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Interview

Rethinking Applied Linguistics in the Global South: A Conversation with Sinfree Makoni

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Waqar Ali Shah conducted an interview with Sinfree Makoni on May 21, 2024. In this interview, Professor Makoni discusses how to rethink applied linguistics in relation to southern epistemologies, decolonization, and globalectics. He also discusses his views on disinvention and reconstitution of languages, ethnolinguistic response to linguistic boundaries and identity politics, language purity, Black linguistics, integrationism, and epistemological racism. He further

discusses how ideas are articulated from a specific geopolitical setting; for example, those in the Global North are privileged within the field of applied linguistics while silencing those from the Global South. Makoni further argues that scholars from the Global South can enrich the field of applied linguistics because of their local experiences, knowledge of the local intellectual traditions, and familiarity with Northern theories and contexts.

Keywords: applied linguistics; black scholarship; ethnolinguistic politics; globalectics; southern epistemology

1. INTERVIEW

We present a verbatim transcript of the interview based on the themes that emerged from our conversation. However, both the interviewer and the interviewee made minor edits to the transcription where necessary for clarity.



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1.1 Southern Epistemology, Globalectics and (Re)Doing Applied Linguistics

Waqar: Professor Sinfree, thank you very much for taking the time to speak about “Rethinking Applied Linguistics in the Global South.” Since you come from Zimbabwe, a country in Africa and an ex-British colony, how would you recall your colonial experiences and memories in your own country and connect them with your current scholarship in Southern theory and decoloniality?

Sinfree: Thank you very much for the opportunity to reflect on my career and my life and the direction and unexpected paths it has taken. I grew up in Zimbabwe and went to a missionary school in the eastern part of Zimbabwe. The school is called St. Augustine. My earliest recollection of language issues in that school can be captured as follows:

I didn’t encounter the problem of not being allowed to speak or write in my first language, which we call ChiShona, a Bantu language. That was neither stopped nor discouraged. The problem I faced was that I could never fully understand why I never could get good grades in my first language (if there is ever such a thing in multilingual contexts), but I could pass and get good grades in English. So, from that early stage, I always wondered what the problem here was. If ChiShona was my first language, as I said, why [was] it so problematic and difficult to pass ChiShona, but it was relatively easy to pass English. However, that question was always lodged at the back of my mind. That is one aspect of my colonial experience that I have always been interested in trying to address. If you want me to, I can continue to explain more about the impact of the colonial experience. I couldn’t enroll at the University of Rhodesia, which became the University of Zimbabwe, because, during that year, you needed to go and be part of the Rhodesian army, which was fighting against the Zimbabwean guerillas, if you were to be admitted to the university. So, some of us left the country, which marked the beginning of a lifelong trip that finally found me at Penn State. My interest in epistemology is a direct consequence of my migration and nomadic life. When I was in Zimbabwe, my colonial experience was that the experts in any area that I was dealing with were all white. Books that we read were largely written by white people. But when I went to the University of Ghana, it was the first time I encountered black experts. So, it was interesting to see the shift in thinking for me that it is possible to have black expertise even in the world of academia.

Waqar: Right. Thank you for sharing your personal experience. Why did you choose Applied linguistics as a part of your academic career and scholarship? Does it have anything to do with your colonial experiences and memories?

Sinfree: Yeah. There are two things that happened. When I got into the University of Ghana, I studied English literature, and then I also did applied linguistics. I was interested in linguistics because it provided me with some ability to analyze the social

context of language around me. I wasn't drawn very much to the literary part of English because it [was] just sort of colonial novels and writers like Chaucer [and] William Shakespeare, so I drifted more towards [the] language aspects of it. And I still had the curiosity of trying to explain to myself—the problem I described at the very beginning—why I could not pass my indigenous languages but could pass English.

Waqar: You have been working in diverse areas: discourses of terrorism outside the USA, Language and health in Africa, language planning, language policy, and language philosophies. Recently, your scholarship has also included southern theory and decoloniality. Could you please explain what constitutes the Global South and southern epistemologies?

