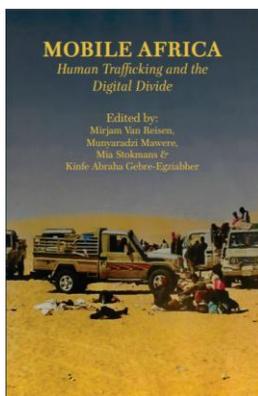


# Language Dominance in the Framing of Problems and Solutions: The Language of Mobility

*Munyaradzi Mawere, Mirjam Van Reisen & Gertjan Van Stam*

## Chapter in: Mobile Africa: Human Trafficking and the Digital Divide

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## Chapter 18

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### Language Dominance in the Framing of Problems and Solutions: The Language of Mobility

*Munyaradzi Mawere, Mirjam Van Reisen & Gertjan Van Stam*

*“Akanva e Sano: e kupingulwa fyonse (Bemba)  
La bouche, c’est la cour du chef, c’est là que se règle toutes les affaires.”  
(Africa Museum, Tervuren, 2019)*

#### Introduction

In his book, *C'est l'homme qui fait l'Homme*: *Cul-de-Sac Ubuntu-ism in Cote d'Ivoire*, Cameroonian academic Francis Nyamnjoh (2015) gives us an insight into a television series of the same name in the Ivory Coast. Analysing the series, Nyamnjoh paints a stark picture of the differences in perceptions of people travelling for work and those remaining 'at home' in Africa. Nyamnjoh shows the complexity of the relationships between the diaspora and their friends and relatives at home, of course, dramatized for television.

Nyamnjoh's study is unique as it looks at the discordance in

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*Words explain the world, and on the basis of this understanding we act. Denying the reality that mobility has been a normal part of life on the African continent, the Western dominated narrative on mobility from Africa to Europe uses words with negative connotations. The term 'illegal migration' is used to describe the movement of refugees fleeing their country in search of protection. The term devalues their need to escape dangerous situations, while dehumanising their intentions. Terms such as 'illegal' and 'irregular' migrants criminalise Africans who move. Taking experiences out of context makes their lives look incoherent, inferior and cheap. As a result, loss of life on migratory trajectories is framed as collateral damage and seen largely as irrelevant losses.*

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communication between a remitting diaspora and those at home from the viewpoint of African sociology framed in *ubuntu*.<sup>1</sup> The study, however, remains superficial (Nhemachena & Mawere, 2016), as it touches mostly on urban experiences, whereas many people on the move are from rural areas. Most studies on mobility in Africa are from Western perspectives and influenced by Western views on mobility, negating the diversity in perspectives on, and the language of, mobility. Therefore, in this chapter, we analyse words in their geographical and epistemological context, to try and determine what mobility means from an African perspective. Our interest is not in the conceptual significance of the words themselves, but their *meaning* beyond the limits of the linguist and his/her professional context. We endeavour to identify the systems of communication used in various parts of Africa and the metaphysics behind the words, thereby scrutinising the language of mobility that has been developed by professionals (politicians, academics) to frame the contentious issue of African mobility.

## Method

This chapter is based on desk research carried out over a period of several years by the third author, who reviewed academic work on the subject, as well as articles in the media, and interacted with academic researchers working on migration. The authors used the method of living research, as described by Van Stam (2019), which involves immersion in the places and among the people being studied. In this case, this method involved living in Southern Africa full time (for two of the authors), travelling through other parts Africa, and numerous community interactions by the authors.

We subscribe to the view that in each culture, informed positions can be developed with intellectual integrity. To understand travellers, or people on the move, in the various cultures in Africa and Europe, we

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<sup>1</sup> The word *ubuntu* is derived from the Nguni languages. It is literally translated as “collective personhood and collective morality” (Mbiti, 1996). For a full discussion of *ubuntu* see *Ubuntu/Unhu as Communal Love: Critical Reflections on the Sociology of Ubuntu and Communal Life in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Mawere & Van Stam, 2016b).

seek to analyse *meaning* and *meaning-making* from different perspectives and epistemologies.

### **Dominant Eurocentric formalisations**

In our approach to the study of the language of mobility, we were intrigued by how the African voice is seldom present, if not entirely absent, in narrations about mobility. A dominant, loud (and rather angry) Western voice dominates, framed in a Eurocentric philosophical base. This begs the question where is the diversity, as the field of language is inherently diverse. Where are African inputs and voices? In fact, there appears one skewed and very biased perspective – and one language – that dominates and defines the frame through which mobility is being viewed: a Eurocentric one. How can we recognise African expressions and do African voices justice when using a language that is formalised by a non-African culture? Undoubtedly, there are African experiences and African designations that are expressed without reference to a foreign language or culture. However, in the current discourse, it appears that only one voice seems to be represented – the Western one – while other voices from Africa are subalternised, to the extent of answering Spivak’s rhetorical question in the negative: “Can the Subaltern speak?” (Spivak, 1988). The absence of balanced literature, or even worse, of any consideration of the language of mobility from an African perspective, is a form of epistemic violence.

