The glossary of a glossary*

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¡Ekwe! Respeto a la presencia de los antepasados fundadores, así también a todo representante de la cultura Africana aquí participando. ¡Heekwa!

1. Ambiguity and etymology

A century ago, Lydia Cabrera began transcribing Afrocuban folklore with encouragement from her *cuñado*, the island's leading sociologist (Ortíz 1940, 7). Between bohemian migrations and self-exile she published these four books among others: *El Monte* 1954, *La Sociedad Secreta Abakuá* 1958, *Anaforuana* 1975 and *La lengua sagrada de los ñáñigos* 1988. The last one is a glossary of the other three, giving Spanish equivalents for several thousand strings or samples of coded speech, ranging from short words to page-long incantations. Unbound by academic niceties, Cabrera's poetic insights bounced back into Abakuá *libretas* (León 1972, 133), and her data are largely confirmed by current interviews across the transatlantic *Ékpè-Ekwe* continuum (Miller 2009). Even so, errors and ambiguities are inevitable whenever an outsider tries to interpret a *cultura autónoma*, a self-curated heritage. Abakuá remains an "underground spiritual game" (Fẹ́lá 1992), uncooptable as a national identity token (Berry 2010) and firmly inseparable from layers of social memory anchoring its linguistic roots. Which is why Cabrera's glossary needs a glossary of its own.[1]

2. What type of language is Abakuá?

Cabrera's readers can't miss her difficulty—and/or that of her Abakuá consultants—in translating numerous expressions of *la lengua sagrada* literally into Spanish. Similar hesitations are voiced by initiates advising us today. These problems would certainly be less if Abakuá was an *i-language* (Chomsky 1986, 20)—a mother tongue spontaneously acquired by infants (L1) or an adult's conscious approximation of same (L2). I-languages are infinite sets of sentences describable only by context-sensitive rules (Chomsky 1956, Shieber 1985). That format, affording the expressive capacity of direct translation, is imposed on every L1 by intergenerational transmission as sketched by Andersen (1973, 778).[2]
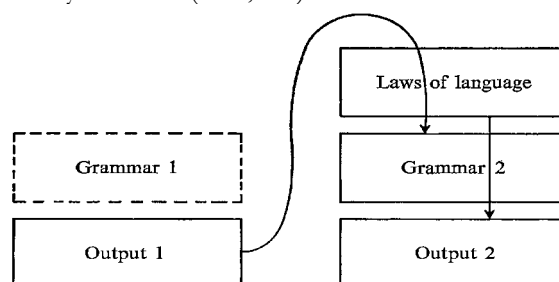

FIGURE 2. Abduction and deduction in the acquisition of language.

Infants lack telepathic access to their parents' internal *Grammar 1*, so they rely on *Output 1* to attain internal *Grammar 2* by an indirect ("abductive") path. *Grammars 1* and *2* inevitably differ, but their shared (hypothetical) biological inheritance ("laws of language") ensures that *Outputs 1* and *2* are in a relation of close paraphrase if not full isomorphism (Keenan & Stabler 2003). Outputs transmitted directly between individuals yield at best an artificial/auxiliary language (LX). Being fully external, it's not forced to follow context-sensitive rules. Context-free and finite state automata are easier to program, but feebler at natural language (L1) processing, as shown by this rendition of one short sentence (screenshot in Appendix, cf. Cabrera 1988, 12).[3]

Con él que sabe no se juega ⇒ GoogleTranslate™ ⇒ *With him he knows is not played*

Ritual performance is evidently less like L1 speech and more like a computer program, calling a list of semantic routines to retrieve and apply expert knowledge from a private database. Ritual speech is rich in rare jargon "learned… as a result of instruction or… participation in the activities of the associated culture" (Hale 1986, 233). Thanks to both these factors, it's no surprise if *Ékpè* ritual evokes amorphous themes such as "natural force which lies beyond the confines and cognizance of society, and at the same time, tradition and authority, the force of law and the continuity of the social order" (Leib & Romano 1984, 52), approaching the famous vagueness of the proverbial "floating signifier" (Lévi Strauss 1950, *xlix,* cf. Jakobson 1939). Cabrera's Abakuá corpus is similarly skewed towards a few topical domains, such as the funerals of titled chiefs, but this formally restricted expressive capacity can be functionally compensated in performance, where referential meanings are deictically reinforcible by