Sinfree: Right. This is a good question. What constitutes Southern theories and Southern epistemologies for me are ways of thinking and orienting towards the problem. They are forms of social and political struggle in scholarship. So, it's a way of orienting towards a problem in which you are arguing that all things are entangled. They are interrelated in a way. So, what Southern theories do is that they challenge the idea of being able to understand the distinction between geography and epistemology, that epistemology is a way of thinking about a problem. From this view, you could have a southern epistemological view even if you are in State college or you are in Philadelphia, but you could have a Global Northern view about the world if you are in Cape Town, Pakistan, or somewhere else because it is your intellectual orientation towards what you are trying to do. So, the interesting thing about Southern epistemologies is that there are a number of approaches. There is no general simple consensus about what it is, but you can say that the aim of Southern theories is to address the challenges that Western scholarship is faced [with] outside the Western context and [the] challenges that Western scholarship is faced [with] in the Global North. So, in a way, Southern theories are global in intent, but their globality, in one way, is different from globalization of most Northern theories. They are not imperialistic in their globality. They are a consensus—that's the way to frame [it]. They are epistemologically well founded on issues about consensus. So, the interesting thing about Southern theories is that they challenge issues about hierarchy, authorship, books, etc. For example, there is a book that we are working on where there is no single author; it is a group name—just a group name. This is who we are and where we come from—all sorts of different places. This is where I think Southern theories and Southern epistemologies are liberating. Southern theories liberate [us] from the confines of current thinking. But they are also forward looking in that they are always seeking to try to provide a better explanation to the circumstances, but they are not imposing one way of handling all these issues.

Waqar: In many parts of the colonized world, Applied Linguistics is heavily influenced by colonial knowledge, ideologies, and theories. For example, in Pakistan, applied

linguistics as a subject is heavily influenced by American and British traditions and European linguistic knowledge. In such a case, what insights can we get from Southern Theory and Southern epistemologies to rethink Applied Linguistics in postcolonial societies, such as Pakistan and similar others?

Sinfree: This is interesting. Historically, Southern theories in Southern contexts, such as Pakistan and Africa, have shaped Euro-American scholarship, but it is less acknowledged in American and British scholarship today. The so-called periphery has had a substantial impact on how ideas are shaped in American and European scholarship. Colonialism was not only a violent act; it was also a process through which ideas situated outside Euro-America were extracted and implanted in Euro-America. More recently, what happens to most of these people [is that] they go out into Pakistan, and they go out into Africa, and then they realize all of a sudden that there is a disjuncture between what they thought was going to happen and what happens when they get to the African context. In other words, they realized that their theories were not functional in those contexts. There is a generation of British applied linguists, all who somehow taught or some of their formative years in applied linguistics were spent in Africa. People like Alan Davies, Chris Brumfit, and Rod Ellis. All those people—their first encounter showed them the limitations of their applied linguistics in contexts outside, and when they returned to the UK, they tried to provide theories to explain their experiences in other contexts. In other words, there has always been a sense in which it was the margin that shaped the core of what constitutes applied linguistics. These scholars subsequently shaped the direction of applied linguistics, but it was their African experiences that made them aware of the limitations of their original thinking. But of course, Africa was not given credit for that, [which is] not unexpected. That was the case that was always there, and there have been a lot of students and faculty members who then have gone to establish careers in the Global North, but they are coming from the South, and they are moving on. I mean, as Suresh Canagarajah and other people who have become very successful in the North largely because they have retained the Global South experiences that enable them to see the world differently, even in the North.

Waqar: Yes. That's right. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O is also one example. He talks about Globalectics in terms of rhizomatic relations where he argues for collapsing of hierarchies so as to view relationships between languages, cultures, and literature in terms of networks. How do you see applied linguistics in relation to Globalectics?

Sinfree: What it means is that, in terms of globalectics, Applied Linguistics can be viewed as a non-hierarchical field, for example, [in terms of] native speakers, non-native speakers, second language speakers, teachers, and learners. You want applied linguistics in which everybody's life is intermingled with another person: *Entanglement* is what you aim for. We are trying to do that in our recent project on *unbooking* or even in the Global Virtual Forum, where there is a range of people who are bringing in different

experiences to create an ecology of knowledge that is relevant to what we are talking about. When you talk about collapsing hierarchies, you acknowledge that people bring different experiences, and that all the experiences that people bring are important. But you don't include other types of experiences; that's not where you are going, that's not what you are doing. What you are interested in is the intermingling, the mutual entanglement of experiences around the globe.

1.2 Disinvention and Reconstitution of Languages, Linguistic Boundaries and Ethnolinguistic Politics

Waqar: In two of your collaborative works with Alastair Pennycook, “Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages,” published in 2007, and “Innovations and Challenges in Applied Linguistics in the Global South,” published in 2020, you talk about decolonizing language as an object of study in linguistics/applied linguistics and propose reconstituting them. How do you explain this, and how is this notion of disinvention and reconstitution of language informed by Southern theory or decoloniality?