In our research, the accounts of the families and communities of travellers, who speak from the same context as those who travel, make it clear that the language of mobility is a clash of histories and cultures. It is a clash of paradigms (Mawere & Van Stam, 2015). The language of mobility is a contested area, with dominant, polarising stories depicting ‘good’ (for instance, European policies) and ‘bad’ (for instance, migrants and smugglers who pursue profit-driven motives). These narratives negate the complexity of human relationships and people’s grounding in a shared culture, which encompasses moral sentiments, emotions and values, and shared norms and obligations, among other things. Nevertheless, many

people strive for shared frameworks of morality and language, and recognise the centrality of ethics in social networks (Achilli, 2018).

### **Contrapuntal developments in the language of mobility**

The relationship between language and its meaning is deeply rooted in culture and embedded in localised philosophies and epistemologies. The shaping of meaning begins at birth, the very moment one is introduced to a language and culture. When we distinguish between a philosophy developed in Europe and philosophies from Africa, we notice distinct differences in their grounding and orientation. The differences in orientation, of course, result from variations in epistemologies and philosophies about life; these result in (and reflect) differences in the daily and cultural practices in Africa and Europe.

The theologian Gert-Jan Roest (2016) recognised the basis of Western practices as being a self-consciousness that regards the individual (and, therefore, individualism) as a primary agent. Furthermore, in the Western context, Roest perceives the political pursuits of individuals to be driven by striving for human power and agency, freedom and fulfilment in self-sufficiency, self-reliance, autonomy, and immanent prosperity and security. In Africa, however, “every conceivable African political system had communities at its base” (Amadiume, 1997, p. 15). Numerous anthropological studies testify to the communitarian or communal character of African societies, where “the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately” (Mbiti, 1976, p. 141). Also, in many African places, the view of being human in a community is linked to views of morality, where “an individual's image will depend rather crucially upon the extent to which his or her actions benefit others than himself” (Wiredu, 1992, p. 200).

Multiple narratives unfold separately, and in conjunction, at the same time. In Africa and Europe, these stories are contrapuntal, a musical term that refers to two or more separate tunes that are played at the same time (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). These narratives are situated

in different epistemologies (Table 18.1) and perspectives on the causes and effects of mobility (Table 18.2).

*Table 18.1. Comparative overview of dominant epistemic orientations in relation to mobility*

<b>Africa</b>	<b>Europe</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Dynamic and integrative epistemology	Normative epistemology	Bigirimana, 2017
Ubuntu cultures	Christian-Judean cultures	Du Toit, 2009
Conscientisation	Age of Authenticity	Nkrumah, 1964; Roest, 2016
Oratio	Literality	Van Stam, 2013; Mawere & Van Stam, 2017
Sharing economies	Neo-liberalism	Sheneberger & Van Stam, 2011
Polychronic time	Linearity	Bidwell <i>et al.</i> , 2013
Authority	Power	Du Toit, 2009; Grosfoguel, 2008
Communiversality	University	Mawere & Van Stam, 2019

As mentioned, in the African setting, there is a close link between the individual and the community. The former belongs to the latter. Community is given primacy when prioritising between the two (the community and the individual). In African cultures, this deep connection between the individual and the community is summed up in the dictum: “I am because we are, we are therefore I am” (Mbiti, 1976, p. 140), which embraces the idea that human beings cannot live in isolation. This statement reflects the fact that many Africans acknowledge the primacy of community over the individual, from the understanding that humanity depends on community, interconnectedness, conviviality and interdependence. Bishop Francis Loyo of South Sudan narrates a vivid story about his life, in

which he shows how an individual in an African place is understood as part of the whole:

*I was born premature, weak and almost dying. My mother was ill and without milk. This was the beginning of my journey to life. I was breastfed by different mothers in the village and so I believed I am their son. After one year my father died leaving me in the care of my mother and my elder sister. Six years later my mother also passed away. When my mother was dying she spoke to my sister who had just got married telling her: 'Take him and care for him as your eldest child'. I became elder sister's first child and she took me to the village school. I was keen to learn and listened carefully since I knew my parents were not there anymore. I did not have much demands I only relied on goodwill mothers and fathers who were kind to me. What helped me was the African philosophy by Dr John Mbiti: "I am because we are and, since we are, therefore I am." We share and we are concerned for one another in times of hardships and happiness. (Loyo, 2015, np)*

This case, as with many others, clearly shows how relations and conviviality are valued in Africa.

Although Eurocentrism thrives on the separation between individuals and forms of groupings, we do not wish to reify or subscribe to an orientalist 'othering'. We recognise great diversity of behaviour and culture in groupings and individuals. However, given the geolocations of meaning-making and views on development, in this study we indicate some of the documented observations about the varied and multiplicity of experience. Kwasi Wiredu (1998) argues that comparison is only methodologically possible when comparing equal with equal. Therefore, in the tables we analyse "contingent norms of life" (Wiredu, 1996, p. 30), which are, anthropologically, indications of the customs and norms of societies. These can include "...conventions, grammars, vocabularies..." (Wiredu, 1996, p. 28). We have selected materials – language to be specific – that are indicative of common attributes as a base for comparison. We derive these tables from critical and reflective thought (Van Stam, 2017a).

