously do more to reproduce than oppose the conditions to which they object. In a similar vein, Rajagopalan suggests that:

the very charges being pressed against the hegemony of the English language and its putative imperialist pretensions themselves bear the imprint of a way of thinking about language moulded in an intellectual climate of excessive nationalistic fervor and organized marauding of the wealth of alien nations, an intellectual climate where identities were invariably thought of in all or nothing terms. (Rajagopalan, 1999: 20)

Thus as Sonntag (2003: 25) goes on to argue, ‘the willingness to use the language of human rights on the global level to frame local linguistic demands vis-à-vis global English may merely be affirming the global vision projected by American liberal democracy’.

The invention of languages has had particularly insidious consequences for indigenous people, since the invention of the construct of indigenous peoples, particularly in contexts such as multicultural Australia, produces for Aboriginal Australians a need for identification with their prenational selves during some ‘mythological dreamtime’ in which they ostensibly cared for their relatives, lived in harmonious accord with the land in a mode consistent with the ideals propagated by the environmentalist movement, reflecting the extent to which the thinking of the environmentalist movement has permeated even the ways in which indigenousness is construed (Thomas, 1994: 28). This construction of indigenousness is bought at a social price; it fixes their identity, consequently disqualifying socially embedded urbanized indigenous peoples.

A complete identification of indigenous people with their prenational selves is not possible, for two reasons. First, it is not possible to retrieve prenational selves because of the impossibility of overriding colonialism’s traumatic effects on indigenous social life (Povinelli, 2002: 36). Second, retrieving the indigenous forms from prenational selves is a ‘back-projection’ which assumes as a given the existence of the prenational selves (Kuzar, 2001: 281). In some cases the nature, or indeed even the existence, of these prenational selves may be open to serious debate. Even if the form
and nature of the cultural artifacts in the prenational era had not been subjected to strong colonial influence, the key question is, as Catherine Coquetry-Vidrovitch queries (in Mamdani, 1996: 39), how far back do we have to go? In Africa, for instance, when we seek to appeal to prenational forms, do we have to go as far back as pre-Portuguese, colonial Islamic expansion, or Bantu expansion (Mamdani, 1996: 39)? The central point here is that while indigenous people are caught between impossible pressures to identify on the one hand with prenational selves and on the other with their colonizers (Fanon, 1952/1967), any solution needs to avoid both those discourses that construct an essential character to indigeneity and insist on the integrity of indigenous languages, and those that insist the only solution is to adopt wholesale the dominant languages of modernity, such as English. Our argument is that only a disinvention and reconstitution of language can open up ways out of these cycles of discourse.

The invention of some African languages, such as Tswana, Shona, Tsonga and Yoruba was based upon the Herderian view that was a significant part of the German Intellectual Movement in which language, race, and geographical location were constructed as indivisible. These conceptual insights have encouraged us to explore the essential contradictions in colonial rhetoric between preserving the past, promoting economic development and protecting Africans and other colonized people from the traumas of modernity. These contradictions were eloquently captured in colonial disdain for the ‘detribalized’ or ‘trouser’ Africans who responded most enthusiastically to the ‘colonial civilizing mission’ (Spear, 2003: 4). Trousered Africans, who were more likely than not to be educated, were held in disdain because they were treated as ‘mimics’ or ‘hybrids’ parroting white discourse (Jeter, 2002). The discomfort that colonial and postcoloniality has with ‘trouser’ Africans is not peculiar to the ways Africans are treated. It is common to contemporary celebrations of indigenous life that:

denigrate and marginalize urbanized or apparently acculturated members of these populations who speak English, lack ethnic dress, do not obviously conduct ceremonies and do not count as real natives to the same extent as those who continue to live in the bush and practice something closer to traditional subsistence. (Thomas, 1994: 30)

The term ‘hybrid’ was being used negatively to refer to the appropriation which took place in moments of encounter between Africans and Whites (see Makoni & Meinhof, 2004). When colonizers appropriated material from encounters, they were not regarded as hybrids. The term hybrid was thus restricted to appropriation by the colonized ‘trouser’
Africans. The term hybrid is a metaphor that is derived from biology, so can be read as a biological construal of cultural practices. That something or someone is a hybrid presupposes that the individuals and social practices are pure but, as Bauman and Briggs (2003) point out, every pure form can be regarded as a hybrid by a different measure; so the notion of hybridity may be misleading unless one seriously challenges the underlying biological metaphor. Of central concern here for our argument are the ways in which the romanticization of tradition, the use of biological metaphors (Pennycook, 2004), the denigration of the trousered and the hybrid, have very real material effects for language users in the contemporary world.

