

Language, identity, and ideology: High-achieving scholarship women

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Abstract

This article addresses the linguistic identities of high-achieving women who are participants in a prestigious scholarship programme at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). We examined how these high-achieving women negotiate and construct their linguistic identities within the context of the university's Anglicised institutional culture and against the backdrop of South Africa's multilingual society. Individual and focus group interviews were examined by employing an experience-centred and culturally orientated approach to narrative (Squire 2008). Our examination revealed that language is both an academic and social intermediary of experience at the university, and that language functions as both an identity marker and an ideology that permeates the university and wider society. How participants transgress and maintain their linguistic identities, as well as how they subvert, and align with, the dominant university ideology is discussed.

Keywords: language, identity, ideology, university, scholarship programme, women in science

INTRODUCTION

The push to recruit more women into the fields of science, engineering and technology has contributed to scholarships, bursaries and high school preparation programmes aimed at producing more women in the sciences. While considerable research has been undertaken that addresses university women's identities as science students and the challenges posed by traditional gender role paradigms (see, e.g., Danielsson 2012; Lynch and Nowosenetz 2009), less is known about how these women negotiate their linguistic identities within these spaces. This article addresses the linguistic identities

of high-achieving women who are participants in a prestigious scholarship programme at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). This scholarship programme provides first generation, academically talented black¹ women from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds with the necessary financial, academic, social, and psychological support needed to aid their adjustment, retention and graduation from university. We examine how high-achieving women negotiate and construct their linguistic identities within the context of the university's Anglicised institutional culture and against the backdrop of South Africa's multilingual society. Our analysis is foregrounded by both the university's dominant English culture and the scholars' position as high-achieving women transgressing traditional gender roles.

Within a country as linguistically diverse as South Africa, language policy and practices at educational institutions have been a topic of much concern (see, e.g., Alexander 1997; De Klerk 2002; Hugh 1995; Murray 2002; Webb 2002). Given the 11 official languages and the country's grim socio-political history, which has, and continues to, divide people along racial, ethnic, and linguistic lines, it would be expected that a great deal of students at all levels of education grapple with negotiating their linguistic identities. We argue that the language(s) that these individual scholarship students speak(s), and the ways in which they speak in relation to others, plays a part in shaping their identity. Although language and identity are not necessarily conflated, language scholars have pointed to the significant relationship between language and identity (see, e.g., Norton 1997). Bucholtz and Hall (2005) have noted that identities can be linguistically indexed via stances, styles, or linguistic structures and systems. Moreover, research on female students that addresses both language and gender has provided insights into identity formation and practice (Bucholtz 1999).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A university's culture, values, and language(s) are potent defining forces, that while commonly taken for granted, should not be underestimated (cf. Clark 1972). The university is not devoid of its own particular character, which is shaped by its history, practices, and the ideologies it espouses. It has been noted that traditionally Afrikaans-speaking universities, such as the University of Pretoria, Stellenbosch University, and the former Rand Afrikaans University, were instruments of the apartheid state and upheld conservative agendas, whereas, traditionally English-speaking universities, such as Wits, the University of Cape Town (UCT), and the former University of Natal, have been viewed as 'liberal' universities that rejected apartheid policies and practice² (Bunting 2006). Individuals do not exist independently from their environment, and therefore we can presume that a university's culture, ideology, values and language shape not only the university itself, but also have an impact on the experiences of students who find themselves within the institution.

It is also necessary to situate this study within the larger South African socio-linguistic milieu. In South Africa, language, and the particular way in which people

speaking a language is inextricably tied to their race (Soudien and Botsis 2011). While language can act as a signifier for race, this does not mean that people can escape from the hierarchical categories that were produced and perpetuated during the apartheid era, and thus 'speaking English well [continues to be] a form of prestige associated with access to educational institutions', whiteness, and desirability (ibid., 98). Moreover, speaking English well is perhaps even more desirable in the context of the university, where consequences exist for not speaking English in a particular manner. For instance, black students at UCT who attended historically disadvantaged schools reported refraining from asking questions in class, as they feared being laughed at for speaking with a particular accent, by their black peers who were labelled as 'coconuts'³ and had attended formerly segregated white schools and private schools (Smith, Dube, Gasnola and Myeza 2004, 5–6).