When regarding the migration discourse, it becomes clear there are glaring misalignments in the use and meaning of words by people from different groups and cultures.

Table 18.2. Simplified overview of common misalignments in the language of mobility

<b>Africa</b>	<b>Europe</b>
Projected esteem on travellers reaching Europe	Labelling of migrants as exploiting
Expecting remittances from travellers	Criminalisation of migration
Depicting Europe as ‘resource abundant’	Depicting Africa as ‘poor and failing’
Source: Van Stam, 2016	

Even if a common language is used – English – in the practice of a large group of Africans travelling from Africa to Europe, the words used by both are incompatible. Table 18.3 gives some examples.

Table 18.3. Examples of the different use of words in the discourse on mobility

<b>Issue</b>	<b>An African view</b>	<b>A European view</b>
<b>Reason for travel</b>	<i>Resource gathering</i> in far-away places for communal survival, or seeking refuge outside areas of conflict	<i>Profiting</i> from European success and society
<b>Denomination</b>	<i>Traveller</i> from Africa to Europe (and back)	<i>Migrant</i> from Africa to Europe (to stay)
Sources: Ong’ayo, 2019; Van Stam, 2016		

### **A discussion model**

By definition, mobility involves travelling between different geographical areas and, thus, engaging with various epistemologies. An individual can purposively move about her/his environment (Rosso, Taylor, Tabb & Michael, 2013), including geographical and epistemic landscapes. In this section, we endeavour to deconstruct

the issues at play in the case of Africans travelling to Europe. Although there are many reasons for travelling and reaching the West, Africans commonly share any resources acquired from Europe with their families and communities in Africa in the form of remittances.

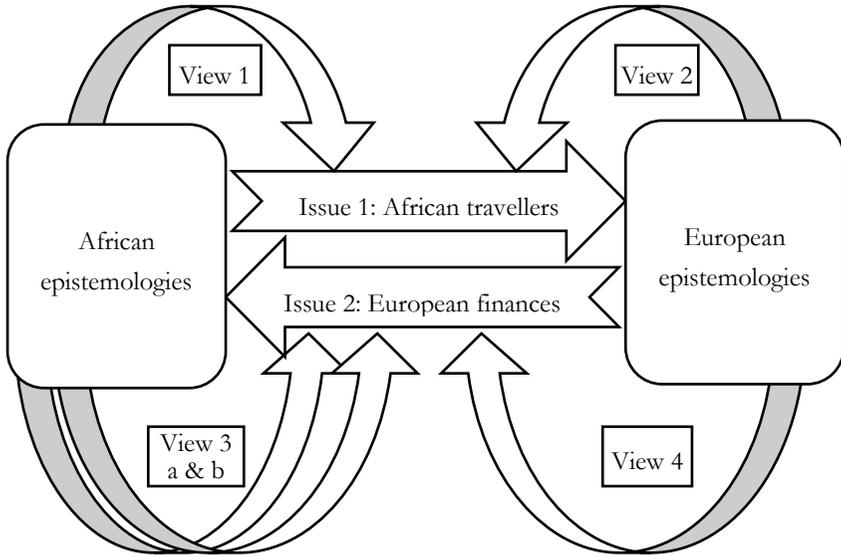


Figure 18.1. Simplified overview of epistemologies, issues and views

In Figure 18.1, a simplified overview of the epistemologies, issues and views at play is presented. The figure shows two main issues:

- The flow of people from Africa to Europe
- The flow of resources, mostly financial resources, from Europe to Africa

The views depicted in the Figure 18.1 are grounded in epistemologies that currently exist in the two geographical areas involved: African epistemologies set in African philosophies and meaning-making and European epistemologies located in Eurocentric thought. Our use of the term *African* in this chapter, like the term *European*, adheres to Thaddeus Metz's position that geographical labels refer to:

*...features that are salient in a locale, at least over a substantial amount of time. They pick out properties that have for a long while been recurrent in a place in a way*

*they have tended not to be elsewhere. They denote fairly long-standing characteristics in a region that differentiate it from many other regions.* (Metz, 2015, p. 1176)

The figure depicts four views:

- View 1. On the purpose and practice of travelling from Africa to Europe, based on Africa-centric epistemologies
- View 2. On the purpose and practice of travelling from Africa to Europe, based on Eurocentric epistemologies
- View 3. On the resources from Europe being sent to Africa, from African epistemologies, separated into view 3a (embedded in indigenous African epistemology) and view 3b (embedded in neo-colonial thought)
- View 4. On resources from Europe to Africa, from a Eurocentric point of view

The figure is greatly simplified; it omits many details, especially contextual issues, such as the significant net outflow of financial and other resources from Africa to Europe (Mawere & Van Stam, 2016a). It omits the diversity of African and European epistemologies. However, in this chapter, we wish to highlight the multiplicity, complexity and discordance of the languages involved, and, for that purpose, this simplified model suffices.

