

## Dialogicality and imaginings of two 'community' notice boards in post-apartheid Observatory, Cape Town

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### Abstract

This article undertakes a poststructuralist multisemiotic analysis of posters and notices found on two 'community' notice boards in the trendy, multicultural neighbourhood of Observatory in Cape Town, South Africa. An analysis of the two notice boards endeavours to reveal different strategic uses of English as well as varying constructions of (transnational) place-making and community in Observatory. The two notice boards reveal voices of transient and permanent groups alike and index new imaginative constructions of this changing neighbourhood. Furthermore, this paper explores the implications of strategic linguistic processes in self-marketisation of transnational and 'local' community members in Observatory. We conclude by expounding on the new perspective of transcultural capital and what it means to the sociolinguistics of a super-diverse neighbourhood in the post-apartheid neighbourhood of Observatory in Cape Town, South Africa.

### Introduction

The article explores identity construction in the notices on two adjacent 'community' notice boards in the trendy, multicultural neighbourhood of Observatory in Cape Town, South Africa. The article also aims to unravel motivations behind the choices in language used in notices representative of the Observatory community.

Under apartheid law, the neighbourhood of Observatory was officially designated as a white-only suburb with very restricted and controlled access for non-whites. However, it was also considered a *de facto* grey area as it was home to many young liberal students and leftist members. The neighbourhood is conveniently located close to the national highway with train, bus and taxi routes. With its century-old Victorian architecture, thriving commercial corridor and close proximity to an elite university, Observatory has become known as a 'cosmopolitan' place which appeals to tourists, immigrants and locals alike. The diverse crowds have left their fingerprints on the landscape, and it is this landscape which indexes the constant reshaping of notions of neighbourhood and community in Observatory. South Africa's 2011 national census results (Statistics South Africa, 2011) affirm that the Western Province has three dominant languages, specifically Afrikaans, Xhosa and English. Afrikaans is the most dominant language with 51 percent (2 820 643), followed by Xhosa with 25 percent (1 403 233) speakers and English with 20 percent (1 149 049) speakers. Unspecified language speakers constitute





















negative attribute, but when seeking work as a domestic, char or nanny, it is a positive attribute (Mawadza 2012). The temporality of the author's stay, as well as the positive connotations of being Zimbabwean, is reinforced here. The statement 'I am a Zimbabwean' at once positions the author as claiming in-group status (through locality) as well as 'out-group' or foreignness through nationality. This author can be seen as using her nationality as an effective self-promotion marketing strategy. The author capitalises on the positive connotations that being Zimbabwean brings her and for this reason states her nationality explicitly. Here we see the author adopting a dual identity as a marketing ploy in which she situates herself within the geography of the Observatory neighbourhood as well as a (reliable) foreigner from elsewhere.

Language on a sign also has a specific communicative effect. Example 4 similarly comprises an author seeking employment; however the notice is written exclusively in Standard Afrikaans and unpacks how South African (local) authors use language choice, locality and legitimacy to position themselves in the job market:

#### **Example 4**

My naam is Amanda.

Ek is bereid om u huis vir u skoon te maak.

Ek kan wasgoed was en stryk en nog vele meer.

As u my nodig het skakel my enige tyd van die dag.

*English translation:*

*My name is Amanda.*

*I am willing to clean your house for you. I can wash and iron and much more.*

*If you have need of me [then] you can phone me any time of the day.*

The notice is written in Standard Afrikaans and unlike many of the other notices analysed; there are no grammatical or orthographic errors from a 'centre' point of view. The formal variety of Afrikaans is used and is signalled by the formal 'u' meaning 'you'. This form is regarded as a respectful way of addressing superiors, as opposed to the informal 'jy' which also means 'you'. The author also follows the proper grammatical structure of Standard Afrikaans, which places the verb at the end of the sentence. The author's deft use of Afrikaans positions her as a 'local' on multiple levels. On the one hand, the author may be South African (presumably due to her proficiency in Afrikaans) or on the other hand, may have asked someone to translate her advert into Afrikaans. The author may have also opted for the formal variety of Afrikaans as a marketing strategy. Incidentally, it is quite common to find blacks and coloured women from outside of Cape Town speaking 'suiwer' or 'pure' Afrikaans. These women are often described by the derogatory term 'up country'. This term refers to someone who is naïve and unfamiliar with urban life. However, the use of Standard or 'pure' Afrikaans may also be affiliated with a stern, reliable and subservient employee. This variety of Afrikaans stands in sharp contrast to the local variety of Afrikaans called 'Kaapse', which is spoken by the majority in Cape Town, but which has in the past often been associated with the 'lower-class' and attributes of 'untrustworthiness' and 'gangsterism' (McCormick 2002). Additionally, there is a possibility that by opting to use 'pure' or 'white' Afrikaans,

this particular jobseeker may have priced herself beyond the majority of the coloured community.

