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Subject positioning in the South African symbolic economy: student narratives of their languages and lives in a changing place

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Abstract

Language use is irreducibly social and historical, bearing the complexities of difference, location, and power. These dynamics are particularly visible in "post"-apartheid South Africa, where historical and contemporary asymmetries of race and class are refracted through language politics, practices and experiences. "Youth embody the sharpening contradictions of the contemporary world in especially acute form" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2005, p. 21) because they are often at the coalface of societal change. At this particular historical moment the paradoxes and challenges of South African students are acutely visible when examining the role of language in reproducing a bifurcated education system, and indeed society.

Methodologically, I examined 15 student narratives about their experiences of language in everyday life. The narratives were generated using a multi-modal approach to language biographies, where participants' linguistic repertoires are visually represented in different colours on a pre-given body outline (Busch et al., 2006). The inclusion of the visual component provided participants with a nuanced vocabulary for constructing their narrative accounts. This narrative data was then thematically analysed with a focus on participants' subject positioning.

Firstly, it was found that the notion of an authentic identity functioned as an ideological claim. The participants referred to a desire for authentic cultural roots, through reference to what they considered "pure" African languages. They articulated a sense that an authentic cultural identity might be lost by virtue the ubiquitous nature of English in their lives. Participants positioned themselves and others as either belonging or not belonging, depending how "authentic" a member of an identity category one was assessed to be. The narratives demonstrated that the nuances of language and voice become the site for the nano-politics of identity and authenticity (Blommaert & Varis, 2015), especially when cultural and racial identity categories appear to be in crisis.

Secondly, English was constructed as a variable symbolic asset across different fields. Representations of English and African languages were positioned in line with existing colonial and racial tropes where English was represented as the language of the mind and rationality, while African languages, even when positively described, were construed as languages of the body or emotion. For black participants, while it was appropriate and desirable to speak English at university, in other fields, such as the home, English could be negatively sanctioned. It is the relation of power between fields in the symbolic economy that influences the reception of a linguistic asset. I argue that English was negatively sanctioned (while still being desirable) as a way of containing the power of English *qua* whiteness. The link between desirability and derision that English represents makes claims to authenticity, as well as accusations of betrayal, pivotal in the subject positioning of participants in relation to their experiences of language across different fields.

These student narratives about experiences of language capture a particular historical moment and demonstrate how the youth straddle the contradictions of the past and the future. However, while these narratives are historically specific they also point to the universal process of becoming a subject through language.