Even if it were possible to strip the past of the traumatic effects of colonialism, the nature of that past is still open to serious contestation – a contestation that may occur even at a national level. For example, the politically and economically beleaguered Zimbabwean state is engaged in an ongoing struggle to seize control over the various ways in which it can represent and create the past. It is doing so by propagating ‘patriotic history’, a much more acutely narrowed-down version of nationalistic history (Ranger, 2004: 215). Of course, appeals to tradition have always been made in order to justify the present:

Elders tended to appeal to tradition in order to defend their dominance of the rural means of production challenged by the young. Men tended to appeal to tradition in order to ensure that the increasing role which women played in production in rural areas did not result in any diminution of male control over women as economic assets. Paramount chiefs and ruling aristocracies in polities which included numbers of ethnic and social groupings appealed to tradition in order to maintain or extend their control over their subjects. Indigenous populations appealed to tradition in order to ensure that the migrants who settled amongst them did not achieve political or economic rights. (Ranger, 1983: 254)

Yet claims to tradition take on a very different role when made by the State. Patriotic history focuses on three ‘revolutions’: the 1896 African colonial encounters, the guerilla war and the third chimurenga of land distribution, dividing the nation into patriots and ‘sell outs’. With its doctrine of permanent revolution, patriotic history glorifies violence and omits other forms of popular action, marginalizing the cities and trade unions. Patriotic history is an example of the invention of the past, and an attempt to use the past to serve contemporary political goals. Today, authenticity is the watchword and the Zimbabwean state claims to be a repository of indigenous knowledge, seeking support among indigenous peoples across the world. Such claims should always lead us to be wary of the discourses of...
indigeneity; the waters are muddied by such attempts to own indigenous knowledge. It is the past that is a product of the present, and not vice versa.

The invention of languages in the context of Christian missionary work had significant effects on social and cultural relations. In the Philippine context Rafael describes how the categories introduced through conversion refashioned social life, particularly the relationships between masters (maginoo – principles) and slaves (alipin). Conversion not only constituted the introduction of a new category, but it radically altered the relationship between life and death, affecting the social meanings people may have of fear itself (Rafael, 1988: xi). Looking at the introduction of literacy into the Kaluli community in Papua New Guinea by Australian missionaries, Schieffelin (2000: 294) notes how this ‘challenged and changed Kaluli notions of truth, knowledge, and authority, thereby affecting Kaluli linguistic as well as social structures’.

Schieffelin (2000: 296) argues that ‘everyday language practices, local metalinguistics, and language ideologies that are embedded in complex cultural and historical moments intersect in ongoing processes of social reproduction and rapid cultural change’. Thus, from the initial grammar of Kaluli, in which Christian and Western practices ‘were simply slipped into the linguistic materials and treated as if they had always been there’, so that it was impossible to distinguish between Kaluli ways of saying things and ‘what an Australian missionary linguist thought were good sentences illustrating linguistic structures’ (Schieffelin, 2000: 302), to literacy practices, which emphasized, in true Christian fashion, reading over writing, and truth as inherent in the text itself, the colonial missionary work on and through Kaluli was aimed at ‘domination, control and conversion to a particular point of view’ (2000: 321) and wrought profound changes on the social, cultural and linguistic practices of the Kaluli. As Schieffelin suggests, ‘every language choice is a social choice that has critical links to the active construction of culture’ (2000: 323).

