

Metonymic Power:

The role of “English,” “education,”
and “literacy” in the discourses of
South African domestic work

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2014: Invited to Observe an English Language class for South African Domestic Workers

Primarily between the ages of 50-75

Predominately isiZulu Language Speaking

Post-apartheid Democratic Constitution promoting 11 official languages

isiZulu remains the most widely spoken language in Gauteng

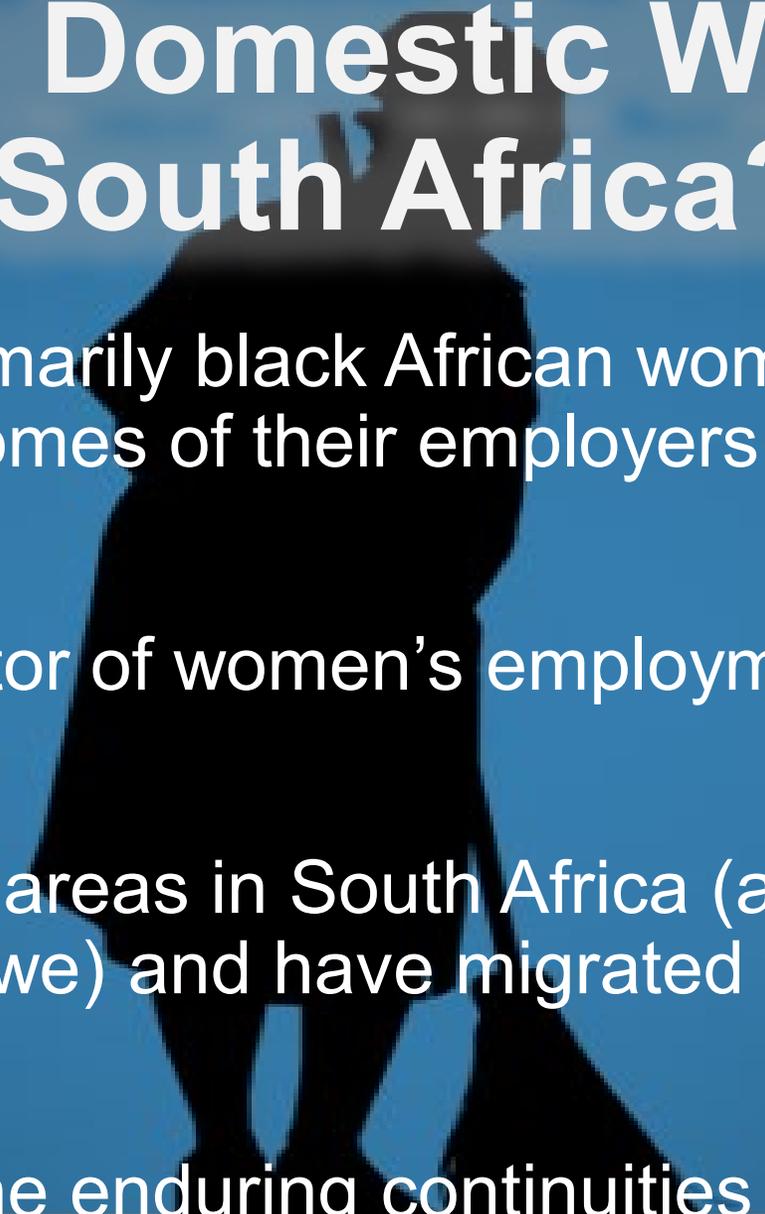
Only 12% of the population uses English as a main language of communication

Retirement age in South Africa is 60-65

Many of the women had worked for their employers for 10-20 years



Who are Domestic Workers in South Africa?

A black silhouette of a woman wearing a long, flowing dress, standing with her hands clasped in front of her. The silhouette is centered in the background of the slide.