### ***Travels from periphery to the centre (view 1)***

In view 1, travelling is a dynamic and integrated activity, initiated from African experiences and stories of travellers. It is from this context that travel commences, from a situated understanding of what the pros and cons of travelling are. Therefore, view 1 starts off the travelling. The reasons for travelling are diverse and can be distinguished as being reactive (e.g., fleeing from violence or indefinite military service, as in Eritrea) or pro-active (e.g., in search of a better standard of living, as in Nigeria).

Ubuntu implies an expanded view of community (Ramose, 2003; Mawere & Van Stam, 2016b). Any activity in the Horn of Africa links

in with community ('being sent' by elders in the community), religion ('my share', as per beliefs in the community), blessings, oaths (for instance, bounded by *juju* curses in West Africa<sup>2</sup>), or spirits. Mobility is facilitated by 'travel agents'. Such agents are common and have been facilitating travel for decades, for instance, by helping people find work abroad (see Hoffmann, Meester, & Nabara, 2017 for an example set in Agadez, Niger). Responding to the circumstances and demands of travellers, the radius has been extended and travel has been made more difficult and dangerous due to suppression by official systems (see view 3b). In Europe, the vocabulary used by Africans talks of 'blending in' (Vermeulen, 2018). Woyo from Angola expresses this succinctly in the following quote: "An uprooted palm tree gets trampled", which means that "someone without family or money is weak" (Prover Pot Lid, Africa Museum, 2019).

### ***Receiving travellers in Europe (view 2)***

View 2 is ideologically framed. Here, terms like 'illegal migration' are being positioned as an ideological straw man (Taylor, 2015; ICMPD, 2017), that is to say they misrepresent what is happening to make it easier to attack (like a straw man). Upon their positioning, this intentionally misrepresentative terminology provides the foundation for political manoeuvring and the raising of barriers (Mbembe, 2018). Such writings and practices are positioned in a long history of what can be called 'the Terrible Three': orientalism, imperialism and colonialism (Van Stam, 2017a, pp. 117–126).

In political writing, the 'problem of migration', as vaguely defined in Eurocentric language, is placed at the feet of Africa and Africans. Subsequently, these misrepresented problems are proposed to be solved in processes that build up barriers and impose restrictions on the movement of people. Through embedding the issue in processes (for instance, the Khartoum Process), questions like 'why is this view being taken' are overshadowed by narratives about a 'crisis'. The dominant language, therefore, reifies practices.

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<sup>2</sup> *Juju* refers to a multifaceted phenomenon covering a wide range of traditional and religious practices, reportedly used by perpetrators to subjugate victims of human trafficking (Van der Watt & Kruger, 2017).

These kinds of systems and reifying processes have been used before. The contemporary language of blaming and criminalising ‘African migrants’ serves a similar purpose: to set the stage for Europe to impose its anti-migration policies.

### ***Remittances and aid (view 3)***

View 3a is the contemporary view from an African epistemology. Here, the resources being remitted from Europe to Africa are seen as the result of seeking remunerated work in Europe (Van Stam, 2016). Francis Nyamnjoh (2015), who was cited in the introduction to this chapter, describes the dynamics of this ‘hunting’ for resources vividly. At the same time, and parallel to the dominant view from within Africa, view 3b exists in response to the language used in view 2. View 3b interacts with the rather substantial resources that come out of the European policy decisions based on view 2. These are multilateral and bilateral funding streams from Europe to international non-governmental organisations and African governments to ‘stop the migration streams’. View 3b, thus, is the result of geopolitical influence meant to disrupt or prevent issue 1, with definitions of outcomes set in a European epistemology. View 3b represents an ongoing neo/super-colonial meddling in Africa. A vivid example in popular language is: Europe is moving its borders south of the Sahara through a “remote control policy” (The Conversation, 2018; Väänänen, 2018).

### ***Super-colonialism (view 4)***

There is a distinct difference between travel and trade in humans. European slave ships transported an estimated 12.5 million enslaved African men, women and children to the Americas from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century through to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, with the involvement of important European harbours, such as London, Amsterdam and Lisbon (Eltis & Richardson, 2010). New modern-day forms of slavery have emerged in the last decade, especially since the introduction of ICTs that facilitate human trafficking for ransom as a new form of slavery (Van Reisen & Rijken, 2015). Without exception, the abduction, extortion and selling of people as merchandise is regarded as a crime. The networks profiting from mobility are complex,

international hierarchical structures with links to governments (Van Reisen & Mawere, 2017). That this may include officials from European governments was illustrated by the involvement of a top politician in Belgium, who was arrested on suspicion of selling humanitarian visas to refugees (Pano, 2019).

View 4 is a positioning set in a historically-shaped ideology. “Everything passes, except the past” is written on the wall of the newly reorganised Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium (2019). It is located in the old museum constructed by King Leopold II in 1897 for the World Fair. King Leopold owned Congo as his personal property and was its sole ruler. The museum was funded by the Ministry of the Colonies and exhibited live Africans. It is now recognised that the museum “played an important role in the representation of Africa and Africans and in the glorification of the colony and its founders”. The museum also points out that “Some aspects of this imagery are still at work” (Africa Museum, 2019).