The insights from disinvention can serve as a critique of some aspects of language ‘endangerment’ as articulated by Nettle and Romaine (2000), Crystal (2000), and Skutnabb-Kangas (2003), amongst others. Currently, there is a discernible shift from indigenous languages towards urban vernaculars in Africa. While some linguists may regard the shift as regrettable because it constitutes a form of enlargement, from an invention perspective, promoting the continued use of indigenous languages constitutes a retrospective justification of colonial structures. While the shift from indigenous languages to urban vernaculars may also be read as catastrophic from the perspective of some linguists, those who shift from indigenous languages to urban vernaculars may construe the shift as a reflection
of a creative adaptation to new contexts (Makoni & Meinhof, 2004). The advantage of the notion of ‘invention’ is that it provides opportunities for social intervention and counter-practices through disinvention and reconstitution. For example, the widespread use of urban speech forms that are ontologically inconsistent with notions of language as ‘hermetically sealed units’ (Makoni, 1998b) challenges existing dominant ideologies that constrain official policies, particularly in South Africa.

Towards Disinvention and Reconstitution

In the disinvention project we are, therefore, not merely reiterating the generally accepted notions that languages have fuzzy boundaries, and that the distinction between language and dialect is arbitrary, as is frequently stated in conventional sociolinguistics. Rather, we want to argue that the concept of language, and indeed the ‘metadiscursive regimes’ used to describe languages are firmly located in Western linguistic and cultural suppositions. They do not describe any real state of affairs in the world, i.e. they are not natural kinds (Danzinger, 1997): they are convenient fictions only to the extent that they provide a useful way of understanding the world and shaping language users, and they are very inconvenient fictions to the extent that they produce particular and limiting views on how language operates in the world. In response, we want to propose neither a view that we need better descriptions, nor mere acknowledgement of fuzziness, but instead strategies of disinvention and reconstruction.

The perspective that languages are socially and politically constructed is necessary not only for an understanding of languages, but also for situations in which there are reasons either to change them or to change the way we think about them. We are focusing on language because definitions of language have material consequences on people and because such definitions are always implicitly or explicitly statements about human beings in the world (Yngve, 1996). It is, therefore, necessary to overcome ideas about language if we are to imagine alternative ways of conceptualizing the role and status of individuals in the world. For example, a world in which plurality is preferred over singularity requires rethinking concepts founded on notions of uniformity over those predicated on diversity (Blommaert, 2005: 187; Bauman & Briggs, 2003: 9; Canagarajah, Chapter 10, this volume).

Part of the process of rethinking language involves questioning the broader assumptions that have been linked to languages. One crucial element here is time and history, particularly as it has been constructed in relation to diachronic linguistics. As Blommaert (1999b: 1) puts it, 'The
socioculturally motivated ideas, perceptions and expectations of language, manifested in all sorts of language use and in themselves objects of discursive elaboration in metapragmatic discourse, seem to have no history. Our interest here is to locate language inventions, dis-inventions and reconstructions within a broader project in critical historiography, in which there is latitude for multiple temporalities. Contrary to historical linguistics, we are arguing here for the possibilities of ‘a discontinuous history — one in which no state of affairs can be derived simply from a preceding one’ (Fabian, 1991). A discontinuous notion of history is different from the conventional notions of history in historical linguistics that are predicated upon linguistic continuity as understood in terms of mutations through successive stages (Ehret, 2002). If we can allow for ‘multiple, heterogeneous and uneven temporalities and histories that the dominant historical narrative, often presenting itself as singular and linear, suppresses’ (Inoue, 2004: 2), it becomes possible conceptually to question the linearity at the heart of much historical linguistics and to see that time, like language, presents far more diverse ways of thinking about overlapping, translingsual language uses.

Any critical applied linguistic project that aims to deal with language in the contemporary world, however good its political intent may be, must incorporate ways of understanding the detrimental effects it may engender unless it confronts the need for linguistic reconstitution. For example, in North America and Australia, there have been strong movements towards the teaching of heritage languages (Hornberger, 2005), but the concept of heritage languages may resonate differently in different contexts because of its emphasis on the roots of the speakers, on their ‘ancestral language’. In situations characterized by massive migration, the promotion of heritage languages might easily be appropriated and harnessed and fuel xenophobic tendencies in which some people end up being defined as permanent outsiders and others as insiders (Brutt-Griffler & Makoni, 2005).

Our argument, then, is that just as languages were invented, so too were related concepts such as multilingualism, additive bilingualism, or code-switching. Language planning policies seeking to promote additive bilingualism are founded upon a very specific view of language, a view that takes languages to be ‘entities’ which, when accessed, will then be beneficial to the speakers. Thus although they tend to be projected as if they were goals that language-planning policies must seek to achieve, additive bilingualism or multilingualism must also be understood as particular ways of thinking about language. Language planning research therefore needs to focus not only on the political contexts in which it operates, but also on the nature of the concepts of language that underpin the different policy
options, to question not only the *realpolitik* but also the *reallinguistik* of the 20th century.