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1. Postmodern scruples about authorial blowback from Ortíz and Cabrera into the data of Cuban popular ethnography (e.g. Palmié 1998, Rodríguez-Mangual 2004) don't impeach the present project. All cultural description is prone to observer bias and other circularity, but any naturalistic data that filter through can still inform a critical philology and "open up the fields of struggle" (Said 2003, cf. Boas 1910).

2. This flowchart omits epigenetic (non-DNA) inheritance (Jablonka & Lamb 2005). On language universals see Greenberg (1963).

3. Cf. also Fitch & Friederici (2012). Translation machines emit "disastrous results" (Bar-Hillel 1954, 259, cf. 1959) even after gulping billions of dollars of military investment and trillions of hours of unpaid e-labor harvested from us, the surveilled digital citizens (Rimbert 2016).

"alternate kinesic codes" (Kendon 2004, 177, 292, cf. Gambetta 2009, 154).[4] Competence/performance tradeoffs of this type have been noted for the *langue secrète* of Dogon initiation masks (Leiris 1948, Apter 2005), closely parallel to Abakuá.

The foregoing is enough to disqualify Abakuá as a *creole/Mischsprache* i.e. an unexceptional L1 (i-language) that happens to be learned in exceptional demographic circumstances (Muyslen 1988, Bakker & Muysken 1995, Mufwene 2000, DeGraff 2003, Manfredi 2004).[5] Instead it's an LX, a ritual language (Valdés 1976, 322). Also falsified is the classification of "Carabalí/Efí" as a "symbiotic mixed language" that "combines the grammatical structure of one language… and a varying number of lexical items… from a variety of different sources" (Smith 1995, 333, 369). That label fails for another reason as well: *la lengua sagrada* originated not in Spanish-speaking Cuba, but already in the Cross River basin, where its historic presence is indirectly attested by an "alternative literacy" of gestural and graphic codes called *ǹsìbìdì/ǹchìbìrì* etc. (Daryell 1910, 1911, Talbot 1912, Adams 1952, 236, Á!bálògù 1978, 92-94, Röschenthaler 2011, cf. Boone Hill & Mignolo 1994). Although detailed comparison still needs to be done, *ǹsìbìdì* graphs closely resemble their Cuban counterparts in form and meaning (Cabrera 1975). As an African LX with a linguistically fragmented user base, *ǹsìbìdì* supported the "Ékpè polity" (Ruel 1969, 255), an 18th-19th century network of local lineage federations engaged in "trade without rulers" (Northrup 1968). Ékpè allies insured long distance debts and so enabled mass trafficking of inland Africans through the Bight of Biafra towards European settler-colonies in the Americas (Graeber 2011, 153-55, 412 and references therein). Thus *ǹsìbìdì* was known to African-born founders of Cuban Abakuá *cabildos*, and if a verbal sample of Ékpè secret language can still be obtained, continuity with the Abakuá *lengua sagrada* is likely to exist.

Etymologies of Abakuá expressions are consistent with *e-language* (LX) transmission scenarios. In the 195 items—a minor fraction—of Cabrera's corpus for which we find good Westafrican correspondences, the demographic proportions closely match the assumed linguistic profile obtaining at the relevant time in the Cross River port currently known as "Calabar".[6]

	ordinary vocabulary	proper names
Èfìk-Ìbìbìò (Lower Cross)	120 = 62%	30 = 16%
Ìgbò	8 = 4%	3 = 2%
Oroko (Guthrie A1, SW Cameroon) plus Èfúùt of "Calabar"	6 = 3%	9 = 5%
Éjághám (= Èkóí of Crabb 1969) plus Kúò ("Quä/Kwa") of "Calabar"	5 = 3%	5 = 3%
miscellaneous other languages	4 = 3%	5 = 3%