Example 5 is another job seeker's notice and she foregrounds English by not writing in Afrikaans.

### **Example 5**

IM SOUTH AFRICA CITIZEN LOOKING 4 A DOMESTIC JOB I GOT 11 YEARS EXP AND A GOOD REFERENCE. LANGUAGE: AFRIKANS AND ENGL. HEALTH: GOOD.

Unlike previous notices, this notice begins with an explicit mention of the author's South African nationality. Unlike many other authors who add additional personal attributes as a footnote or as 'filler' in the body of the notice, this author positions her South African identity first. She is also the only author to use the word 'citizen' to tie legitimacy in relation to nationhood. The author relies on the social capital which is linguistically signalled through the mention of English and Afrikaans competence.

The author fortifies claims to her South African citizenship through the mention of proficiency of two of the official languages of the country. This type of legitimacy is tied to linguistic proficiency of two of the 11 official languages, specifically English and Afrikaans. The author appears to perpetuate the apartheid ideological construct of the one-to-one relationship between language and ethnicity (or citizenship here). The author's use of the English language reveals 'grammatical errors' as in 'IM SOUTH AFRICA CITIZEN', and basic 'orthographic errors' such as 'AFRIKANS' as opposed to 'AFRIKAANS'. These 'errors' indicate that the author's claim to legitimacy is not necessarily tied to proficiency of English and more to that of latent ties such as their 'birth right' or having been born in the country. Here 'peripheral normativity' is seen as losing much of its punch as it offers no bearing on communicative purpose. Instead, the mention of South African citizenship and English and Afrikaans proficiency may be indicative of the kind of employer envisaged by the author, particularly one that prefers South African citizens as employees.

Continuing with notices which overtly espouse 'foreignness' as an effective marketing tool, the next notice is interesting as it is written in Lingala, a native language and lingua franca of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The aspiration of the author may well speak to 'Otherness' as a necessary addition to the make-up of this aspirational construction of a heterogeneous Observatory. The Lingala notice continues the discussion of a divergence from the 'centre' English to reveal how the employment of Lingala both appropriates space on this notice board as well as reveals the malleability of this space as changeable and not limited. What is interesting here, is that black job seekers/persons (foreign nationals) appear to be engaging more agentively with this newly available space, as seen in Example 6.

### **Example 6**

*ToZali KOFUNGA CRECHE*1/09/09

YAKA NA **BÉBÉ**, TODWANA

AKALI OKOSEPHELA BENGA

English translation:

*We open new creche from 1/09/09 your baby is big you will be happy phone*

The communicative purpose of this notice serves as an advertisement for services rendered, specifically, a newly-established crèche in Observatory. Unlike the other notices discussed, this notice is directed at a target group of Lingala speakers (plausibly based in Observatory) and excludes all others. However, the words 'crèche' and 'bébé' are recognisable and do allude to the gist of the notice. This notice subtly differs from the transnational authors in the job-wanted notices above in that the Lingala notice is directed at other Lingala-speaking people and there is no attempt to use English (whether 'centre' English or localised English) at all. What is interesting here is that in this space, black transnational foreigners seem to be engaging more agentively than their South African counterparts, particularly Xhosa or 'Kaapse' speakers in Cape Town. Nevertheless, it may be argued that these two native groups in Cape Town may use other social networks independent of the notice boards completely.

### **Summary and conclusion**

The analysis of the two 'community' notice boards offers a variety of new understandings of community, wherein issues of locality, transnational flows, self-marketisation, power and linguistic resources have emerged. Delving into these issues signals notice boards as both a communicative and interactive space wherein languages can be used to produce, orient and include or exclude various members of the ethnoscape.

On Notice board B, an image of an innocuous 'normal' community with a clear 'homeless' problem is constructed. Notice board A creates a type of social structuring based on language, but within which greater social implications may be inferred. Most of the notices are written in monoglot Standard English, with no Xhosa or Afrikaans.

The strict adherence to the Standard variety of English severely limits the readers and contributors to an ostensibly English-speaking middle class grouping. Due to these restrictions, it may be argued that this notice board is more exclusive, with Notice board B appearing to be a more 'democratic' space as seen with the appropriation of space by its heterogeneous constituencies. Overall, notices on Notice board A appear to fulfil a directive function wherein community members are instructed how to act and think. These notices, however, do appear to invoke a generally loving community spirit with aspirations of a community which looks after its pensioners, homeless and residents. Additionally, a clear 'English' residential audience is signalled and it is these readers that are encouraged to join the local civic association. The authors of these notices were unknown; however the notice board appears to be speaking with a single civic voice. An analysis of this notice board clearly delineated the boundary between community (as residents within a specific geography of Observatory) and outsiders (as those passing through and unaccustomed to expectations and social networks of locals). Vagrants and foreigners would generally fit into this 'outsider' category.