An important element of the museum are the exhibits of this colonial portrayal of Africa by Matton (1873–1953) in the form of statues, which are still protected. The museum explains:

*All statues represent a colonial vision. Belgians are presented as benefactors and civilizers, as if they had committed no atrocities in Congo, and as if there had been no civilization there beforehand. Africans are represented as smaller than Europeans or reduced to the activities they practice. African women are sexualized. An Arabo-Swahili trader tramples a Congolese who tries to protect his wife. It is clichéd colonial propaganda, but it still effective more than a century later.* (Africa Museum, 2019)

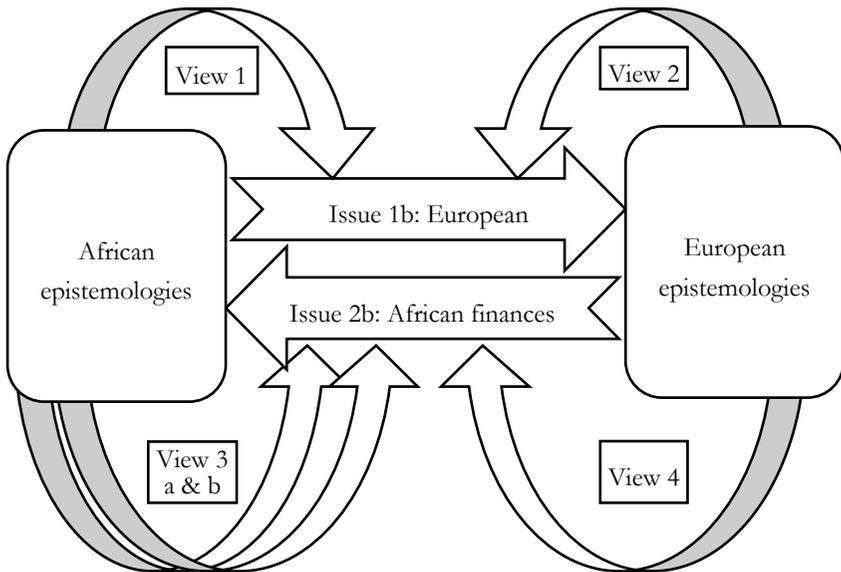
This museum in Belgium gives a stark view of how travellers from the African continent were limited to stay in Africa or come to Belgium as servants, students or living exhibits.

This colonial ideology is sustained by an oriental outlook on Africa, as a failing continent that had no history before colonialism and a continent that cannot stand on its own. In this ideology, Africa is

characterised as a continent suffering from persistent dismal economic performance, diseases (i.e., HIV/AIDS, Ebola), civil war, maladministration, corruption, poverty, dictatorship, human rights abuses, and starvation. Views on the broader context are being neglected, for instance, omitting the sizeable net inflow of resources and financial means from Africa to Europe (Sharples, Jones, & Martin, 2014; Mawere & Van Stam, 2016a). The devaluation and the dehumanisation of Africans, sustained through centuries of propaganda that has depicted Africans as lesser human beings to their ‘superior’ European masters, sustains a colonial ideology and language in which African lives have inferior value.

**Confrontation: Exposing the ideological framings at play in views 2 and 4**

The undergirding of ideologies comes to the fore when changing the direction of the arrows in Figure 18.1. Doing so highlights the case of European travellers to Africa.



*Figure 18.2. Simplified overview of mirrored issue and views*

Table 18.4 now looks as follows (compared to Table 18.3).

Table 18.4. Examples of the different use of words in the discourse on mobility when the direction of the arrows is changed (with regards to Figure 18.2)

Issue	African view	European view
<b>Reason for travel</b>	Visitor welcome as a common dweller in one humanity	Saving Africa
<b>Denomination</b>	Interference based on white saviour syndrome or super-colonialism	Expatriate bringing development and business skills through technical assistance

When reviewing Figure 18.2, the dominant language focuses around the word ‘freedom’. In classical liberal thought, four freedoms are invoked: freedom of movement of capital, goods, services, and people. The contrast between the language used in the situations described in figures 18.1 and 18.2 is remarkable. We have observed the dismay of European travellers having to apply and pay for a visa to enter African countries, oblivious of the high barriers, expenses and efforts needed for Africans to legally enter Europe.

**Creation of a ‘straw man’**

Referring back to Figure 18.1, in the political framing of view 2, straw men are being put in place. Their purpose is to caricaturise and dehumanise Africans travelling to Europe. Instrumental among these straw men is the container-term ‘irregular migration’. This term has been invented to allow holders of the European view to gain the political upper hand. In daily practice, the term ‘irregular migration’ is used interchangeably with ‘illegal migration’, making travelling synonymous with criminal behaviour.

