Orientations to English in post-apartheid schooling

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A study of sociolinguistic and identity changes amongst adolescent girls in multilingual schools

Introduction

As Voloshinov has famously argued, 'the word is the most sensitive index of social changes, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth' (Voloshinov, 1986: 19). Scrutiny of young people's discourses on language together with their language practices offers us a window into a society in transition, such as present-day South Africa. This article examines the language ideologies and language practices of Black youth attending previously White, now desegregated, suburban schools in South African cities, important spaces for the production of an expanding Black middle class (Soudien, 2004). Due to their resourcing during apartheid (both financial and human) previously White schools are aligned with quality education and perceived as strategic sites for the acquisition and maintenance of a prestige variety of South African English. This article looks at how mainly African girls (15–16 years) position themselves in relation to English, drawing on data collected using ethnographic approaches in four desegregated schools in South African cities: three in Johannesburg, Gauteng and one in Cape Town, Western Cape.[1] The discussion focuses on two significant themes: English and the [re]production of race; and the place of English in young people's linguistic repertoires. My aim is to show how African youth in desegregated schools orient themselves to English and what their language ideologies and language practices might tell us about macro social processes, including the (re)constitution of race in South Africa. Schooling, as Bourdieu points out, is one of the most important sites for social reproduction and is thus also one of the key sites, 'which imposes the legitimate forms of discourse and the idea that discourse should be recognised if and

only if it conforms to the legitimate norms' (Bourdieu, 1977: 650). However, co-present with processes of reproduction are practices that work to subvert and unsettle dominant discourses. Suburban desegregated schools are thus productive sites for the re-making of cultural practices (including language) and identities.

English and the (re)production of race

While language has been central to the social construction and ascription of racial categories in South Africa, the language/race relationship has not been a focus of sociological or sociolinguistic study. As both McKinney (2007a, 2007b) and Mesthrie (2012) show, race is a highly complex and contested concept in South Africa and globally. The falsity of race as a biological construct

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(Omi and Winant, 1993) and the fact that race as socially constructed is a highly heterogeneous and unstable category (Hall, 1992; Rattansi, 1999) has been convincingly demonstrated. However, what continues to puzzle and disturb analysts is the ongoing purchase of static race categories in every-day life and people's sense making of their experiences (see Soudien, 2012). Thus, while race exists neither as a biological reality nor as an essentialist signifier of homogeneous experiences shared by social groups, it is pervasive in everyday discourse, as are its daily material effects.

Previously I have argued that the historical racial labelling of varieties of English in South Africa, such as White South African English, Coloured English, South African Indian English and Black South African English (e.g. Lanham, 1996; Mesthrie, 2004; van Rooy, 2004; Bowerman, 2004), contributes, albeit unwittingly, to the essentialist (re)construction of race, as such labels construct the false impression that all people of the same 'race' speak the same variety of English. Mesthrie's (2010) research on the deracialisation of the GOOSE vowel in South African English, which shows Black middle-class females who attend/ed previously White schools adapting to the norm of fronting the GOOSE vowel, a 'prestige White middle-class norm' (p. 3) provides a welcome contrast to this as does his recent research on the dynamics of Coloured and Indian English in five South African cities where he points out that 'the criss-crossing of dialect and ethnicity is an interesting one that can produce anomalies that fly in the face of the simplistic racial categorization of South Africa in former times' (Mesthrie, 2012: 391).

What then do we find in the ways in which young people label their own and other's use of English? I will argue through the data presented below that young people's linguistic ideologies ('sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use', Silverstein, 1979: 193) and language practices show a simultaneous sedimenting and destabilising of race categories. Furthermore the prestige attached to White varieties of English contributes to constituting the ongoing normativity of whiteness, and othering (at times stigmatisation) of blackness in desegregated suburban schools.