While speaking English well is highly valued within the university context, some students struggle to gain a firm command of the English language. University students who do not speak English as a first language can face serious academic challenges at the tertiary level (see, e.g., Kapp 1998; Paxton 2007; Thesen and Pletzen 2006). More specifically, Agar (1991) found that African students who spoke English as a second language, and who participated in an Academic Support Programme at Wits struggled to express themselves in English and understand the English used in textbooks. However, Agar (ibid.) notes that these types of language problems are ameliorated as students gain more experience and progress in their academic careers. Yet, the dismal passing rates at South African universities raise questions concerning the likelihood that these students are afforded the opportunity to progress in their academic careers.

Discourse within South Africa on English language imperialism is pervasive and can be traced back to Milner's Anglicisation efforts during the turn of the 20th century (Hugo 1998). However, English language imperialism is not specific to the South African context. It has been argued that English has been legitimated, while African languages across the continent have been stigmatised (Phillipson 1996). In light of this assertion, Phillipson (ibid.) makes a case for multilingualism, and predicts that English instruction alone will likely lead to an English-speaking elite that is estranged from the rest of society. While there is indeed a case to be made for African language and multilingual instruction, it is necessary to acknowledge that in South Africa, instituting an African language as the medium of instruction is not without contention. Barkhuizen and Gough (1996, 453–454) have pointed out that 'the apartheid system used promotion of the mother tongue principle, specifically the advancement of the indigenous African languages as subject and medium of instruction, as a central instrument of the policy of divide and rule'. Thus, the promotion of African language instruction may be seen by some as tied to substandard Bantu education, which was intentionally developed to subjugate the African population and create divisions. As such, language in South Africa is firmly entrenched in the country's socio-political history and is implicated in its ideology, power, inequality, and past injustice. Despite the debates that African

language instruction may raise within some communities, a stance has been taken to promote multilingualism within higher education in an effort to promote and reflect South Africa's diverse linguistic society. This is evident in the 2002 Language Policy for Higher Education legislation which mandates that universities introduce multilingualism in their teaching and learning activities (Madiba 2010). However, as will be discussed in the following section, university practices are not necessarily aligned with national mandates and university policies.

WITS: LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

The study draws on a prestigious scholarship programme based at Wits. In practice, Wits' formal language of instruction, administration, and operation continues to be English. The high value placed on English is apparent in that virtually all formal university business is conducted in this language (with a few exceptions, such as the selected language courses offered by the School of Literature and Language Studies). It is, however, noteworthy that Wits' language policy has signalled a shift away from English as the sole language of instruction (Wits 2003). The policy supports the use of South Africa's 11 official languages at the university and specifies that Sesotho will in the future be developed into a language used as a medium of instruction. However, implementing the objectives of the language policy is a difficult task that requires not only substantial training efforts, but also a shift in people's ideology. The policy has proposed ambitious undertakings that were set to have already been implemented:

- providing courses in Sesotho/IsiZulu for academic, administrative and support staff from 2011; and
- requiring students who do not speak an African language to complete two credit-bearing modules in basic communicative competence in Sesotho or IsiZulu. These modules will be a requirement for all qualifications from 2011 (Wits 2003, 3).

However, to date, little, if anything has been done to implement and enforce the aforementioned policy. As Madiba (2010) notes, the bulk of language policies that have been adopted by universities across South Africa, view the incorporation of African languages as taking place in the distant future, and not as an immediate priority.

In examining UCT's language policy, Madiba (*ibid.*, 330) notes that '[t]he challenge is how to provide access to English without entrenching its hegemonic position'. In other words, given that English is a global language that has the potential to open up countless opportunities for people, how can it continue to be part of the university, without it being ascribed higher status to that of indigenous African languages? Indeed, a shift away from viewing English as the preferred and predominant language proves to be difficult when Wits' English legacy, which dates

back to its founding, is taken into consideration. When the university officially came into existence in 1922, it counted on a large cohort of exceptional senior academics from Great Britain – it is these academics who built the institution's spirit and traditions, undoubtedly, in British fashion (Wits 1966).