In our view there is a disconcerting similarity between monolingualism and additive bilingualism in so far as both are founded on notions of language as ‘objects’. By talking of monolingualism, we are referring to a single entity, while in additive bilingualism and multilingualism the number of ‘language-things’ has increased. Yet the underlying concept remains unchanged because additive bilingualism and multilingualism are at best a pluralization of monolingualism. In the context of South African language policy Makoni (1998a: 244–5) argues that ‘emerging discourses about multilingualism derive their strength through a deliberate refusal to recollect that in the past multilingualism has always been used to facilitate the exploitation of Africans’. Proponents of multilingualism seem to suffer from a process of ‘historical amnesia’ (Stuart Hall, 1997: 20), in which they believe that just because they have started thinking about the idea, so the idea has just begun. Furthermore, proponents of multilingualism are the ideological captives of the very system that they are seeking to challenge. Makoni suggests that

The battle for independence is simply not won by opting for vernaculars over English as normally articulated in the decolonization literature ... From UNESCO to the multicultural lobby the potential negative effects of learning through vernaculars assigned to speakers is not addressed as it is assumed that it is cognitively and emotionally advantageous that a child learns through such a medium as it does the colonized images encoded in such versions of African vernaculars. (Makoni, 1998b: 162–3)

More importantly, in disinvention we are seeking to provide alternative ways of understanding some of the frequently reported problems about language planning. For example, it is frequently suggested that in a lot of cases, particularly in Africa, parents may object to their children being taught in their mother tongues. The refusal to be taught in their mother tongue is treated as the legacy of colonialism. We would like to adopt a different perspective. Some indigenous communities object to being taught in ‘their mother tongue’ because schooling is perceived not as the place were knowledge is transmitted, but as a point of contact between the ‘indigenous world and the white-man’s world’. Non-indigenous languages (i.e. European languages) are regarded as central to that contact. Education and the transmission of knowledge from the perspective of indigenous communities take place in the oral tradition in the home. While indigenous communities regard schools as sites of contact between indigenous communities and the ‘white-man’s world,’ education being under-
stood as taking place at home, Western scholarship takes the opposite view, defining what indigenous communities regard as education to the relegated status of socialization (Reagan, 1996).

The conceptual orientations that we adopt in disinvention and reconstruction may also vary depending upon the problems we are seeking to address. Language planning debates have tended to think and articulate their positions in terms of solutions. Through disinvention we prefer to argue that it is more realistic to think in terms of viable alternatives than solutions. The conceptual alternatives that we propose vary between situations. For example, in some situations the viable solution may lie in essentializing mother tongues, in other cases, in problematizing them (Pennycook, 2002). The ideology of invention serves as a critique of language imposition or linguistic imperialism, not in the sense that dominant languages are imposed on minority groups, but rather in the sense that the imposition lies in the ways in which speech forms are constructed into languages, and particular definitions of what constitutes language expertise are construed and imposed.

Instead of the often static notions of language implied by concepts of multilingualism, we need to start to move towards concepts such as Jacquemet’s (2005) transidiomatic practices: ‘the communicative practices of transnational groups that interact using different languages and communicative codes simultaneously present in a range of communicative channels, both local and distant.’ Jacquemet explains that:

Transidiomatic practices are the results of the co-presence of multilingual talk (exercised by de/reterritorialized speakers) and electronic media, in contexts heavily structured by social indexicalities and semiotic codes. Anyone present in transnational environments, whose talk is mediated by deterritorialized technologies, and who interacts with both present and distant people, will find herself producing transidiomatic practices. (Jacquemet, 2005: 265)

And yet, we would also argue that such practices are not so much the product of contemporary linguistic contexts mediated by deterritorialized technologies, as they are the common ways in which languages have been and still are used throughout the world.