However, there is no clear or universally-accepted definition of irregular migration (IOM, 2018). The terminology is not grounded in international law and, therefore, evades regulation. The term also evades the distinctions set for refugees of war or travellers for health

and economic reasons. Such distinctions are guided by the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, known as the Geneva Convention.

Terminology like irregular migration (IOM, 2018) homogenises all travellers from Africa to Europe that follow unchartered travel paths. The language lumps all of these travellers together, regardless of their motive: whether they are refugees or seeking a living wage. The terminology is weaponised. Such language is used unscrupulously by some as a springboard to attach labels such as ‘rapist’, ‘scavenger’ and ‘terrorist’ to broad swaths of people.

Another container-word is ‘compact’, which is colloquial for ‘comprehensive partnership’. This terminology also evades clear definition (Gammeltoft-Hansen, Guild, Moreno-Lax, Panizzon, & Roele, n.d.). This word is used to justify geopolitical meddling through the provision of technical assistance aimed at influencing processes to remove the reasons to travel. Here, the weapon of ‘funding’ through ‘aid’ is used to strengthen neo-colonial processes and establish super-coloniality under the guise of international organisations that ‘help’ Africa. In practice, there is often little to show in terms of the outcomes of the interventions implemented by these organisations. The objective is ‘border outsourcing’, which has been done in deals between Europe and Turkey, and between Italy and Libya.

Another example of non-defined terminology that is making its way into use through view 2 is ‘migration management’ (for border control). This qualitative language is subsequently turned into ‘body management’ or ‘people management’. Here, the descriptive language morphs into quantification, using the tool of numbers. The use of quantitative language results in datasets that are framed, categorised, set, and managed by those who control the language of the methods and definitions.

## The criminalisation of migration

The terminology in view 2 has hardened in recent years. The documentary *It will be chaos* (Luciano & Piscopo, 2018), which investigates the journeys of refugees, traces the battle over the negative framing of African migrants back to 3 October 2013, when a ship sank near the Italian island of Lampedusa, killing over 300 Africans. The documentary opens with a stark image of the coffins being loaded using a crane.

The film shows a dialogue between members of the media and the Mayor of Lampedusa, who bemoans the terminology used by the reporters who refer to the migrants as 'illegal'. Before answering their questions, the Mayor insists on clarifying the language being used:

*They are refugees. We are talking about asylum seekers. Let's make it clear. Those who land in Lampedusa aren't illegals. [...] I know what your question was, but I have to correct you, otherwise you will report these are 'illegals'. [...] well if you don't get it, neither will your audience. Those who land on Lampedusa are not simply undocumented. These people are 'refugees'. You know, words are important.* (Luciano & Piscopo, 2018)

The documentary shows how the disaster in Lampedusa opens a window of opportunity to frame the problem in a new light. And as the mayor is arguing for language that upholds the dignity of the people who died in sea and the survivors, she is doing this in the context of another language that is emerging. International and European officials visit the island to emphasise the need for a common policy and direction. In this context the Prime Minister of Italy Enrico Letto visits the island and is filmed in the documentary responding to a question by a journalist, next to the smiling President of the European Commission, Mr Barosso:

*Journalist: But the DA's [District Attorney's] Office has charged the survivors with the crime of illegal immigration.*

Prime Minister: *The law is the law. But, of course, this is a terrible tragedy.*  
(Luciano & Piscopo, 2018)

The documentary shows the battle over terms, which lay the basis for policies. The Italian Minister of Migration, also shown in the documentary, tries to soften the impact by stating: “When they’ll start the asylum procedure, the charges may drop” (Luciano, & Piscopo, 2018).

The documentary then shows how one of the survivors, a refugee from Eritrea, is brought to court and accused of entering Europe illegally; he decides to continue his journey in search of protection and safety on his own, relying on relatives in Europe, forcing him towards illegality, as he is now trying to survive without any support from the host society.

### **African versus European lenses**

Tables 18.1 and 18.2 provide evidence of the fact that the language and voice from the West is at variance with the language and voice from Africa. The language from the West represents a facility that allows for the colonial exporting of problems, issues and methods. This language is used politically, while being framed as an objective truth. Truth, Kwasi Wiredu (1980, p. 114) argues, is located in time and place and, therefore, an opinion, never an absolute. However, through a dominating language, ‘opinion’ is positioned as ‘truth’ to define who is or is not allowed to travel in the world today (Mbembe, 2018). The contemporary language of mobility, therefore, is unjustly biased by, and for, Western (European) ideology.

The African ways of talking about and, thus, culturally framing travel have not received just consideration. African ways of looking at reality have not received the necessary scholarly attention. The survey of realities in Africa through Eurocentric lenses, however, has received much attention and is being facilitated by large grants in Europe. This chasm is overshadowed by models ‘explaining’ migration patterns that are proffered by European powerhouses. These models continue

to flesh out Western premises, filtered through a colonial matrix of power and racial systems of socio-cultural classification (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). The adoption of Western models, therefore, boils down to a continuation of colonial behaviour based on supposed Western supremacy, while neglecting African voices.