As early as the 1930s, Wits was accused of language discrimination by Afrikaans-speaking students, since English was (and continues to be) the only language of instruction in virtually all of the faculties (Murray 1982). While these allegations may have been more easily dismissed during the early years of the university, they can no longer be ignored. Today, English-only policies are increasingly viewed as inadequate and it is widely acknowledged that university students should be prepared to participate in a multilingual South Africa (Madiba 2010; UCT 1999). Despite English being the formal language of instruction, cursory observations of informal interactions at Wits reveal the multilingual nature of the student population. While monolingual English instruction at the university level has come under criticism, implementing a model that equally values all languages concerned has proved to be a difficult challenge. This may be because employment statistics of graduates from historically white institutions speak to engrained inequality in the higher education system, with degrees from Wits continuing to be associated with quality and prestige (Gultig 2000, 51). Thus, Wits has a vested interest in protecting the economic value of its degrees, offered in English.

METHOD

In the current article, we examine how high-achieving women negotiate and construct their linguistic identities within the context of Wits' Anglicised institutional culture and against the backdrop of South Africa's multilingual society. This study drew on 19 individual interviews and two focus group interviews with the participants in the scholarship programme. The interviews were accessed from the Student Equity and Talent Management Unit's (SETMU) archival data and were collected by one of the authors, in some cases, with the assistance of another researcher in the SETMU. The individual interviews elicited information concerning the participants' home language, language of instruction during high school, university preparedness, academic challenges, and support systems available to them. The interviews were approximately one hour in duration. They were audio-recorded and transcribed. The first focus group interview consisted of ten participants, while the second focus group consisted of nine participants. The focus group interviews asked participants broad questions about their transition to the university; how they cope with academic challenges; and their expectations of their proximal academic year.

Data analysis

An experience-centred and culturally orientated approach to narrative (Squire 2008) was adopted. According to this approach, narrative includes 'all sequential and meaningful stories of personal experience that people produce' (ibid., 42).

Thus, stories could be about personal change, themes, a general state or experience. Additionally, the data were analysed by drawing from thematic content analysis and a hermeneutic perspective. As such, themes were inductively derived from the data. The interview data were coded using Atlas.ti and reviewed several times by each researcher. Preliminary categories, based on the pre-ordinate quotations pertaining to language, were generated and served as a guiding framework for subsequent coding of information. Based on these categories, the data were subjected to thematic content analysis in three broad stages. First, responses were read and re-read for familiarity and their latent and implicit meanings. Second, items were coded and then grouped according to predominant themes and, lastly, interpretations were made based on the dominance of grouped themes and sub-themes. The study's trustworthiness was ensured as the three authors engaged in the data analysis process by independently reviewing and interpreting the data, adhering to the aforementioned three broad stages of analysis. Subsequently, the authors consensually agreed on the over-arching themes that were derived. This approach served to curb the biases, assumptions, and expectations that each individual researcher may have had about the data, and minimised an incomplete, ill-informed, or distorted interpretation of the data.

FINDINGS

The findings indicated that language is both an academic and social intermediary of experience at the university. Two over-arching themes that emerged in relation to language were: (1) language as an identity marker; and (2) language as an ideology of the institution. The first overarching theme includes the following two sub-themes: linguistic maintenance and transgression. The second overarching theme includes the following two sub-themes: linguistic subversion and assimilation. The data indicated that the participants were involved in what could be called constitutively normalising work (Davies 2006, 77), which validated the status quo of the dominant language, but there were also instances where a clear desire was expressed to transgress and deviate from socially and academically sanctioned norms.

Language as an identity marker: Maintenance and transgression

In the extracts that follow we analyse how these students straddle multiple power dynamics in relation to language in the social and academic sphere. In these extracts we show how 'individuals *can* deviate from the identity descriptions attributed to them' (Davies 1989, 29); however, this is not simply a rejection of identities that 'belonged' to one, but rather it involves what Davies (*ibid.*) has described as *category-maintenance* work. This is the decision that an individual makes as to whether she will mark her identification with, or distance herself from, a category or an identity; in this case it would be a linguistic identity, which in South Africa is closely mapped onto ideas of race.

The extract below focuses on the complexities of the participant managing her linguistic identity and highlights linguistic practices:

Manka: It's actually hard to speak Zulu sometimes I promise you, I don't know it's difficult. Like because now I am used to speaking in English and when I speak Zulu there's a bit of English in the Zulu and my dad is like, can you decide which language you want to speak.