The ovewhelming predominance in Abakuá vocabulary of a single macro-cluster "Èfìk-Ìbìbìò" (Òyò-òyò 1943) contradicts the creolist stereotype of plantation *mixité* (e.g. Price 2001).[7] At the same time the consistent minor presence of three demographic neighbors (Ìgbò, Oroko/Èfúùt, Éjághám/Kúò) reduces the Èfìk-Ìbìbìò share of indentifiable African items below 80%. The shortfall is explained by either of two circumstances or both: (i) that Ékpè initiation was a crosslinguistic bridge across the entire region, as noted above, and (ii) that "Calabar" itself had become an ethnolinguistic amalgam by the relevant time.[8]

3. How are Abakuá messages conveyed?

If Cabrera's Abakuá glossary is incomplete, our glossary-of-a-glossary covers even less ground. Cabrera translates *Anaforuana*—the title of her 1975 catalog of 362 *ǹsìbìdì* designs—as "symbol, magic trace, commemoration, invocation" (1988, 51), but unless this can be narrowed down, too many semantic possibilities present themselves; even more allowing for phonetic variants. An Abakuá *maestro anónimo* (*p.c.*) proposes *afia fioriama* as an alternative of *anaforuana* (1988, 51) and suggests *anaforuama* for Cabrera's *afoforama* (1988, 190). His *n>m* emendation brings into play three different Ìgbò lemmas differing only in tone: *ámá* 'street, public space', *á!má* 'distinguishing or identifying mark', *àmà* 'act of witnessing, disclosure of a secret' (Williamson 1972, 37*f.*, Ígwè 1999, 60*f.*). Any one of these could underly the reported Cuban gloss, depending on how the rest parses out in Ìgbò—if it does at all.

To be sure, a word of *la lengua sagrada* doesn't need an etymology in order to supply the user with a lexical denotation. Most speakers of most L1s are none the worse for the fact that they are etymologically naive, but etymology has special, indirect relevance to an LX and its user. If a given, long Abakuá phrase is 'idiomatic' i.e. semantically opaque, etymology may be the only independent evidence of how the meaning is stored and retrieved. Of course even in L1s, idioms are far from rare—to *kick the bucket* in English you don't need either a pail or a pliable knee—but most L1 vocabulary is less opaque than that, and the individual

4. Semantic skewing also holds in gestural surrogate speech: about half of the conversational gestures sampled in Napoli (*n*=111) and Palermo (*n*=85) fall in only two domains: *food/sex/money* and *violence/secrecy*; the rest are general emoticons (Paura & Sorge 1999, Olivieri 2000).

5. To avoid racist notions of 'babytalk' (outlier structural simplicity) attached to the *creole* label by some scholars (e.g. McWhorter 1998), less tendentious terms can be coined like "younger" or "new" languages (Smith 2007, Aboh & Smith 2009), but even the blandest euphemism still prolongs commitment to the creole mystique and its distracting ideological sideshow, at the expense of cognitive naturalism.

6. Transposing *Kalabarị*—an Ịzǒn ethnonym—a hundred miles east of the Niger Delta to the Cross River estuary was a howler of 17th century Dutch cartography (Jones 1965, Ejituwu 1998). In the table above, proper (personal/group/place) names are factored out, on the grounds that they're more easily borrowed than ordinary vocabulary, and are to that extent less informative about the biography of the user—that's why anyone can namedrop *Prada*, *Camorra* and *Berlusconi* without having ever set foot in Italy or spoken one sentence of Italian. All of our claimed etymologies can be inspected in the appendix to the forthcoming English translation of Cabrera (1988).

7. The line between Èfìk and Ìbìbìò is more political than linguistic. A strictly single-source profile is found for another Cuban LX: *Nganga* alias *Palo* stems uniquely from ki-Kǒǒngǒ (Guthrie H16, Schwegler & Rojas-Primus 2010). For L1s, the demographic profile is more varied. In Jamaican Creole, after *triage*-ing out unlikely and "multiple" etymologies offered by Cassidy & Le Page (1967), Àkàn is the single largest component of the African vocabulary (160 ≤ *n* ≤ 210) but accounts at most for just a third of that (Kouwenberg 2008, 20). Berbice Dutch on the other hand owes 100% of its African etymologies to one single language Ịzǒn ("Ijaw/Ịjọ"), which is responsible for a third of all its basic/Swadesh vocabulary, the rest being either Arawak or Dutch (Kouwenberg 1995, 530, cf. Smith 1987, 119, Smith & al. 1987).

