During a recent conference on African Urban and Youth Languages (AUYLs), held in Cape Town in July 2013, a number of important issues were raised regarding the status of informal and youth languages around the African continent. Some of these informal varieties appear to be becoming 'lingua francas' or vernaculars in the urban space. In order to function as such, an urban variety would require systematisation which seems to be at odds with their historically subcultural alignments. Additionally, the relationship between these varieties and standard languages and/or urban languages remains ambiguous.

This paper firstly outlines some recent work in South Africa on the variety 'tsotsitaal' which has begun to provide some answers. Investigations are being undertaken focusing on: the syntactic frame of AUYLs and their grammatical departures from 'urban' forms of African languages; descriptions of AUYL use by children in the home; their relationship to gesture; and gender dynamics. These new studies add to knowledge by answering some of the existing questions regarding the trajectories and statuses of AUYLs. They also enable us to delineate areas that remain open for exploration, gaps in current knowledge, and needs in future research.

Secondly, this paper presents data from a recent multi-sited research project on tsotsitaals, to illustrate the slippery nature of terms such as 'variety', 'standard', and even 'language' when applied in a language practice context such as that of AUYLs. It considers the sociolinguistic proposals of 'metrolingualism', 'crossing' and 'linguistic repertoire' which are being used by theorists to engage with the complexities of language in urban contexts. The paper reflects on whether these frameworks allow for the kinds of variation found in AUYLs, and ultimately considers whether any existing accounts of language are descriptively adequate.

Keywords: Tsotsitaal, African urban youth language.