It is clear that the boundaries between Manka's 'Zulu' and 'English' linguistic identities are fluid. Nevertheless she reports receiving pressure to establish clear boundaries between the two languages. A linguistic change in her identity is apparent, which could be read as a transgression. This can be seen in her use of the word *now*, 'now I am used to speaking in English'. This signals a movement that has had to take place in her social identity. As a student at Wits, she is 'now' in a space that requires her to speak more English, and it is making its presence ever more felt. This reveals that she has had to 'transgress' a language boundary, presumably to assimilate into the university culture and to cope academically. Although there are no value judgments being made, it is clear that there are strenuous emotions involved as a multilingual subject and that there is familial (and perhaps other social) pressure to abide by clear linguistic boundaries.

In the following extract there is an interesting move that takes place in terms of the participant retrospectively examining her linguistic life, where agency is required for the reminiscence, which was in fact not possible at that time in the participant's life:

Interviewer: And, if you could go back in time, do you think it would have been better if you had done English as a first language [rather] than Zulu?

Esther: Yes, it would have been better yes.

Interviewer: It would have helped you?

Esther: It would have helped me because sometimes even the lectures the lecturer there are words that you just can't understand, maybe he is saying something the thing in your mind, you start saying it into you like first before you understand it so it is like hard. And, the time the lecture is going on and you are busy translating, but the lecture is going on ...

Here, Esther's social and academic identities are collapsed into one, and in the end her academic identity is given more salience than the social one. This could of course be a matter of the focus of the interview, but it is noteworthy that Esther quickly and emphatically reports that learning English as a first language would have been better. In this example, it is clear that the societal and institutional value placed on English has influenced Esther's desire for a different type of linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1991).

In the following extract a number of interesting manoeuvres are made in terms of the participant's identity maintenance and transgression, othering and language ideology:

Interviewer: City life? Do you think language plays a role?

Pamela: I think it does because like I don't want to say it like I'm saying ...

Interviewer: No, be honest there is [sic] no right or wrong answers.

Pamela: Because I think they do have issues with English sometimes so ...

Interviewer: They themselves have said that, that they – they went to high school where they were supposed to be taught in English but because the teacher[s] themselves couldn't explain in English, they had to explain in their own language, and now they come to University ...

Pamela: And when they get here and then like the lecturer.

Interviewer: Yes, and then the lecturer gives instructions in English and now they have to go to the lectures [and] try and listen to what they are saying and try and interpret it in their own language. So do you do that?

Pamela: No.

Interviewer: So they do that.

Pamela: It's also that thing that like what language do you think in? I think in English. So I am so used to like speaking English.

Interviewer: That's a good question. And, why do you think you think in English if you like you said in the first question, the language you mostly speak at home is Setswana?

Pamela: But, you see at home, so like I'm not used to it I spent most of the time at school, so when I am at home I actually speak in Setswana.

Here, Pamela constructs herself as different from her peers within the scholarship programme who struggle with English. In the dialogue between the interviewer and Pamela, it becomes apparent that these students struggle because of their schooling background. There is a discrepancy between what is officially mandated ('they were supposed to be taught in English') and the reality on the ground ('the teacher[s] themselves couldn't explain in English, they had to explain in their own language'). This discrepancy no longer exists at the university, where the language of teaching and learning are one and the same, English. Pamela, however, remarks that there is a much deeper shift that needs to take place in order to successfully navigate university, a shift which she has 'successfully' undergone. Pamela suggests that students need to think in English in order to cope in lectures. While this may be construed as an academic necessity, it is in fact a social aspect of language and identity where a shift takes place between a person's home language, and the language in which he or she thinks. This is a product of prolonged exposure to schooling which subscribes to a particular language ideology which values English over other languages. The home

language seems to be relegated to a spoken act as opposed to a language which contains an entire gamut of cerebral capacity, which English represents in this extract.

The intermeshing of identity and ideology is also apparent in the following extract. Here, the participant expresses embarrassment because of her 'transgressive' identity, as a 'black' person, unable to speak a 'black' language (revealing of both racial and linguistic identity in South Africa).

Interviewer: Do you speak any African languages?

Mpho: That's the embarrassing part. It's kind of awkward, I was raised in a situation where my mother she wanted the best for us, so she would do anything to put us in a kind of English westernised society, so I have known English my whole life – she had tried at home, but because she is working and she has no time and even with my father and then she never had the time to teach me. I can hear, especially when she shouts at me, that's how I learned to understand, but I can't speak it, I still have this problem. It sounds weird but yeah ...

Interviewer: Yes, that is funny hey?