8. Today, elders in the city's barrios explain different ethnolinguistic markers by invoking diverse inflows of upcountry population in generations past. Migration metaphors are always a rich vein of historical consciousness, true or false. We anticipate that some anecdotal evidence of this type can be corroborated, and so isolated from the background noise of Nigeria's amped-up neo-ethnic assertiveness.

parts of most L1 idioms can be used in straightforwardly compositional ways—you can *fill the bucket* or *kick the ball* without memorizing the meaning of these phrases, you just have to know the separate words (semantics) and something about buckets and balls in the real world (pragmatic or encyclopedic knowledge). An LX by contrast depends less on literal denotation as discussed above, and can tolerate "ritual unintelligibility" (Warner-Lewis 1996, Wirtz 2005) on a scale that an L1 would crash. Somehow or other, LX unintelligibility does not impede the flow of information. Many initiation secrets are "no more than open secrets" (Abímbólá 1973, 43) and the interpretations of secret codes may be redundantly doubled in paralinguistic datastreams, accessed during public performances. The taboo is less on decoding a secret message than on claiming the right to reference this information openly in a socially regulated "linguistic market" (Bourdieu 1982/1991).

One telltale index of phrase opacity is the resegmentation of text. The acoustic signal of human speech doesn't add pauses where writing would separate words. Written wordspaces are useful to the extent they match audible parsing cues (Kaye 1989, 49*f.*), but in many languages—including Èfɪ̀k, Ìgbò and Yorùbá—divisions between 'words' are less important than the distinction between *phrases* and *bare roots*. In such languages, the choice between 'conjunctive' and 'disjunctive' word spelling is determined less by requirements of grammar than by preconceptions of scientists, humanists or missionaries applying technologies of literacy to their respective goals.**9** In codifying Abakuá as "una tradición oral escrita" (León 1971), Cabrera causes no practical problem by putting a space before the *m* in *ita musón* instead of after it, because *ita musón* is a fixed expression, but the same thing would make trouble in Èfɪ̀k because the two parts of the phrase *ìtàm úsọ́ñ* are syntactically independent. The denotation of *ìtàm úsọ́ñ* is a logical product of its components: nominal *ìtàm* and attributive *úsọ́ñ*, but the idiomatic meaning and fixed form of Abakuá *ita musón* guarantees that which side of the space the *m* goes on is a non-issue.

ìtàm	'hat'	(Goldie 1874, 139, Urua *& al.* 2012, 142)
úsọ́ñ	'strong, old'	(Goldie 1874, 326, cf. Urua *& al.* 2012, 271*f.*)
ìtàm úsọ́ñ	'old man's hat' < [[*ìtàm*] *úsọ́ñ*]	(Engineer Bassey, *p.c.*)
ita musón	'sombrereta'	(Cabrera 1988, 483)

The remaining question is how lexical meaning (denotation) is carried in an e-language without context-sensitive phrasal syntax. Consider the Abakuá expression transcribed with the Spanish gloss already discussed above:

Abairemo afoiremo weri beyui bayuaka mbori taibó añandé	'Con él que sabe no se juega' (Cabrera 1988, 12)

Confronted with this text, an erudite Abakuá consultant draws a complete blank. But coming from outside, we can't ignore the presence of a wide range of phonetic and spelling variants of the second 'word' including these effective synonyms:

afomireme	'saco, ropa del diablito'	(Cabrera 1988, 30)
efomiremo	'camisa, ropa, saco del diablito'	(Cabrera 1988, 153)
Efó Iremó	'the Íreme body-suit in Efó territory'	(*maestro anónimo, p.c.*)

Across the whole corpus, not only can the same meaning map to differently spelled audible forms, but vice-versa the same phrase or fragment can evoke different translated interpretations, as shown by an independent token of *abairemo afoiremo*:

Abairemo afomiremo kúkoro makabuyo kúkoro mafonkamo	'Soy caballero de sotana y ustedes tienen que arrodillarse
abairemo afomiremo kúkoro mafonkúiremo	cuando yo presente el *Sese Eribó*' (Cabrera 1988, 12)
aluá obonekue ndibó makotero ndibó ñampe	

Nevertheless, all the different occurrences share a consistent reference to high initiation status that demands respect!