It is instructive to note that plurality was the pervasive state of affairs in most pre-colonial communities and it was not regarded as problematic. Indeed, as Fabian (1991) stated, the idea of a monolingual Shaba-speaking person was unusual, so, paradoxically, communication models that derive their inspiration from pre-colonial periods might aid us in addressing some of the conceptual problems which face contemporary sociolinguistics as it
tries to address issues about plurality and diversity. This is not to say we are arguing for a wholesale return to pre-colonial conditions in order to address postcolonial problems, because an unselective return to pre-colonial conceptual artifacts is not feasible owing to the inescapable effects of colonialism on many social and analytical artifacts (Povinelli, 2002).

Rather, we are interested in a project akin to Degraff’s (2005) radical postcolonial creolistics that illuminates the epistemological continuity between slavery, colonialism and ‘scientific notions’ of creole exceptionalism while also turning the tables on contemporary linguistics by emphasizing language exceptionalism: all claims to know, count, name and define languages need to justify themselves against the normality of creoles. If we frame our contemporary problems using prisms derived from pre-colonial eras, we may be able to radically alter the role and status of language within applied linguistics. The analytical categories drawn from pre-colonial eras were not language categories per se, but categories designed to deal with communication and other social activities. So, an applied linguistics that seeks to draw its inspiration from a deployment of pre-colonial era categories has to deal with the paradox that it will be an applied linguistics in which language is of secondary importance.

Overview of the Book

This book is divided into three sections. The first section deals with analyses of socio-political contexts within which ways of thinking about language emerged. The second section is an examination of how these ways of thinking about sign languages, indigenous literacies, or African American Vernacular may militate against the development of radically different and perhaps more nuanced understandings of language. Our contention throughout the book is that ways of thinking about language are not only a conceptual issue: they have potentially negative effects on language users—what Grace (2005) has termed ‘collateral damage.’ If ways of conceptualizing language might result in ‘collateral damage’, in the final section of the book we show how revising how we think about language affects the nature of the language teaching materials we develop, and our language-teaching goals.

‘... And then there were languages’

In the first section of the book we examine the historical contexts in which languages and notions about language were constructed. Ariel Heryanto (Chapter 2) analyses the historical circumstances in which Bahasa Indonesia emerged as a language. He analyses how the meanings of
bahasa, which in vernacular Malay and Javanese communities referred to socially-bound practices, shifted to refer to rule-governed systems. The term referred not so much to something abstract and neutral as to a social activity. But with the introduction of Bahasa Indonesia – as part of the universalizing discourse of development – came particular notions of languageness. Consequently, formerly ‘language-free’ communities now had language. This does not of course imply that prior to the invention of Bahasa Indonesia, there were no languages in Indonesia; rather it suggests that the construction of Bahasa Indonesia required a radical shift in the conceptualization of what constitutes ‘language’. In a similar vein, but focusing on a different part of the world, Sinfree Makoni and Pedzisai Mashiri (Chapter 3) focus on the constructions of Shona and Tsonga in southern Africa. They argue that the construction and crystallization of these speech forms into languages were shaped by a complex interplay between literacy, writing and European views of language.

From a perspective that differs from these, which look at the construction of languages from within complex multilingual matrices, Pennycook (Chapter 4) argues that the notion of English as an International Language is also a myth. Looking at how myths about English (English as a language of development, opportunity and equality) are constantly put into discourse, he argues that such myths simultaneously contribute to the larger construction of English itself. For Pennycook, there are therefore two pertinent questions to ask. First, what is the nature of the political and discursive interests that lead scholars to regard English to be a real entity that can be described as an international language, and secondly, perhaps even more importantly, what are the real-life consequences arising from the tendency to treat this ‘thing’ as an international language? Pennycook’s concerns about the effects of constructing English as an international language are the converse of the critique that Sinfree Makoni and Mashiri are making about the claims of indigenous African languages as authentic repositories of African cultures, which in turn are a product of African nationalistic historiography. All the papers in this section insist that we should take our descriptions seriously, not only because the descriptions are linguistically important, but because any language description implies an intervention into people’s lives, and the intervention might have unexpected adverse effects on exactly those same people whose interests we think we are promoting or safeguarding.

