GUEST LECTURE

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What if language is not universal?

When: Thursday, 18th of March 2021, 11.15-12.45h.

Where: Online, within the context of the MA-course “Language and Textual Practices - From Colonial Language Textbooks and their Heritage to Today’s Understanding of Heterogeneous Knowledge Production” (Daniela Waldburger).

Join us: https://eu.bbcollab.com/guest/6e8f2f5a50b245c1bd9ff3c4b073fb2f

Abstract

When Ariel Heryanto (2007:47) wrote „Not all societies possess language in the sense we define it today“ he claimed that the notion of language is not universal but rather historically contingent. This thought is not altogether new, not least because the empirical findings with regard to language practices as they occur in many African societies, not only resist but challenge traditional linguistic explanations. I historicize such challenges to ‘language’ as we know it with the example of “eine Sprache – ein Volk – eine Nation”, a still highly functional ideology that played out in Africa as a nexus of language-culture-territory (Beck 2018). Dynamics around Swahili and Afrikaans demonstrate the historicity of these notions. Moving on to possibilities for decolonizing ‘language’, I look at (everyday) language practices in a South African township (Krause 2021). By taking seriously the heterogeneity of such practices and how it stands in tension with the constitutive role of homogeneous languages in the nation state, I show how deeply implicated linguistic theory is with the scientific-political project of enlightenment’s modernity. From the perspective of African Studies we have to postulate a protracted complicity with (post/colonial) structures of power and inequality. Coupled with concerns about the state of the world in the Anthropocene we might even have to consider what it would mean to posthumanize ‘language’, or even to renounce the notion of ‘language’ altogether. To this end, in the last part of my presentation, I sort “wire spaghetti”, i.e. cables of all kinds that people the walls
of houses in Stone Town Zanzibar, in order present a few first ideas towards an alternative theorization of human relation making that draw on posthumanist and non-representational theories and allow for a re-entanglement of words with the world.

Heryanto, Ariel 2007. And then there were languages: Bahasa Indonesia was one among many. In Makoni, Sinfree & Alastair Pennycook (eds.), Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, pp. 42-61.