The next chunk of the text in question is *weri beyui*. With different forms this is consistently associated with funeral sacrifice:

asango weri nyampe	'los ritos fúnebres' (Cabrera 1988, 71)
were beyuí eson bayankán	'cuando se pone la cabeza del chivo sobre el tambor de *Ekueñón*' (Cabrera 1988, 438)

Continuing along: besides *bayankán* above, potential congeners of *bayuaka* appear a few more times in slightly different forms:

bañuaka	'borracho' (Cabrera 1988, 98)
mbayakán	'adelantar' (Cabrera 1988, 336)

The semantic non-intersection of these two suggests that one of them must be disregarded—provisionally, the first one.

Mbori occurs in more than a hundred lemmas of Cabrera's corpus (sometimes, as *kambori*), almost always with the clear literal meaning 'goat'. This is no surprise: *mbori* has a well known etymology in the Benue-Kwa branch of Niger-Congo. The item's Cross River reflexes include the following:**10**

m̀bóí	'goat'	Éjághám-Kúọ̀	(Crabb 1969, 70, Miller 2009, 54)
ébót	'goat'	Èfɪ̀k-Ìbìbìò	(Goldie 1874, 58, Adams 1952, 194, Urua 2012, 91)

Taibó, in turn, recurs in numerous other lemmas including

ngomo taibó	'polvo de yeso blanco. Se llama el acto de rayar a los hermanos por quienes Ekue tiene duelo' (Cabrera 1988, 394)
etié soúso maserén ngomo taibó beromo nyankue	'palabras que se pronuncian en la ceremonia fúnebre, en el momento de dibujar los símbolos en el cadáver del *abanekue*…' (Cabrera 1988, 222)

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9. Both the traditional taxonomy of *word* as "the minimum of free form" (Bloomfield 1935, 178) and the modern distinction of X⁰ *word* vs. XP *phrase* (Baker 1988, 1995) break down in most languages (Sapir 1921, 130, Guthrie 1948, Stahlke 1971, Sietsema 1989, Russell 1999, Manfredi 2008, 2010, Mair 2011). A valiant attempt to rescue the "definition of word" (di Sciullo *&* Williams 1987) for generative grammar resorted to multiple, incommensurate criteria, proving that the concept itself is better abandoned or dissolved (Marantz 1995).

10. Note in passing the differential phonetic resemblance of these two Cross River cognates to the Afrocuban reflex.

A dozen adjacent lemmas support a simple translation of *ngomo* as 'yeso', which is confirmed externally as well:

ńdòm 'white kaolin clay'   Èfị̀k-Ìbìbìò   (Goldie 1874, 207, Urua 2012, 210)

By subtraction this leaves *taibó* on internal grounds to denote 'white'—an inference confirmed by many of Cabrera's examples.

Finally, the closest match in the corpus to *ñandé* shows up with an alternant string segmentation:

obón kereñande múkere   'pescador que hace nasas para atrapar peces' (Cabrera 1988, 447)

and *múkere*—with a different stress pattern to be sure—independently seems to denote 'fish' in this expression:

Ekueñón ubia ñandi mukeré   '*Ekueñón* vio que era un pez lo que llevaba *Isunekue*' (Cabrera 1988, 190)

This leaves *ñandé* to denote killing—in West Africa, *to go fishing* usually translates as 'to kill fish'—and this is confirmed by our *maestro anónimo* who remarks (p.c.) about *nandi* 'cuidar' (Cabrera 1988, 423) that *ñande* is chanted before the sacrifice of a goat.