- Often women (and primarily black African women) who both work in and often live in the homes of their employers
- The largest single sector of women's employment in South Africa
- Often come from rural areas in South Africa (as well as growing numbers from Zimbabwe) and have migrated to cities for work
- They remain “one of the enduring continuities of apartheid in contemporary South Africa” (Ally, 2011, p. 8).

Research Questions

- What personal, social, and historical forces shape South African domestic workers' desires to learn English?
- What role does language education play in the lives of these participants?
- Why might these participants focus on learning English specifically rather than increasing literacy skills in other languages such as their native languages?



Data Collection

- **Research over a 3 year span (2014-2016)**
- **3 main sites:**
 - *Site #1: Gauteng English Literacy Program*
 - *Site #2: Johannesburg English Classes*
 - *Site #3: Word of Mouth in an Affluent Johannesburg Suburb*
- **28 South African Domestic Workers**
- **7 Supplemental Participants (Educators/Researchers/Policy Makers)**
- **Data Collection:** Interviews, Narratives, and Participant Observation; use of HERstories (Kaiper, 2018); Policy Analysis



Combined Methodologies

- **Critical Ethnographic Narrative Analysis (CENA)**
(Kaiper, 2018)



Critical
Narrative
Analysis
(Souto Manning,
2012)

Critical
Discourse
Analysis
(Fairclough, 1992a;
1992b; 2013; 2015)

Theoretical Framework

**Poststructural
Theories of
Language,
Identity, and
Power**

(Bourdieu, 1991; Butler, 1997; Norton, 1997; 2013; Weedon, 1997)

**Postcolonial
Theories of
English
Language
Learning**

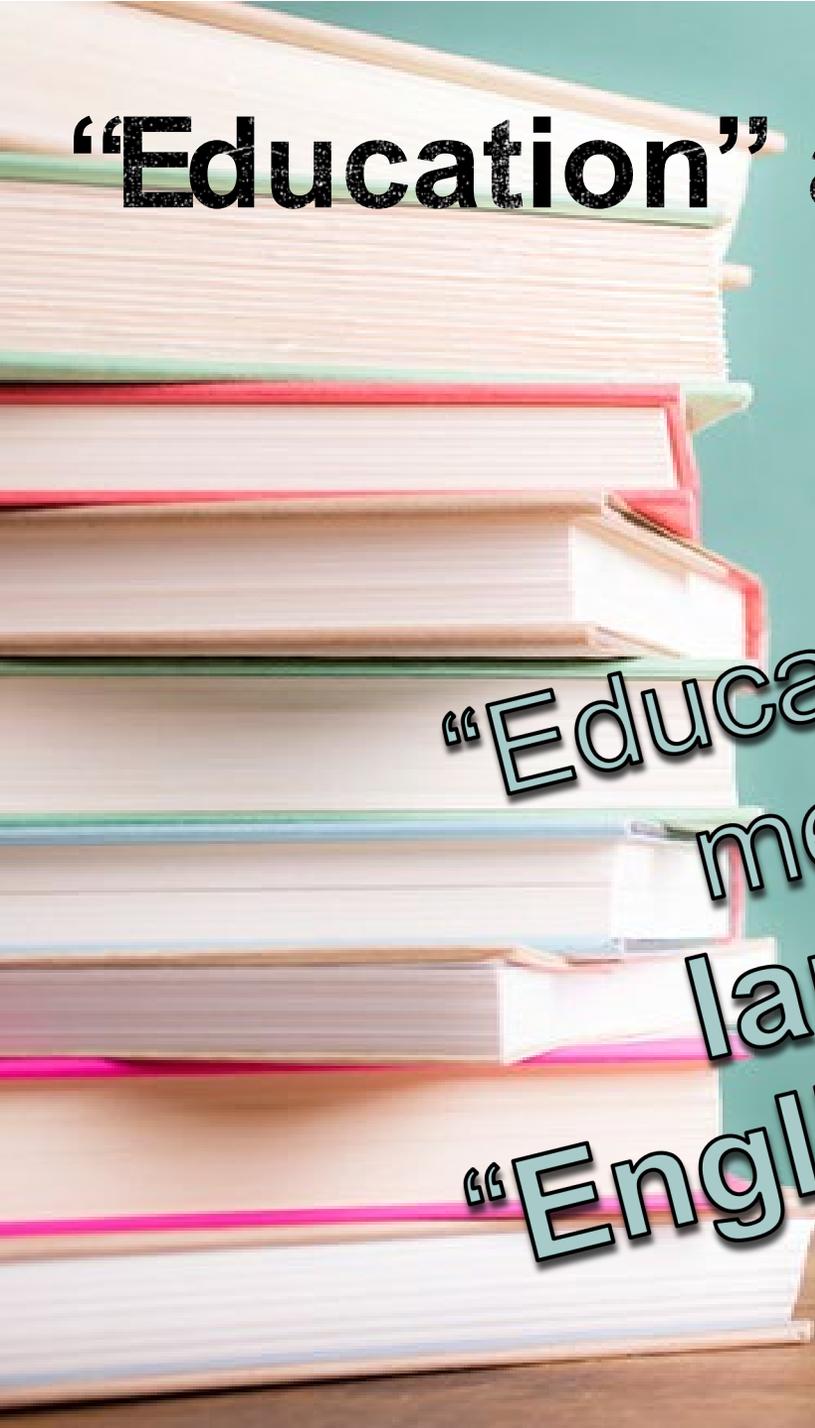
(Brock-Utne, 2015; Heugh, 2007; Pennycook, 2013; Praah, 2009)