The dominance and export of Western language that reifies and defines is a means of analysing empirical material that is presumably derived from Africa. This practice is a continuation of colonial interference, which distorts African identities and misrepresents African realities (Van Stam, 2017b). This language, Achille Mbembe argues, is:

*...produced nearly always by Europeans or Euro-American men who are the only ones accepted as capable of reaching universality; they involve a particular anthropological knowledge, which is a process of knowing about Others – but a process that never fully acknowledges those Others as thinking and knowledge producing subjects.* (Mbembe, 2015, p. 36).

Colonialism has caused the involuntary intermixing of Western and African intellectual categories in the thinking of contemporary Africans (Wiredu, 2002, p. 54). The forces that require Africans to use the non-African based languages of the former colonisers – English, French, Italian, and Portuguese – are incognisant of the incompatibilities of those languages with local narratives and contexts. However, by accepting Western languages, African environments have little ammunition with which to withstand framings and models set in Western methods and classifications. Or, in the words of Kotze and Kellerman: “The role and status of the technocrat and technocratic approaches contribute not only to the devaluation of indigenous knowledge and experience but also to the side-tracking of the people's emotions and feelings in development” (Kotze & Kellerman, 1998, p. 34).

The dominant language of mobility can be traced back to the imperial project, through which Europe sought to control ‘others’ in all respects – politically, economically, morally, culturally and religiously.

Already, by defining borders during the ‘Scramble for Africa’ in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and through the colonial projects, European powers sought to limit the mobility of others, in order to control and dominate them. Contemporary language is a natural evolution of such thought, “turning the [African] continent into a massive carceral space and each [African] into a potential illegal migrant, unable to move except under increasingly punitive conditions” (Mbembe, 2018). Research is needed to show the illegitimacy of these practices and propose alternative frameworks that are grounded in the realities of the travellers in their African home areas, for instance, by highlighting the role of traditional leaders, the custodians of culture and, thus, language. An example of alternative narrative is the denouncement of the juju-curses by spiritual leaders in Benin (Ebegbulem, 2018).

Language is linked to local conditions and culture, with local languages framing meaning-making and responses to local issues/problems. Any proposal from ‘the outside’ must be aligned with, and, ideally, complementary to, local meaning-making (Mwesigire, 2016). Robert Chambers (1994) argues in his presentation *Poverty and livelihoods: Whose reality counts?* that in case of large power distances, the realities of the poor should be pre-eminent in any intervention. In line with this argument, it can be posited that the sole use of Western language exacerbates the plight of, and disempowers, African travellers and feeds narratives of victimhood.

As the world is becoming increasingly global, for both Europe and Africa, there is a need for common, or at least complementary, understandings. In other words, we need to find a shared foundational semantics and understanding about the mobility of people. Cooperation toward this end can only be fruitful when one acknowledges the intercultural nature of philosophy and substantive universal rationality and sociality. It is partly for this reason that we endeavour in this chapter to provide a considered opinion, seeking cognitive elements in knowing, by applying a thoroughly intercultural, reflective manner of perceptive and rational inquiry (Du Toit, 2007).

The sociologist, Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, like many others, stands against Western dominance in African studies. She wrote on the necessity “to undertake a re-examination of the concepts underlying discourse in African studies, consciously taking into account African experiences” (Oyěwùmí, 1997, pp. x–xi). She notes that: “all concepts come with their own cultural and philosophical baggage, much of which becomes alien distortions when applied to cultures other than those from which they derive” (Oyěwùmí, 1997, pp. x–xi).

Her studies on genderisation stand as an example. She found that gender discussions are being framed by the specific feature of an English-language culture to classify words as being either feminine or masculine grammatically. With the favouring of male pronouns, Western social history has regarded women as secondary beings (Oyěwùmí, 1997, p. 39). This gendering in the English language, Oyěwùmí argues, has led to colonialisation and misrepresentations that have applied genderisation where, in African languages, such a feature does not exist.

Similarly, Munyaradzi Mawere and Tapuwa Mubaya (2017) have asked why African studies, as a discipline, has always been spearheaded by Western academics and institutions. In the cover blurb for their work *African Studies in the Academy: The Cornucopia of Theory, Praxis and Transformation in Africa*, Mawere and Mubaya note with concern that:

*African Studies as a discipline have been spearheaded by academics and institutions in the Global North. This puts African Studies on the continent at a crossroads of making choices on whether such a discipline can be legitimately accepted as an epistemological discipline seeking objectivity and truth about Africa and the African peoples or a discipline meant to perpetuate the North’s hegemonic socio-economic, political and epistemic control over Africa.* (Mawere & Mubaya, 2017)

In line with Oyěwùmí and Mawere and Mubaya’s arguments, in this chapter we posit that the use of a specific language about mobility in Europe misrepresents African realities by imposing attributes to travellers that are assumed to be universal, for instance, wishing to

travel to Europe because it is somehow superior. This misrepresentation of African realities, however, has become the reification and source of social distinctions.