Mpho: But, I'm still – I'm making it's one of the priorities that I made since last year to at least learn one black language. I can understand Felicia speaking it with a person because they find it funny.

African languages in this context are described as 'black'. While this is in some sense common parlance in South Africa, a clear ideology, or set of values is set up when people speak of 'English' and 'black'. English is given a universalism and also seen as better than 'black' languages. This is evidenced through Mpho citing her mother's desire of wanting the 'best' for her being equated with English. The best was English, there was no other option. 'Black' languages then take on a group identity marker, and belie any deeper ontological status an African language could confer. The self-consciousness of Mpho's slippages in her identity boundaries are again revealed when she remarks that she wishes to learn a 'black' language. It is unclear here whether this desire to learn an African language is to placate her purported racial group, so that they do not find her 'funny', or whether she has a desire herself to acquire an African language. This example reveals the power of a group in defining a person's identity, and sense of belonging or unbelonging, but also exemplifies the power of a societal ideology which values western, English education. This subject is caught in a state of flux, occupying a liminal position in the South African educational landscape. In the following section, English as the dominant ideology of the university is highlighted. How participants position themselves in relation to the dominant English ideology is discussed.

Language as an ideology: Subversion and assimilation

English is ascribed a dominant role at the university with participants acknowledging its significance with respect to coping academically. While English is highly valued,

participants both align with, and subvert, the dominant language ideology. The different forms and varieties of English spoken are discussed by participants, thus raising issues about the different values placed on varying forms of English. In this light, while English is upheld as the dominant ideology of the university, participants further align themselves with specific varieties of English, notwithstanding that they themselves might be confronting struggles with academic English.

In the extract below, the participant explains how English is a ‘big barrier’ to acquiring knowledge and coping academically at the university. It is also apparent that the desire or need to perform well academically could be an impetus for assimilating to the university’s dominant English language.

Devayani: I think this is very important because English is a big barrier at Wits. Even with me, I mean I am not the most well-spoken person but I did speak English and I did do English higher grade, but there’s a lot words that come across and you think what are they talking about ... But you do and the worst is when you get a test or an exam question you like what are these people talking about. It’s like you can’t do the work if you can’t understand what they asking you.

Devayani discloses the academic challenges she faces in relation to English as a language of instruction, even though she positions herself as competent in English. Devayani’s account alludes to the use of professorial and institutionally sanctioned language at the university. Utilising professorial language, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue, no longer serves the purpose of communication; but instead serves to conjure pedagogic authority. While the language of the university is not anyone’s mother-tongue, it is not equally removed from the languages spoken by varying social classes (*ibid.*). It would thus follow that an individual student’s socio-economic standing would play a role in determining what Bourdieu and Passeron (*ibid.*) have termed as the student’s *educationally profitable linguistic capital*. As such, although Devayani reports being proficient in English, the English she is accustomed to speaking may be far removed from university idiom. This is particularly significant, since this scholarship programme targets women from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and the linguistic capital they have accrued thus far might not be valued within the university setting.

Devayani highlights the significance of English with respect to coping academically, and thus appears to be subscribing to the dominant English ideology. Nonetheless, this does not imply that Devayani is unable to display agency in challenging dominant linguistic ideologies, over time. During the period in which these interviews were conducted, the participants’ narratives could be considered examples or snapshots of how they experimented with different strategies in an attempt to break particular barriers to cope academically. For instance, the extract below demonstrates how a participant deliberately chose to work with particular group members because they spoke the same language as her. Thus, she circumvented the predominance of English in academic spaces:

Judith: Eish like my group members. Like you know like we all speak the same language like we were all Vendas. I was the only girl in my group.

Interviewer: Oh.

Judith: And there were four guys – they were friends actually. So they didn't give each other space to, like they didn't listen to each other – they will say those horrible stuff to each other and we'd [...] up – instead of doing the project they were doing something else because they were friends and all that. And I'll just get there during the meeting and they will tell me we're done already just go and type this, just go and do that.

Interviewer: Oh my word.

Judith: So like that's why I failed design. It was the project because the project is like 60% project, so ja I didn't work with the group and I didn't even know what was going on in the project. They will just submit and I will just get the marks like 20% for the first project and like 40% for the second project.

Interviewer: Did you go speak to your lecturer about it?