Students in three schools spoke about 'White English' as 'proper English', marking this as a prestigious variety. In extract 1 below, taken from an interview with Gugu, a female learner at one of the Johannesburg co-ed schools, the notion of

'White English' as a prestige variety is reinforced. Here Gugu and the researcher are discussing different kinds of English and Gugu begins talking about some of her 'stuck up friends' who speak 'posh':

Extract 1
Gugu: you can have the rich spoiled ones [friends], I have like three of those. Louis Vuitton or Gucci, that's all they talk about, their clothes and themselves.
R1: ee
Gugu: and their English is actually like wow, [. . .]
R1: their English is what?
Gugu: it's wow! It's like you're speaking to a White person.
R1: oh, maybe . . .
Gugu: . . . but she is as Black as Black.
R1: but it's like Whites
Gugu: ja ja
R1: and the clothes they wear?
Gugu: all those labels.
[Interview with Gugu, Fairview]
R1 = researcher 1, Clifford Ndlangamandla

Gugu's description of her friends' use of English, 'it's wow!', indicates that she finds it impressive. In considering the way in which these 'stuck up girls' speak, Gugu shows her association of 'White people's English' with snobbery and furthermore with a particular kind of elite consumption in the reference to exclusive international fashion designers such as Vuitton and Gucci. Similarly, on another occasion where students at this school were discussing varieties and different accents of English in their English lesson, Gugu speaks about 'Louis Vuitton English' as a kind of 'posh' English (video recorded English lesson, 13 April 2005, Fairview). 'Louis Vuitton' English speaks of the social class dimension in different accents and varieties of English in South Africa; Gugu is not merely linking posh English to White speakers but also to wealth and the ability to consume or at least to the desire for elite consumption. Gugu's exclamation 'it's wow!' in referring to her friend who is 'Black as Black' speaking like a 'White person' also highlights the continued power of racial labelling of accents and brands of English as well as people's expectations that one should be able to identify 'race' from audible features, the phonological aspects of the variety of English used.

In extract 2 below, taken from an interview with two Grade 10 girls at the same school, they initially struggle to describe the kind of English they use,

and eventually draw on the resources of racial labelling to do this.

Extract 2

[The interviewees had been discussing the different languages that they speak and mentioned 'proper English'; the researcher is following up on this]

R1: What kind of English do you speak?

Lulu: English?

R1:mm

Lulu: I think I speak a type of English that eh, (pause) I don't know because (pause)

Lindi: it's hard

Lulu: I know. It's like, I don't know

Lindi: her English is good

Lulu: it is the type of White people, type of English.

Lindi: Mm

Lulu: You know what I mean? It's not the Coloured English, it is not the Indian English.

Lindi: it's not the one mixed with your, with your…

Lulu: language

Lindi: African language, ja, ja,

Lulu: So, it's basically that, because you can't, you know how Black people, like my mama…, for example, how she speaks English.

Lindi: Ja,

Lulu: You can hear that she comes from Black schools and she was, you know what I mean? […]

Lindi: ja

Lulu: so, I don't speak English in that way. I don't speak English in the Coloured ways […]

Lindi: (laughs)

R1: (laughing) and you?

Lindi: the same

(Interview with Lulu and Lindi, Fairview 08/06/05, p11)

R= researcher 1, Clifford Ndlangamandla

The students' characterisation above further reproduces racial categorisations of the different varieties of English present in South Africa. If one were working with a static, unified category of blackness, there would be some irony in Lulu's emphatic description of her English as 'White people's' type of English, especially when she addresses the researcher (a Black male himself) saying 'you know how Black people [speak]'. Lulu's English is described as 'good' by her friend and then as 'White people's type of English' which conflates 'good' English with 'White' English. However, despite these statements, Lulu is clearly working with heterogeneous categories of 'Black' and positions the researcher

as being differently Black from her mother. Lulu goes on to clarify what she means here: she is referring to people, like her mother, who are a product of township or rural schooling ('Black schools'). This relates to the work that has been done on Black South African English (BSAE) in South Africa, which also sees this form of English as largely a product of Department of Education and Training (DET), i.e. the apartheid government department for former Black schools or ex-DET schooling (cf de Klerk & Gough, 2002).

In the Cape Town girls' school where I conducted research, White students were still in the majority, with Coloured and African girls making up about 40% of the students. I had observed that girls who identified as Coloured were much less likely to use phonological features of White South African English and predominantly used phonological features of Cape Flats English (Finn, 2004). In an interview I asked two girls who self-identified as Coloured whether they felt that they needed to 'speak a particular way to fit in in this school'.