**Language epistemologies and local knowledge**

Through a critical historiography of the development of the epistemology of thinking about sign linguistics, Branson and Miller (Chapter 5)
trace some of the changes that have taken place in the ways sign languages are understood. They draw our attention to a key paradox: while the linguistic argument that sign languages were like any other languages challenged denigratory views of such languages, the continued use of linguistics as the dominant (and in many cases exclusive) lens through which to understand sign languages has also limited our understanding of the complexity of sign languages because of pressure to fit sign languages into conventional models of linguistic analysis. This is a central argument for a number of concerns we are trying to address in this book: it has often been an important move to use the academic status of linguistics to support denigrated semiotic systems. Thus, sign languages, creole languages, dialects of languages, indigenous languages and other stigmatized codes have often benefited from careful description and the argument that they are complex linguistic systems like any other. Yet, at the same time, by confining such diverse domains to the straightjacket of linguistic description, their complexity, variety and locatedness in social and cultural worlds has often been lost.

Focusing his analysis on the Kashinawa people in Brazil, Lynn Mario de Souza (Chapter 6) argues for a more locally grounded perspective about the nature of language, writing and literacy. Writing, its necessity and its forms of dissemination in indigenous education, he argues, tend to be anchored in a non-indigenous locus of enunciation. De Souza shows how concepts of language and writing in indigenous education in Brazil have been deeply implicated in colonial ideologies of conversion and civilization, where they became instruments of a politics of inequality and the negation of difference. This collusion, in Brazil as elsewhere, has historically permeated much of the work done in linguistics in the field of indigenous education. Basing his analysis on his ongoing project in Brazil he demonstrates the sharp differences between Euro-Brazilian ways of understanding language, writing and literacy and language learning from that of the Kashinawa people, arguing that a lack of awareness of these local modes of understanding the nature of language, learning and literacy renders it difficult for language teaching to achieve its goals.

From a very different perspective, Steven Thorne and James Lantolf (Chapter 7) examine the implications for language learning of constructing languages as ‘nouns’, ‘objects’, ‘things’. Examining Saussure’s astute rhetorical and philosophical move which contributed significantly towards a construction of language as a ‘thing’ and linguistics as a science, they show how he downgraded the role and impact of human activity in language, thus unintentionally preserving and reinforcing Cartesian dualisms of mind/body, langue/parole, competence/performance. In a
move analogous to Hopper (1998) and the arguments we made earlier about dealing with interactions rather than languages, Thorne and Lantolf argue for an approach that places significance on human communication, and treats grammar not as a precondition for communication but a product of communication.

In the fourth article in this section, Elaine Richardson (Chapter 8) examines how the identities of African Americans that can be gleaned from a linguistic description of African American Vernaculars is inadequate. Looking at how rappers exploit linguistic stereotypes to upset and redefine social reality from meanings rooted in their everyday experience, she suggests that they thereby (dis)invent relationships between identity and language. Where conventional Anglo-American discourses attempt to ascribe certain language forms to certain identities, or particular identities to language forms, Hip hop discourses recall African language histories from before the European invention of languages and imposition of metadiscursive regimes, drawing on language possibilities that can cross, challenge and unravel hostile conditions.

Applied disinvention

The final section of the book is made up of two chapters (by Brigitta Busch and Jürgen Schick, and Suresh Canagarajah) that examine the educational implications of revising some of the assumptions we make about language. Busch and Schick (Chapter 9) report on a project that sought to experiment with novel ways of designing language teaching materials amid the intense language wars of the former Yugoslavia. They demonstrate how in such contexts language teaching materials that draw on diverse registers, styles and different languages might reduce possibilities of language-based political conflict because the diversity crafted in the materials may approximate the heteroglossic nature of language. By accommodating differences, heteroglossic materials may reduce pressures that arise from attempts to approximate a monolithic standard.

Finally, in Chapter 10, Suresh Canagarajah argues for a model of language learning and teaching that is founded on notions of differences. He cites examples of frameworks such as accommodation or crossing that have tried to demonstrate how differences may be negotiated. He also argues paradoxically, that in pre-colonial times differences were not seen as constituting an impediment to successful communication. Drawing inspiration from the ways communication was structured in pre-colonial times might assist in addressing modern problems.
Conclusion

Where then does this leave us? When Heryanto speaks of ‘language free zones’, when Branson and Miller show how the move to constitute sign languages as ‘real languages’ was also an act of epistemic violence, or what Grace calls the ‘collateral damage’ of linguistics, when, from an integrational linguistic perspective, Harris tells us that linguistics does not need to posit the existence of languages as separate and autonomous objects, and when linguistic anthropology draws our attention to the imperative of understanding local ideologies of language, we have clearly embarked on a different trajectory from much of applied and unapplied linguistics, with their belief in the existence and describability of discrete languages, their positing of languages as systems that exist outside and beyond communicative acts, their location of language within the heads of people, and their use of disembodied texts to represent language use.