Judith: Ja, I did but it was in the second semester and he was like, 'It's too late, you should have just raised that in the first semester' and all that. I only chose them because like we spoke the same language ...

Interviewer: Oh.

Judith: So that's where I learnt. Ja in the future choosing a group you should not go to things like you know race stuff, language and all that, no you should just work with the people who are easy to work with. Cos I knew some other friends, like Indians or whatever that I use to work with when I was in first year but this time I was like no I'm going to go with this group, so I learnt.

Judith clearly displays that her preference was to work with others who shared the same indigenous African language, TshiVenda. Although this decision subverts the predominance of English at the university, it did not lead to her earning an adequate mark. Judith's reported incident highlights the complexities of negotiating a space for a peripheral identity. Our attention is drawn to the fact that she was the only woman in the group, and was marginalised by masculine displays. She was 'told' to take notes and was excluded from the academic decision-making in the group. Moreover, she alludes to male banter and in-group dynamics among men that excluded her from the group (cf. Easthope 1990). In this way, gender can be viewed as an accomplishment that is performed via interactional and micropolitical activities (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Masculine performances here served to marginalise Judith and assign her a secretarial role (see Danielsson 2012 for a complete discussion of how university women in science negotiate administrative and secretarial roles

when engaging in group work). Based on this incident, Judith concludes that instead of students choosing group members with similar characteristics to themselves (e.g. same race and/or language), they should rather consider whether the members will be able to work well together. This example points to how multiple social identity markers contribute to complexity in exercising a person's agency against the status quo.

English as a language of power in the following excerpt is emphasised, as in the above. But even more so than the above, it shows how English is, in and of itself, insufficient to secure students' linguistic capital at the university. What is needed is 'proper' English:

Interviewer: And, how did your high school prepare you academically and in what way?

Pamela: Okay, I think like the class – okay the classes are smaller but like and proper English.

Interviewer: Okay, they taught you in English and that was important?

Pamela: Yes.

Being able to speak a socially sanctioned form of the dominant language was lauded repeatedly in the interviews, as demonstrated by Pamela's comment. This reveals the language ideology that is pervasive within education in South Africa. From the participants' accounts, it becomes clear that the language students need to speak is English, and even more so, this should be 'proper' English. This exemplifies that the variety of English spoken is value-laden. What this 'proper' English comprises is not clear, but suffice it to say that there are clear boundaries being set up between 'proper' and 'improper' English, positioning some students as insiders and outsiders at the university. Moreover, the value placed on different ways of speaking 'always depends on the distance separating them from the linguistic norm the school manages to impose in defining the socially recognised criteria of linguistic "correctness"' (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 116).

Participants suggest that the teaching/learning process in university becomes intervallic when lecturers or tutors do not speak 'proper' English, as demonstrated by the following extract, in which the participant discusses the assistance she received from one of her tutors:

Pamela: It was okay at the beginning it was Paman [tutor] or something and then we didn't understand because he didn't speak proper English ...

Furthermore, a number of students mentioned that they were unable to understand their lecturers' pronunciation (or use) of English particularly if they were of Greek, Chinese, and/or Indian decent. Although, 'proper' and 'improper' references to English are not always made, difference is constructed in the way they describe

accent and the use of English. The following extracts (derived from three different interviews) illustrate the complexities associated with accent and different styles of speaking:

Participant: Lectures, I coped sometimes but there were times when I used to sit in front, I remember because the accent was so different and I couldn't really understand and I had to really open my ears to understand what this person was saying (Focus Group).

Esther: And, then the next one, oh my God, you don't get everything – the others they like Greek and when they – their English it's just I don't know, you can't even get it – I don't know.

Pamela: The chemistry it was okay, just this one lecturer that had like funny accents didn't hear most of the time, but other than that, it was okay ...

By highlighting the different ways in which some lecturers speak, the aforementioned extracts imply that there is a normative accent and sanctioned way of speaking at the university that their lecturers deviate from, and that they align themselves with. Such reports point toward the significance and complexities associated with the institution's normative language ideology. Pamela, Esther, and the focus group participant suggest that accent and linguistic differences are associated with barriers to understanding and learning. This marks an implicit alignment with, and assimilation into, the normative form of English spoken at the university, but also draws attention to their concerns relating to understanding the material and coping academically. In the following extract, the participant explains how she decided to avoid classes that were taught by the lecturer with a different accent:

Cecilia: I didn't find it that difficult, I just had a problem with the lecturer ... because of the accent. And you can't hear him so it's difficult. So getting a 70% was a miracle because I had to ask around and people had to explain ... And then sometimes I wouldn't go to construction and do civil's lectures because I felt like I don't understand this guy.