Extract 3

Sumaya: ok I feel like that like I hardly talk in class because of the way I normally speak like I'm scared to talk in class because of the way I speak. I speak differently from the way *they* do the way the rest of them do

Cathy: (pause) mm joh I don't know (pause) for me it's hard because I'm a Coloured person that looks like I'm White (C:mhm) so people expect me to talk like a White person like not as a White person but not using the words that I do (C:mhm) and because I've got a more Coloured way of talking so

Sumaya, who generally uses the phonology of Cape Flats English, suggests that there is stigmatisation of her use of English in the school where WSAE is the norm. That she does not speak out in class discussions was confirmed by my lesson observations in the English class in particular. Both Sumaya and Cathy's discourses constitute White ways of speaking as the norm in their school environment and Cathy's discourse of race and language in particular shows how expectations about how one will speak are often related to the unspoken practices of racial classification that permeate everyday life. As such these extracts, as well as 1 and 2 above, point to the (re)production of race through language practices and the continuing construction of the normativity of whiteness through the use of features from a White 'ethnolinguistic repertoire' (Benor, 2010) as well as the

stigmatisation of Black South African English and Cape Flats English. At the same time, though, we see the destabilisation of the race descriptor WSAE through the Johannesburg Black girls' description of their own English as like the English of 'White people'.

In my research I have also analysed the ways in which the prestige of WSAE does not always hold for young Black students attending suburban schools, who continue to live in townships on the periphery of the cities. An interesting illustration of this is seen in the labelling of Black students who attend suburban ex-model C schools and draw on a White ethnolinguistic repertoire as *coconuts*. In both individual and group interviews across the schools, students consistently identified the label 'coconut' as referring to:

- Black people who speak 'like a White person'
- Black people who speak English most of the time
- Black people who choose to speak English rather than an African language (e.g. in a township or rural setting) or who are unable to speak an African language
- Black people who are considered to be 'acting White' or as 'Black on the outside but White on the inside' (McKinney, 2007a: 17)

I argue that labelling practices such as 'coconut' are interesting in their reflection of contemporary discourses of 'race' in South Africa. Simultaneously challenging and destabilising static categories of 'race' as produced by apartheid, they also work to police racial boundaries. While some (relatively privileged) young people can exercise symbolic power through speaking a particular kind of English, others (relatively disadvantaged and without access to middle-class schooling) can exercise such power in their ability to exclude privileged peers from their social networks.

One particular student in the Johannesburg girls' school was explicit in her rejection of racial labelling and categorising according to language use. Maria, who reported her mother as Xhosa speaking and father as Venda speaking, was only rarely observed speaking indigenous South African languages. In one of the group interviews, her classmates accused her of being a snob for speaking predominantly English. Maria strongly objected to this and on several occasions raised the question: 'If I speak English, does it make me less Black anyway?' In this repeated question, Maria implicitly challenges the homogenisation constructed by labels such as White South African English (WSAE) and Black South

African English (BSAE). She also points to the complex reality of the relationship between 'race' and language use as well as to the shifting relationships between 'race' and performing identity in South Africa. On a more positive note, however, is the way in which the 'coconut' label signifies the 'sub-cultural capital' of indigenous languages among African youth in the schools.

English in a linguistic repertoire

Extended observation showed that for African students in all four schools, the use of a prestige variety of English was only one resource in their linguistic repertoires, with African languages widely used by Black students in the informal spaces of the school (e.g. offline conversation in the classroom and outside of the classroom space) (see Ndlangamandla, 2011). In the interview with Gugu (extract 1 above), she shows her awareness of how she can use the full range of her linguistic resources to perform different identities and to resist the 'coconut' label. The interviewer has just asked the learner, Gugu, whether she gets labelled for attending a previously White school.

Extract 4

Gugu: you one of those, of those 'White-wanna-be'

R1: mm, mm

Gugu: Just because I go to a White school does not mean that I wanna be White

R1: oh, White wanna be

Gugu: White wanna be, coconut

R1: oh!

Gugu: oreo, topdeck, ja there's everything, man

R1: and then what do you think of those labels (…)

Gugu: I don't care. I am not one of those people who listen to what others say (R1:mm) I might go along with what others say but I don't take it to heart or mind (R1: mm). Others do that

R1: you said that they do that for the school you go to, what about for the way you're speaking?

