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

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

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

Retirement age in South Africa is 60-65

Primarily between the ages of 50-75
Who are Domestic Workers in South Africa?

• 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” 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...”
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”
SoWhat?
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