Sinfree: Yes. The argument about disinvention rose from an intellectual awareness about the notion of language and what constitutes language as it is framed in some cases as an object of analysis. This is itself a colonial enterprise. It was a product of a specific institutional global political discourse that created these ideas about language. We talk about it now in another paper. We even talk about the idea of water as H₂O, that the idea of water as an object running through the taps, and of thinking of water in that way, in a way, is a part of the invention. So, in other words, we are now making the connection that the invention of language is analogous to the invention of thinking about water, that it's something that you get from it. Why we are arguing for disinventing language to some extent is because we are pointing out the imperial nature of the discourses of language. The people have never really begun to systematically realize that, in some of these cases, we are faced with [what] may not be an issue about teaching, about language policy, etc. [Rather,] it may lie in how we are thinking about that problem. So, the problem might be how we are thinking about language. So in order to move beyond that, we came up with the notion of disinventing. But then the interesting thing, which is linked to one of the questions that you posed, is that there is an interesting challenge here if you say to people [that] we need to disinvent language because it is problematic.

And you also have nationalistic movements that are grounded in notions about language. Then they will begin to argue: “You are now saying that there is no language.” No! That's not what we are saying; what we are saying is that you need to be aware of the discourses and the language ideologies that form the basis upon which you are constructing that idea about language. You may want to construct the idea of language, particularly for your indigenous movement, but that way may be very different from the way somebody may want to construct language for language teaching purposes. That's

what we are saying. We are not saying that people should never be interested in framing and thinking about language. We are simply drawing attention to the need for you to be aware of how your discourses may create a language in a particular way that may make it difficult for you to accomplish your objectives. We also then say why it is necessary to disinvent languages—language teaching is a very interesting example here. The tendency is to think of language teaching that the object of language is a neutral one, as if you are just going to teach. But then, that’s not the argument. The argument we are making [is] that language teaching entails shaping very specific ideological operators about language, particular views about language. And the example I normally get is, if you meet young kids going to school, and they speak Urdu, they speak Gujrati, they speak Shona, Swahili etc. It’s when they get to school [that] they see these labels on their timetable that release them to shift and adopt a radically different orientation towards language. But they never thought about it as an object that could be taught, like geography or mathematics. They just thought of it as a form of communication. But once you have [it] in on a timetable, you are framing it in a very specific epistemological lens.

Waqar: I have observed this in my own Pakistani context. For example, we have 70 plus named languages and people think that these languages have their own linguistic boundaries, and therefore they try to preserve these languages and bring identity politics in relation to language. How do you view this phenomenon?

Sinfree: Yes. This is interesting. The idea of these numbers of languages, but this is one way, very specific way of thinking about language. You see, the tendency is to think about that way as the natural way of doing linguistics. This has become a dominant way of thinking, in fact. The countability of languages (there are 20 languages, there are 70 languages, etc.) [and] language preservation—as we put it, for example, in our book, *Innovations and Challenges in Applied Linguistics from the Global South*: the innovation, preservation, and counting of languages are very specific ways of viewing languages. They are not, [however], the only way you can frame languages ontologically. Some of the speakers of those languages don’t think of them in terms of how many speakers there are in [their] language, or who speaks [their] language. Linguists have one way of thinking about language, but that is only one way, perhaps not the most productive way. And it might not necessarily be the most productive way of thinking about language in all contexts. But for government purposes, for governmentality, for censuses, for administration, they may want to know how many people speak this language or that language because that’s what governments do. They count. So, in order for counting to take place, they need to know the number of languages. So, whether it is a numerically or epistemologically productive way of going about linguistics is debatable. In order to count languages, you need to convert them ideologically into objects. This is a sharp ideological process that you are engaged in, [where] you eventually end up with numbers of languages, and numbers of speakers of languages.

And a lot of other discourses arise, like, if you are going to say five languages, then you need boundaries between them. So, you have to create a number of things; so, another set of assumptions [is] set in motion because of that.

Waqar: Do you agree that language purity is a real phenomenon? People think that you cannot even code mix languages or bring words from other languages because you affect the purity of the language. How do you view this purity?

Sinfree: There are two layers. The language purity is an ideological orientation towards language. Any language, to some extent, is combined with other languages. But whether you are going to say it's pure or not pure, it's your own ideological orientation towards the task that you have. So, I agree that there are people who are concerned about language purity. But whether language purity exists or not depends on the power of the sociolinguistic microscope that you use. What I mean by this is that if you go for a detailed sociolinguistic analysis of any language, you will always find that these things are mixed with other things. There is never a language that has no influence on or contact with another language. So, it depends on how detailed the analysis you want to make is. That's the point I want to make. When people talk about language purity, it's not that they are concerned about language. They are concerned about something else, and language happens to be the instrument or the mobilizing tool or the entity around which they want to mobilize. When the French says they need to keep French pure against the English, it is not so much French that they are concerned about. They are concerned about hierarchical relationships between French and English. In other words, the discourse about language purity was never focused on language; they thought something else, [and] they articulated [it] via language. That's the way I think about the language purity.