Metonymic Power

- ***Metonymy:*** When a term or phrase takes on the meaning of a different concept than its written definition





“Education” and “Literacy”

“Education” and “Literacy” act as
metonyms for “English
language literacy” and
“English language education”

- **Zothile:** Yeah, I'm not feeling good because as I say, I'm not educated.
- **Anna:** You are educated!
- **Z:** Yes. I've got a matric certificate but the problem is that I didn't go to college or university and then I ended up being a domestic worker. At least I have a chance to go to school. Even if I don't know English, proper English, but I'm happy that I get that. I know to write my name, I know to fill out the forms, I know to understand some of the words. I'm ok for now.
- **A:** Do you consider English a sign of education? Like if someone speaks English well then they're more educated, and if someone doesn't speak English then they're not as educated?
- **Z:** Yeah, because **the people who know English very well, they think the people that don't know English very well- they think they're stupid. They think that she is a useless one because she don't know English.**

“They will call you stupid, and that word stupid, it hurts a lot.”

Participants made constant links between a lack of English language literacy and notions of “stupidity”:

- **Anna:** And do you think that she (Margaret’s employer) would respect you more if you- like do you think that the more you learn English, do you think that she would treat you better?
- **Margaret:** When I can speak English better than this, maybe she will- yes, she will respect me. She will give me respect. I think maybe she’s not giving me respect just because she think-she thinks maybe I don’t know anything. If I don’t know English, she thinks maybe I don’t know anything...”



The 1997 Policy Document on Adult Basic Education and Training

- ABET (Adult Basic Education and Training) is directly linked to notions of becoming literate
- Literacy is connected to “intellectual and cultural development”