Allowing certain words to act as frames in societies where such words do not exist or fit obscures the reality in such a society. Examples include the use of gender as a frame of analysis in Africa, whereas communities are genderless (Oyěwùmí, 1997; Nzegwu, 1998). Such a framing, for instance, obscures neuter roles. In an analogy to racial framings, Mbembe (2018) recognises that racial violence is encoded in the language of ‘border security’. In the area of mobility, the framing of words like ‘migration’ and ‘exploitation’ obscure the existence of moral behaviours playing out in complex roles and practices during travels, for instance, in the practice of ‘good’ smuggling (Achilli, 2018).

Here, we argue, that an assessment of African realities, and thus language, is not possible when the assessment is set in pre-conceived ideas and encapsulated in one language and, therefore, one point of view. Western ideological reasoning appears to describe ‘migration’ in (neo-)liberal language only, evoking the image of a crisis and the ongoing ‘exploitation of Europe’ by Africans. Such politics could well become impotent if it allowed for the diverse interpretation of reality and for different stratifications in society, taking away popular stereotypes and, thus, undermining the ‘straw man’. In the current dispensation, however, the influence of internationalised Western culture appears pervasive. To counter this pervasiveness, there is a need to diversify the epistemological and methodological basis of understanding and interpreting realities and meaning-making.

The absence of sensitivity and a broad knowledge of indigenous African ways of describing mobility, as well as the ongoing messaging using Eurocentric coding, could well lead to the reformulation of realities in Africa based upon this alien language of mobility. The practice of reframing can be recognised in the behaviour of the police in countries like Mali, who have accepted the narrative about the criminalisation of travelling and who are now penalising those making

journeys for work that were common over the past millennia (Hoffmann *et al.*, 2017). What was previously normal behaviour (e.g., facilitating transport for seasonal labour) has been outlawed due to the influence of ‘foreign ways’ of looking at journeying (Chapter 9, *The Plight of Refugees in Agadez in Niger: From Crossroad to Dead End*, by Morgane Wirtz).

The study of the drivers of the language of mobility might yield surprising results. For instance, African ways of discussing mobility could show that African languages imply inclusivity, in which ‘being human’ is the main ontology that links all of humanity (Mawere & Van Stam, 2016b). Travelling has happened in Africa throughout history. Mbembe argues that, in Africa, “the primordial principle of spatial organisation was continuous movement” (Mbembe, 2018). Or, the language could reveal various forms of membership that defy the racial classifications proposed by the Western scheme. African voices talk about the integration (of foreigners), of peoplehood (including the living, the dead, the unborn, humans and non-humans), and of nature (being part of the chain of beings).

Wamba-dia-Wamba, in his work *Africa in Search of a New Mode of Politics* provides a list of ways to denounce dominant (political) language and ways of reconciliation. Among these, he proposes the following (Wamba-dia-Wamba, 1994, pp. 257–58):

- limiting the notion of the ‘nation-state’ as the main denominator of one's identity
- delinking ‘development’ from ‘development-policies’ set by powers not living in the area that progresses
- deconstructing colonial legacies and notions like ‘traditional society’ or ‘fixed cultures’
- recognising local forms of economy, which then, from their ‘right to exist’ can interact in the world economy
- recognising the local way of ‘knowing’ as valuable and that most people in a community are involved in its creation and dissemination

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the variances in the use of language in mobility discourse. It argues that the existence of one dominant use of language is not useful in understanding the dynamics involved in travelling and ineffective in stemming migration flows. Moreover, it can potentially give rise to dangerous dynamics for both travellers and host countries. More particularly, the chapter shows the differences between African and European framings of mobility, and the benefits of, and problems, with these framings.

This chapter shows that mobility is not static and changes over time, and that words are important, as they lay the basis for policies and practices. Words explain the world, and on the basis of this understanding we act. Words also influence the allocation of resources that allow practices to happen. In mobility, valuable resources are spent to support travelling and are flowing back once a destination has been reached.

This chapter contends that the negative words used to describe mobility from Africa to Europe represents a revival of the colonial view and propaganda in an attempt to devalue and dehumanise Africans, making their lives inferior and cheap. The negative terms used to describe African travellers, such as 'illegal' and 'irregular' migrants, criminalises Africans who travel and denies the fact that travelling has always been part of the way of life in Africa. It also interprets travelling from an elite perspective, where Europeans can legally travel the world, but African attempts to do the same are framed as illegal and criminal.

The human trafficking associated with the irregularised traveling of Africans is in essence little different from the slave trade, which characterised the colonial period, reducing Africans to commodities for exploitation and profit. It is a terrible shame for Europe to find that its current migration policies have enabled the commoditisation of human beings, which should have no place in the contemporary

world. The involvement of Europe in facilitating such commoditisation demonstrates that the colonial era is not yet over.

A new search for understanding the language of travelling in the African continent is needed in order for Africans to recapture the agenda of mobility, which is so central to African culture, economy and way of living. This chapter has drawn on African scholars to show the value of African scholarship in discussing phenomena in words and language set in context and associated with African place and positionality, deconstructing colonial categories while strengthening African identities.

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