1.3 Black Linguistics, Black Scholarship, and Epistemological Racism

Waqar: In 2003, around two decades ago, you wrote about black linguistics and black scholars. How do you explain it today two decades after its publication?

Sinfree: That was, I think, one of the most exciting projects I got involved in. What was happening was an awareness that race operates in linguistics in ways that are not frequently discussed and that non-white scholars may have an interest in linguistics that is very different from those of white scholars. So, we wrote black linguistics, and then it led us to a conclusion that you can be able to characterize language in terms of black languages, white languages, etc. For example, English, we could argue, is largely a white language in the sense that, if you are white and you speak English, it is assumed that you are proficient in it, but if you are black and you speak English, you have to demonstrate that you are proficient in it because [the] de facto position for English is white, even

though there are many varieties of English spoken everywhere. Expertise and whiteness in English are interchangeable. So, within the argument for the need for a strand of black linguistics, we have some of the articles on disinvention and raciolinguistics. It's a project that I regret that I never pursued but which has [been] revived in a different way now through the Global Southern frameworks. But it's now characterized in terms of philosophical orientation towards language rather than in terms of race. The issue that was there was scholarship—at that point, [that] was more willing to accept that the race—language and race—could be studied but was reluctant to accept that black scholars or nonwhite scholars may have different interests from other scholars. So, the point was a dead end, but the introduction to that volume is really good. It really is very good. I mean, it talks about multilingualism, and Ngugi Wa Thiong'O wrote the forward in that volume. And it is a really very good argument that we are making. It was ideologically much clearer than a lot of other subsequent arguments we have ever made. Today, for example, I was just talking with another colleague. We are finishing a book on black linguistics and black languages, which is a follow-up to black linguistics, but it is based largely in Brazil.

Waqar: Great. In recent times, we see that black linguistics comes alternatively in the name of raciolinguistic perspective that becomes dominant, and black linguistics seems to be little known to the people. For example, as a student of Applied Linguistics, I didn't know about black linguistics as such, but I came across white scholars and raciolinguistic perspectives. How do you see this epistemological racism?

Sinfree: This is a very interesting point you are making. Ideas become dominant to some extent because of who articulates them. The irony of raciolinguistics is that, particularly when you check with black linguistics, raciolinguistics is racist in a sense that it never acknowledges the background information and origins it has to black linguistics. It erases that history. It's only when you read a book by Alim on "language and race," Alim acknowledges where these ideas come from. But the majority of people just imagine that raciolinguistics began with raciolinguistics. When they come across black linguistics, which was two decades before this, they are not even aware of it. And this is also part of the American imperial empire, where the only ideas that are circulated and acknowledged are ones that are framed within the American establishment. Raciolinguistics and black linguistics is really an interesting paradox. It's also like another part of the paradox between translanguaging and disinventing, which is very interesting. Ofilia Garcia, for example, has said in a couple of old presentations that, without disinvention, it would have been difficult for her to clearly articulate what translanguaging is, so I get used to it. It's only that you see the irony of it, and it touches on issues about citation, who cites who; it moves on issues about where they are located, and all that.

1.4 Integrational Linguistics and Re-Thinking Applied Linguistics in the Global South

Waqar: In your recently edited volume “Integrational Linguistics and the Philosophy of Language in the Global South,” you discuss that ‘integrationism, although grounded in the Northern thinking, is not linguistics but anti-linguistics.’ How would you explain this anti-linguistics and integrational perspectives?

Sinfree: This is an interesting paradoxical alliance. A group of white, largely male, linguists are anti-linguists ((laughter)). They call it anti-linguistics. They think language is a myth that the Western scholarship has created. You can see where our interests overlap. With “disinventing” for us, we were saying these languages need to be disinvented and reconstituted. They are coming in and saying that language is a myth. They come up and say that expertise in language should be grounded and framed in the speakers of those languages and not in the people who got institutional support. In other words, the expert in English in Shona is the speaker of Shona, so that is the other part, and they then also come up and say that language is a third-order category; language is a mechanism for analyzing communication. It’s not the primary source of experience. So, we find free-flowing ways of thinking very helpful. They are able to provide some philosophical justification for arguments that we are making politically. So, disinvention and its notion of language, when we align it with the notion of integrationism, enables us to explain how it is that institutions can accord so much power to a myth.