Gugu: Ja, I can change my way, the way I'm speaking (…)

If I were to leave school now…I can even be more Tsotsitaal (a township hybrid of different languages), I can be as *Kasi*[2] [township] as all of them (R1:mm) and if I were to go to Sandton, I can be a nigger and like 'yo gal' (mm). If I go to the Eastern Cape I will be Xhosa as Xhosa, and just forget about English (…) I am one of those individual, individuals (…) I can be different from everybody else (R1: ee) but at

the same time, be different and the same.
[Interview with Gugu, Fairview]

Gugu produces a hybrid and fluid discourse of subjectivity in the extract. In each case she refers not only to the use of a range of named languages, e.g. English and Xhosa, but links these to different ethnolinguistic identities as well as to distinct geographical spaces (school/suburb, township, Sandton/shopping mall, and rural Eastern Cape). Gugu also shows her understanding of the need to master and deploy different languages and varieties of language in order to be accepted in the sub-cultures she participates in.[3] Her multilingual repertoire and awareness of language are invaluable in giving her the resources to move across what many other young people might consider impermeable boundaries (e.g. the rural-urban divide) and mutually exclusive geographical spaces, but what Gugu shows to be far more porous, and in continually allowing her to be 'different and the same'. Gugu signals her awareness of the notion that 'discourse is a symbolic asset which can receive different values depending on the market in which it is offered' (Bourdieu, 1977: 651).

The final data extract I will discuss is of naturally occurring interaction, collected with a learner wearing a digital microphone during the 'Living class', which took place once a week in the Johannesburg girls' school with the aim of teaching students life skills as well as 'arts and culture'. On this occasion the teachers of two classes had separately arranged for their lessons to take place outside on the school fields. While one class (10Y) waited for their teacher to arrive with sports equipment, some girls began to play circle games involving singing in a range of languages and dancing in a large circle (with call and response as well as rhythmic repetitions). Before long most of the class were singing loudly and dancing in a circle demonstrating considerable skills in both and drawing on their knowledge of local popular youth culture and indigenous languages.

Some distance away, another class, significantly the top performing class, 10A, were seated in a circle with their teacher, Ms A, playing what she described as 'concentration games'. These included games which focused on listening skills as well as English pronunciation and enunciation such as 'broken telephone' and tongue twisters (in the vein of 'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers'). Not only are the students' bodies controlled as they are seated in a circle with their eyes on the teacher, but the activity itself is designed to (re)produce them as speakers of a particular variety of educated

standard South African English or 'White South African English'. However, two students, Zaza and Thobeka, decide to escape the highly controlled, English-only space and move to join the students playing circle games on the other side of the field. Below is an audio-recorded extract from conversation between the two girls as they do this:

Extract 5

Ms A (teacher):   a clickety clackety clock
Girls: a clickety clackety clock [Zaza and Thobeka get up and leave the group of girls from 10A]

Thobeka: (softly, off record) Ma'am, we do not want to play with you. *Ukwatele ukuthi asifuni ukudlala naye* (Zulu: She is angry because we do not want to play with her)
Zaza: *Uthini*? (Zulu: What is she saying?)
Thobeka: *Uthi sibuye* (Zulu: She said we must come back) (…)
Zaza: *Iyabhora le game ayidlalayo* clickety clackety clock (Zulu: The game she is playing is boring) (singing and dancing together with the group from 10Y)Eyo! Eyo! Eyo! Nohoho! Tha, tha, tha, tha! *Ngena! Uyasha na!* (Zulu: Come! Do you feel the heat!) Eyo! Eyo! Eyo! Eyo! Eyo! Nohoho! (continue whistling, dancing, singing)
Thobeka: Mam is gonna kill us should we go back? [they don't return]
Zaza: UMiss A '*concentration games girls*' [mimicking voice of Ms A] uhuh [No] thank you (Zaza 15 June 2005, 13:20ff)

The girls resist their teacher's assimilationist practices here[4] by leaving her class and moving to join in with another class playing circle games. They also move fluently across different linguistic resources in their repertoires, using both Zulu and English to criticise their teacher, with Zaza appropriating and parodying the teacher's voice in English. Their talk suggests that it is the teacher's disciplining of their bodies, including their speech, rather than English that they are resisting here, although Zaza's parodying of her teacher's voice suggests that she does not aspire to sound exactly like her (White) teacher.

Conclusion

In this article I have presented interview and observational data from previously White, now desegregated, suburban schools to show how young Black

girls are orienting themselves to varieties of South African English. I argue that both their linguistic ideologies and language practices provide insights for our understanding of the complexity of language/race relationships and for the (re)production of race in post-apartheid South Africa.

Note

1 'African' in this sense refers to Black people from South Africa and other parts of Africa.
2 'Kasi' is a popular term for township, and is derived from *lokasie*, Afrikaans for location, which was an apartheid term for townships.
3 Of course whether Gugu is ultimately successful in the eyes of others in moving across these domains cannot be ascertained from this data.
4 McKinney (2010) provides a fuller discussion of assimilationist discourses and practices at this school.

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