The position we have been trying to establish here, however, goes much further than challenging narrow linguistic and applied linguistic orthodoxies. The old issues of description versus prescription, linguistics applied versus applied linguistics simply fade from view as irrelevant. For some this might still imply little more than a turn towards sociolinguistics or pragmatics. Yet from a disinvention perspective, many of the assumptions of more socially oriented approaches to language study also come under critical scrutiny. The givens of sociolinguistics, such as bilingualism and multilingualism, notions such as language rights, or the idea of language pragmatics, are also questionable from the perspective we are developing here since they are in a sense the by-products of the invented languages and metadiscursive regimes we are questioning. If languages hadn’t been invented as isolated, enumerable objects separated from their environment in the first place, we wouldn’t need these add-on frameworks, and thus to talk of sociolinguistics or pragmatics is to uphold metalinguistic inventions.

This view has many implications for applied linguistic domains. Let us take an area such as language testing (for a critical exploration, see Shohamy, 2001). Why is it, we might ask, that a language test such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) remains so desperately monolingual? At first glance, this question may seem bizarre: it is a test of English, after all. Yet the cultural psychology developed by Thorne and Lantolf (in Chapter 7), which opens up ways for us to see how languages may be mediational tools to develop each other, as well as the broader questioning of language inventions across this volume, suggest that a multilingual TOEFL may be a far more appropriate test (to the extent that testing
can be appropriate). What we mean by this is not, of course, that TOEFL should be offered in separate but discrete languages (test of French, German, Japanese, Tsonga or Tagalog as foreign languages) but rather that to test language users in one narrow element of their linguistic repertoire while admitting of no leakage across the tight linguistic boundaries echoes a history of strange linguistic inventions. When we talk of ‘washback’ in testing, it is more common to think of this in terms of the curricular effects of evaluation. More broadly, however, it is interesting to note the ‘collateral damage’ for language users, policy makers, citizens and educators of the strange notion that languages exist in separation from the world and each other and can be tested in isolation.

Language education suffers similarly from such peculiar linguistic inventions. For a start, the enumerative strategies based on the notions of second language acquisition, or English as a second language become highly questionable. From our point of view, there is no good reason to separate and count languages in this way. And while some useful work has sought to break down these divides by talking more in terms of bilingual education, we are still left here with a monolingual pluralization. The question we would like to ask (and see Busch and Schick in Chapter 9) is what would language education look like if we no longer posited the existence of separate languages? Once again an answer might lie in starting to understand language and language education in terms of majority world local knowledge, in starting to relocate language learning from an additional to a transidiomatic practice.

Further questions need to be addressed to other domains of linguistics and applied linguistics. What does translation look like within disinvented and reconstituted languages? The position we have been developing suggests that this boundary we set up between languages, making translation an issue when we speak ‘different languages’ but not when we speak the ‘same language’ is yet again a distinction that is hard to maintain. This does not dissolve translation into a meaningless activity; rather it suggests that all communication involves translation. The twin effects of metadiscursive regimes that divided languages into separable entities and pedagogical dictates that eschewed translation have had sadly detrimental effects on language education. If language learning could be seen as a form of translingual activism or transidiomatic practice far more dynamic effects might be achieved.

Language policy, meanwhile, becomes a very different project from its current orientation towards choosing between languages to be used in particular domains, or debating whether one language threatens another. If language policy could focus on translingual language practices rather than
language entities, far more progress might be made in domains such as language education. Applied linguistics more generally needs to address the question of what it might look like if we took seriously the implications of no longer positing the existence of separate languages, of acknowledging that if a science of language is an impossibility, so too is an applied science of language. But as a domain of work more readily able to lead the way towards understanding the transidiomatic practices of speakers, applied linguistics may be able to help linguistics get over its unfortunate long-term obsession with the impossible study of languages.

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