That’s why integrationism comes in to explain the emergence of language as a myth and through the works of people like Chris Hutton, Andre Pablo, David Bade, Peter Jones, and Roy Harris, etc. In our work on disinvention, we were not very much aware of work in integrationism. We have recently brought together research into integrationism and decoloniality because integrationism provides us with a robust (anti)linguistic framework, and decoloniality offers us a robust analysis of the politics of institutions.

The integrationists were largely based at the University of Oxford, and there was a small clique of white educated males who talked to each other. But I remember when I was doing a PhD in second language acquisition, and this now touches back to my problem with indigenous languages. And my supervisor, Alan Davies, asked if it was possible when I argued that these learners were not successful in acquiring ChiShona; the problem was that the object called ChiShona was not carefully mapped out. It was a myth, an assemblage of verbal, nonverbal features, dance, music, and song. So, that was the issue about mother tongues in search of speakers. That was really the problem that was there. The idea of mother tongues in search of speakers was the crisis of indigeneity for me because it was difficult to identify speakers of these assemblages. So, when you go like this, you then realize that mother tongues, for me, have always been complicated, and for language policy to succeed, it needs to reframe what it understands by language. We found integrationism helpful in that regard. Language policy, therefore, does need a theory of language to succeed. It is important to caution, though, that the construct of

language that governments provide may be completely inconsistent with the construct of language as understood and used by ordinary users.

Waqar: How does this kind of linguistics have a potential to decolonize colonial linguistics in the Global South and empower applied linguistics in the Southern parts of the world?

Sinfree: Yes, it does. The central argument in integrationism is that the center piece of expertise in linguistics is the speaker—the speaker who speaks that language, the one who has got expertise in that language. It's not like the language teacher or language. It's whoever is the user of that language is expert in that language. So, once you do that, then all aspects of lexicography [and] grammar books have to be rewritten because the experiences that are important for you are the experiences of whoever is speaking that language; [that person] is the expert in that particular language. So, if that person says this is not a language, and someone says it's language, so it shall be. There should not be a supreme court to language matters.

Waqar: So, does it question the standardization?

Sinfree: Yes. It then begins to argue for a sociolinguistics in which no language is standardized. For standardization, to some, whatever you are doing, you are removing the speakers from the form making the key judgments about what they are doing. So, it's sociolinguistics without standardization.

Waqar: The last question that I have is what suggestions do you have for applied linguists in the Global South for rethinking applied linguistics or doing applied linguistics in their particular ecological contexts?

Sinfree: This is interesting. We should not frame applied linguistics that we do as being relevant to the context that we are working in only. We should seek to establish alliances with the other different Global Souths. Second, we should use whatever networks we built to make our case to the Global North as well. In other words, it is our responsibility to shift their way of thinking about their own context. I have no doubt that the scholarship you do is relevant to Pakistan. I have no doubt [that the] scholarship [that] Bassey Edem Antia does is relevant to South Africa and Nigeria. I have no doubt about that. That I take for granted. I have no doubt that connections can be between the two of you. The argument, however, [that] needs to be made is the argument that I began in the beginning of our conversation—that the Global North is moving in terms of the intellectual orientation towards [where] we are [in the Global South]. We don't need to catch up with them. They are the ones who are moving towards where we are. That's the issue that this argument I am making—that it is the other way round, that one doesn't

need to get too worried about all catching up with us. It's them who need to catch up with where we are. Because we creolize speakers. We create epistemologically creolized scholars. You know a lot about Pakistan, you know a lot about North American and European applied linguistics, and you combine the two, and you produce a unique breed of scholarship.

I know a lot about African scholarship. I know a lot about North American and British scholarship, and I produce all that, and when I combine them, that makes a unique brand of school, and they can't produce without us. They can produce more experts in American scholarship, but they can't produce somebody who is both a scholar in North American scholarship and African scholarship without us. That is the argument to make. And the second follow-up argument to make is that the current impasse they are faced with, they can't resolve it by more replication, by more experiments, but by a radical reorientation towards the nature of the problem that they are faced with because their past is no guide to how they can resolve the future problems.

Waqar: So, in that case we need policy changes as in some countries as the curriculum and policies are determined by the government and we are following that.

Sinfree: Yes, we need to be able to make these arguments quite forcefully to our various governments and everybody. Scholars that look to us should be determining and detecting what we need to do.

Waqar: Thank you very much, Professor Sinfree, for your time. It was a wonderful conversation.

Sinfree: Thank you very much for finding time to come. Thank you!

THE AUTHORS

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