Cecilia implies that the lecturer's accent was a problem in 'hear[ing]' or understanding him. Again, it is apparent that accent is associated with difficulties in learning and understanding. Cecilia resorts to avoidance as a coping strategy when presented with a different accent in the classroom, thus, highlighting an inability to constructively absorb difference. In this instance, she managed to cope academically by asking her peers for help and learning from their explanation of the course content.

DISCUSSION

In our discussion we adopt the concept of a lacuna. We use the term to refer to a conceptual gap that has the potential to reveal insights. A lacuna has been defined variously as a gap, a blank space, an absence from a piece of writing, and a language

gap where there is no direct translation. In Barbara Kingsolver's (2009) novel *The Lacuna*, she describes it as a space, or a hole, that leads to another place, like a cave covered by water only visible when the tide is out. All of these definitions are helpful in conceptualising the idea of a lacuna as an explanatory tool. We argue that a lacuna can be a useful metaphor to describe implicit insights in the data that are not always readily apparent. This view has the potential to change our understanding of participants' social positioning as subjects.

For instance, in scholarship on assimilation, it has been argued that the evidence points overwhelmingly to the non-dominant positionality of a subject, having to assimilate into the dominant praxis (McKinney 2010; Soudien 2007). Soudien (2007, 439) notes an asymmetry in the relations 'of knowing' between the dominant and the non-dominant subjectivities. However, McKinney (2010, 204) usefully problematises this asymmetry in her research with high school girls which demonstrates that 'complete assimilation is the expectation constructed in the official school discourses' but that this is not 'necessarily the outcome of their experience in attending the school'. This has especially been apparent with academically talented youth (as with the participants in the study), where it has been shown that they can learn to move between and negotiate different worlds, and take up different identity positions, tailoring their performance to their audience and to different circumstances (McKinney 2010, and see also Carter 2006; Mehan, Hubbard and Villanueva 1994). Here the idea of positionality (Davies and Harre 1999) is helpful in understanding that subjects are able to occupy hybrid positions within a social milieu (McKinney 2010).

Taking these ideas into account, from our analysis we have noted what we describe as three lacunas, namely: (1) assimilation as a means to an end; (2) agency and temporal location; and (3) intersections of social markers. The lacunas serve to provide an understanding of participants' subject positioning in relation to language. They are not intended to provide a set of conditions that account for when participants align with, or subvert, the dominant university language. We also do not suggest that the participants' orientations' toward the dominant university language is based on a developmental paradigm that exists on a spectrum/continuum. Instead, these lacunas allow us to consider possibilities for understanding the findings. In other words, the lacunas serve to address a gap, a remaining question: How can participants both align with and subvert the dominant language? Thus, the lacunas can be viewed as ways of interpreting participants' orientations toward the dominant language.

Assimilation as a means to an end

Participants' concerns with coping academically and succeeding at the university are perhaps a driving force to assimilate into the dominant language – English. Thus, we cannot understand this assimilation as a straightforward acceptance of the language ideology of the university. Instead, we can view this as a practical means to an end. This utilitarian approach could be the result of participants' aspirations to

succeed academically. As scholarship students the participants turn their attention to coping with academic demands. In order to cope with English as the medium of instruction and in order to survive in an English dominated environment, these women may choose to strategically assimilate into the dominant language ideology. These attitudes are in misalignment with the university's culture of gradueness, which 'mean[s] more than an ability to pass ... exams' (Wits 2010, 5) and rather a willingness to become lifelong learners and use their subject specific knowledge and critical, reflective and meta-thinking skills, as well as their insights and agency to create innovations that continue to transform society and enrich its values.

To be sure, the push to assimilate into the English language and culture as a means to succeed educationally in South Africa has been apparent since at least the early 20th century (Hirson 1981). Students have been known to accommodate the demands of an English speaking society or institution while maintaining their home language and culture (cf. Mouw and Xie 1999). Moreover, 'assimilation is not a singular, smooth or unidirectional process' (Williams, Alvarez and Andrade Hauck 2002, 566), this is evident in that students can potentially maintain multiple identities and can deploy these identities in different settings. As such, participants' concerns with coping academically points toward a form of assimilation that is potentially transitional, context specific, and driven by practical aims.