? *What languages are connected with “being literate”?*

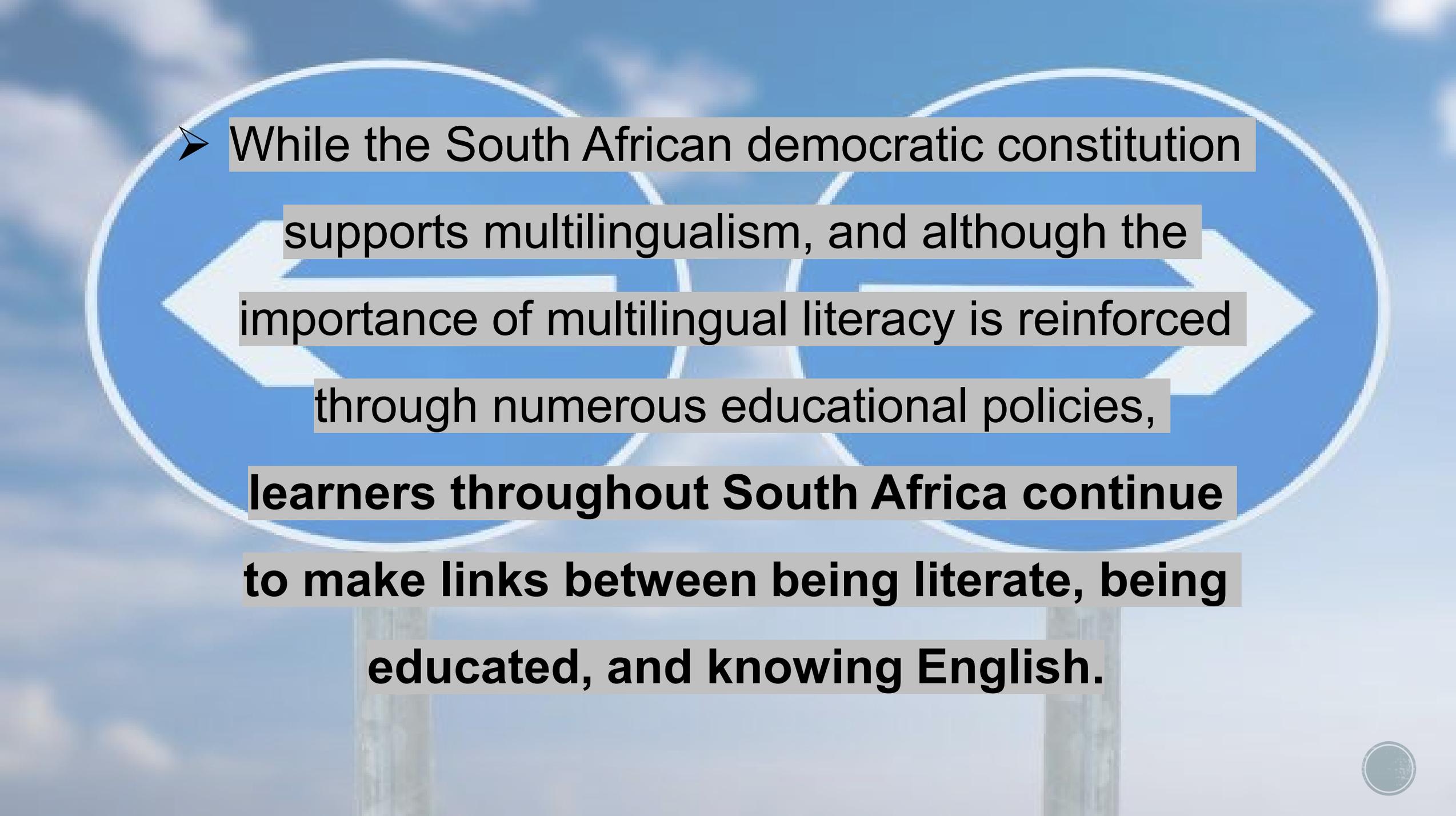
“the right of every student to be instructed in the language of his or her choice where this is reasonable and practicable”

- Use of “hedging” every time language choice is being:
 - “where this is reasonable and practicable”
 - “when appropriate”
 - “when possible”



So What?



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- While the South African democratic constitution supports multilingualism, and although the importance of multilingual literacy is reinforced through numerous educational policies, **learners throughout South Africa continue to make links between being literate, being educated, and knowing English.**



Question for you:

- How do your own definitions of **literacy** and **education** explicitly and/or implicitly link to specific languages, and particularly, English?



**Questions?
Thoughts?
Feedback?**



Feel free to email me as well! axk1222@psu.edu