The foregoing concordance search leads to a semantic analysis of the text as if it is composed by additive linear accumulation, an e-language operation, rather than by the phrasal merger which defines i-language (L1) syntax. The added objects are neither 'words' nor phrases but 'formulas'—audible poetic gestures wielded by performance virtuosi in many great oral cultures of the world (Parry 1928, Kiparsky 1976). Parsed in this way, the text under discussion yields the following mental representation.[11]

<For> the funeral of a highly initiated person, the appropriate sacrifice is a goat <and nothing less than that>

Applied as a proverb, i.e. outside the literal context of a funeral, this idea is not very different from *Con él que sabe no se juega.* Q.e.d.

Three concluding comments:

(i) Assuming that visual and gestural pragmatics support *la lengua sagrada* in ritual performance, the above analysis predicts that these gestures and other visual signs will synchronise closely with the chanted texts. This remains to be shown.

(ii) The division of interpretive labor between lexical denotation and pragmatic signaling may vary between Abakuá and other collegial genres such as *Nganga* and *Lucumí*. For example, etymological lexical meaning seems to account for a relatively greater share of the *cajón* texts of Warden (2006) analyzed by Fuentes *&* Schwegler (2014), than what we find in Abakuá. We can try harder, but if cross-genre differences remain, historical as well as formal explanations can be considered.

(iii) This analysis, whatever its value, hinges on a principled distinction between two kinds of meaning, standardly known in cognitive science as semantics and pragmatics. This same difference is collapsed by Palmié's assumption that the

Palo Monte tradition is (re)produced within a *semantic* framework that draws to a considerable extent on conceptions current in Regla de Ocha (and, to a lesser extent, on the semantic linkages between attributes that deities in Regla de Ocha share with Catholic saints, with whom they have become conventionally associated).   (2005, 17, original italics)

On the contrary, no necesary relationship holds between shared practices and ideologies of various Afrocuban cultural genres (hopefully described beyond an anecdotal level) and the independent semantic contents of the large expressive corpora inherited and propagated by initiates in the respective traditions. Instead, it's only by distinguishing between these two types of information in principle, and then applying the distinction in analysis, that transmission of these *lenguas sagradas*, not to mention their effective use, qualifies as other than a "miracle" (Price 2001). A materialist has to assume that the impressive "constructive propagation" and "macrostability" of these traditions under difficult life conditions across large populations in time and space is not a fluke of historical self-fashioning, and rests on something more than the esthetic attractiveness of these sounds and moving images as memetic "superstimuli", but is also motivated by more prosaic "cognitive and practical abilities and goals" (Sperber *&* Hirshfield 2004, 45, Sperber *&* Claidière 2006, 21).

Appendix: Google Spanglish, 18 September 2016

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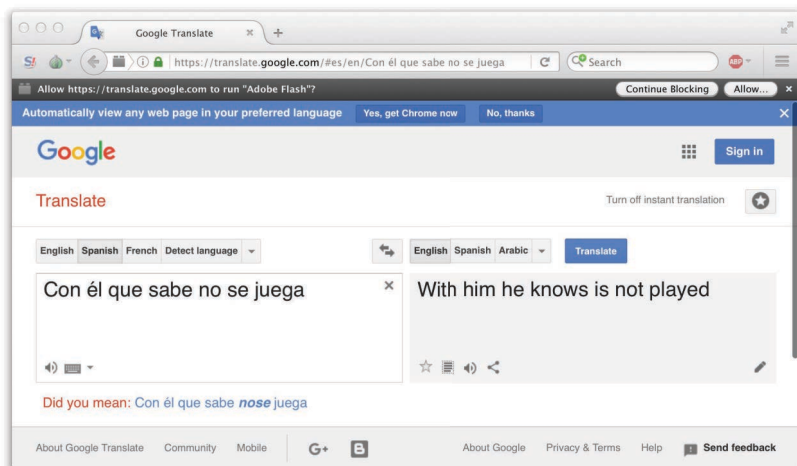
11. Logical connectives <enclosed in angle brackets> have no direct correspondents in the Abakuá text itself. By hypothesis, they arise in all coherent discourse by principles of conversational implicature (Sperber *&* Wilson 1995).

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