Agency and temporal location

When it is the case that participants do subvert the dominant language by strategically seeking out an alternative linguistic community, they display agency which is directed against the status quo. As evidenced by Judith, the participant who sought out a TshiVenda linguistic community, this did not necessarily result in the desired outcome. What must be borne in mind, with regard to the agency of the subject, is that individuals' alignment with, or subversion of, the dominant language is not static. In this example, Judith could be viewed as an agent who actively creates a 'means of dealing with, resisting and resolving the contradictions [she] experience[s]' (Middleton 1987, 170). The scholarship students' narratives are situated because they are told in the context of a particular time and place. Therefore, their situatedness influences different ways of being in the world and with each moment in time, they are presented with a choice or opportunity to develop new linguistic strategies to position themselves vis-à-vis the language in question.

Intersections of social markers

We argue that participants' linguistic identities are intersectional as they account for 'the multidimensionality of marginalized subjects' lived experiences' (Crenshaw 1989, as cited in Yuval-Davis 2011, 8). Following on from the same example, we saw how Judith sought out a community under a linguistic banner but was excluded by virtue of another social marker, namely her gender. This is evidence of the intersectionality of various identity markers and demonstrates how a person's

multiple identities become relevant contingent on the specific interactions with, and the identities of, others. These intersections were also highlighted in Mpho's discussion of her inability to speak an indigenous 'black' South African language, despite her being black. Feminist work in particular, has produced a significant amount of empirical and conceptual research that highlights the significance of multiple identity markers and the complexity of their intersectionality (see, e.g., McCall 2005; Nash 2008; Verloo 2006). Moreover, seminal work within this literature has focused on the societal factors, discrimination, and oppression that black women face (see, e.g., Crenshaw 1989; 1991). Our findings here indicate that race, gender, and linguistic identities can be intricately interconnected and manifest themselves in complex ways.

IMPLICATIONS

Perhaps more than ever before, historically white, English-speaking universities are admitting students whose home language and culture differ to that of the institution. As such, it is increasingly important to acknowledge that language is both an academic and social intermediary of experience and that it functions as both an identity marker and an ideology that permeates both the university and the wider society. Language issues thus need to be viewed within a broader scope that extends beyond the academic achievement discourse and that encompasses (but is not limited to) student identity, power, dominance, and interpersonal relationships. While virtually all historically white, English-speaking universities have transformed themselves in a manner that is consistent with the demands of the 'new' South Africa, the reality is that the academy's *modus operandi* continues to be English-centric. Universities must thus be prepared to continually grapple with various language issues and be sensitive to the needs of students who transgress and maintain their language identities.

CLOSING REMARKS

In investigating the linguistic identities of the scholarship students, we saw how participants engaged in identity maintenance and transgression; and in subversion and assimilation of the dominant language ideology. The ways in which participants constructed and transgressed their linguistic identities need to be viewed in the particular context of a society that was divided on racial, linguistic, and social lines in the not so distant past, and that continues to grapple with these socially constructed divisions. Moreover, the participants' identities were multifaceted and positioned in relation to both the language ideology of the institution, and their practical needs for academic success. While it was not uncommon for their linguistic practices to mirror the language ideology of the institution, this should not be viewed as a strictly fundamental choice in values. Rather, it can be viewed as a display of agency to ensure their academic success. This paradoxical display of agency, while aligning with the status quo, reveals the intricacies of the participants positioning themselves as black women in science, within an Anglicised institution. In other

words, participants' alignment with, or subversion of, the university's dominant language ideology, must be viewed in light of their position as scholarship recipients who find themselves in high-stake situations. That is, they have much to gain from a university education, and much to lose if they forfeit their place at the university.

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NOTES

1. Black is used as in the Employment Equity Act (1998) to refer to African, Coloured, and Indian individuals.
2. It would be remiss of us to fail to mention that some scholars view the self-proclaimed 'liberal' character of the English-speaking universities as a myth, since these universities uphold a predominantly Anglo-centric hegemony (Gerwel 1987; Mamdani 1998; Morrow 2006).
3. For an in-depth discussion of the term 'coconut' in the context of the South African schooling system and as a label tied to youth identities, see McKinney (2007).

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