Notice board B constructs an image of an extremely diverse community membership. Loose and strong social (transnational) groups are signalled on this notice board.

Aspirations of authors on this notice board appear to be consistent with those striving to make a home in the 'new' South Africa. When seeking employment, attributes (being well mannered and quick learners) are constructed as important values which they bring along with them. Power, if construed as tied to 'Standard' English (which it normally is) would definitely place the Notice board A, with its 'Standard English' notices as having more communicative effect. However, 'power' if constructed to a diversity of meaning and communication would certainly place Notice board B, with its 'localised' form of English as the more communicatively successful of the two.

In the study, transnational groups construct their identity through the use of a generic sales promotional genre, but add extra (personal) information regarding attributes as opposed to characteristics as advantages. Nationality is foregrounded as fundamental to gaining employment because of the socio-cultural positive attributes which they have accrued in the neighbourhood and city more generally. In this way, the Obz Kwikspar Notice board B reveals the much wider and complex view of 'locals' in the Observatory 'community' as a necessary addition to the texture of the neighbourhood. Intriguingly, Notice board B also rendered the possibility of both the author and the reader as having power and 'legitimacy' in the community. Community was seen as made up of many different types of foreigners with language not seen as a constraint. Popular understanding of 'peripheral normativity' of English as displaying status of informal economies, is alternatively seen here as a shrewd marketing tool wherein foreigners were legitimised by their particular idiolect and not disadvantaged by them.

Pertinently, it is only on Notice board B that a burgeoning new community was visible as seen with notices relating to employment and childrearing. The authors in this site used their 'accents' and nationalities in Observatory to further create and legitimise ownership of new spaces. This completes their appropriation of the spaces. In addition this practice also shows the mobility of language and texts across national, social and modal boundaries (cf. Appadurai 1996). The belief that 'locals' have the only real ties with the space emerges as a fallacy and it becomes apparent that the 'newcomers' themselves are also not just passive beings, as their identity is a key element of their marketability. Saliently, authors of these notices saw themselves as part of a burgeoning 'new' community in Observatory and not simply occupying its periphery. Ironically, it is Afrikaans and Xhosa, although native and official languages in Cape Town, which occupied limited space in both notice boards.

In conclusion, this study suggests that the notion of 'peripheral normativity' can be said to be 'centre' biased if it undermines and stereotypes 'non-centre' speech forms. This is particularly the case if it frames discourse in heterogeneous communities, such as the ones discussed in this article, as patently imbued with 'orthographic and syntactic errors' which purportedly hold no other value or social mobility. This would effectively fail to recognise the transcultural capital, which includes varied speech forms that migrants may bring along with them into new areas. This paper argues that specific transnational identities (such as Zimbabweans and Malawians) act as 'currency' for upward mobility. In this regard, 'orthographic errors' actually index the foreignness desired by middle-class residents in Observatory. This means they are not errors in the community of practices in which they are embedded. To borrow from Blommaert (2008, 3), to use

‘static and timeless’ centre frames to describe these job seekers’ language practices which ‘belong to a truly global scale-level of events and processes [responding] to postmodernist realities,’ is to (mis)apply rigid traditionalist scales ‘to threads of the fabric of globalisation’. The kinds of writings analysed in this paper call for ‘a sociolinguistics of *speech* and of *resources*, of the real bits and chunks of language... a sociolinguistics...organised... as *mobile speech*, not as static language, and consequently better investigated on the basis of repertoires set against a real historical and spatial background [own emphasis]’ (Blommaert 2008, 18). To this end, the analysis of both notice boards highlights a recurring theme of power, legitimacy and in-group and out-group membership, which emerges as an important issue in the construction of a community in Observatory – an issue which is reflected by the different uses of linguistic space.

Having discussed the creation of two different locals and two divergent views of community, it becomes clear that the ‘Others’ are also viewed as important in contributing to an understanding of the local and what constitutes community in the heterogeneous neighbourhood of Observatory. In many ways, the juxtaposition of these two notice boards speaks to the general heterotopic or dystopic realities of the neighbourhood, city and nation, as it is commonplace to find very poor and very rich as well as very mixed and tightly-bound groups in close proximity of each other. Further research into notice boards may yield deeper understanding of the people using space, and may provide new understandings of particular communities and their challenges.

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