

Education and Literacy as Metonyms for English: Adult Basic Education and Domestic Workers in South Africa

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Key Findings

This study draws from ethnographic research over a three-year span to understand South African domestic workers' motivations for taking English language literacy classes. Narratives of 28 domestic workers were examined through a critical, ethnographic lens. Focusing on notions of metonymy, a word or concept that is used to mean something other than its original definition, the study shows that in a South African adult education context, the terms "literacy" and "education" have come to connote "English literacy" and "English education." Moreover, knowing English was associated with being considered "smart," and conversely, not knowing English with being "stupid."

Key Implications

Analyzing terminology in adult English language learning policy and practice is key in understanding what motivates learners and how they see themselves in the world. In the United States and globally, notions of literacy and education are inherently linked to the English language. However, these linkages diminish learners' other ways of using oral and written language while also reducing the complexities of their motivations to learn. Moreover, in countries such as the U.S., where English is the most commonly spoken language, English language learning remains attached to human capital and job attainment while ignoring the importance of multilingual literacies. By understanding adults'

multiple and diverse motivations for learning English, policy makers and practitioners can begin to broaden policies and classroom practices to reflect these complex motivations.

Background

There is a curious and contradictory phenomenon in current adult education and language learning. Around the world, many educators and researchers have called for policies and practices that recognize Indigenous and multiple languages—particularly adults' native languages—to be taught and used in education and within the broader public. And yet, those who seemingly would most benefit from such language policies are seeking instead to learn English. The English language learning of South African domestic workers offers an ideal case to examine this incongruity.

From 2014–2017, I conducted ethnographic research with several groups of domestic workers who were taking English literacy classes in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. Domestic workers are often black African women who work and live in the homes of their employers. They are the largest single sector of women's employment

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in South Africa (Ally, 2011). Lack of formal education is a primary reason why women in South Africa remain in domestic jobs, despite the history of discriminatory and inequitable practices

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evident in this work (Ally, 2011; Cock, 1980; du Toit, 2013; le Roux, 2013; Wessels, 2006). Thus, it makes intuitive sense that domestic workers like the participants in this study are taking English language and literacy courses. However, although English has emerged as the lingua franca of globalization and business, the linguistic landscape of South Africa makes these women's choices to learn English somewhat more complex.

Currently, only 12% of South Africans use English as a main language of communication (Posel & Zeller, 2016). IsiZulu, on the other hand, is the most frequently used language in the country, with almost 25% of the population identifying as native isiZulu speakers (Heugh, 2007) and over 60% identifying as isiZulu, isiXhosa, or Sepedi speakers (Posel & Zeller, 2016). Although the number of native English speakers is higher in the Gauteng Province than elsewhere in South Africa due to the ethnic and linguistic diversity of the province (particularly Johannesburg), isiZulu is more widely spoken than any other language in Gauteng. Moreover, with 11 official languages implemented in the post-apartheid democratic constitution, South African national policies are increasingly emphasizing the importance of "mother-tongue," or native language, education for both youth and adults. And yet, despite the growing role of native languages in policy and practice, domestic workers continue spending their limited free time attending English language literacy classes. My research sought to discover why.

A Brief History of English in South Africa

Analyzing the history of English in South Africa is key to understanding the motivations of English language learners. English was first introduced to South Africa in 1795 when the British arrived in the Cape of Good Hope, now known as Cape Town, to overthrow Dutch rule and control the Cape sea route between Asia and Europe (Lass, 1995). From the end of the 18th century to the mid-20th century, English was used as the main language of education for both Bantu-speaking black South Africans and Dutch-speaking Afrikaners (white settlers and their descendants). In 1910, the Union of South Africa was formed along with a constitution that made both Dutch and English the official languages of the country (Thompson, 2000). In 1925, Afrikaans (a variation of Dutch, Bantu languages, and English) gained status as the other official language of South Africa besides English, and gradually replaced Dutch.

1948 brought the end to British rule in South Africa and the beginning of *apartheid*, a social system of racial segregation. It simultaneously brought an end to the dominance of the British colonial legacy of English as one of the official languages of the country. During apartheid, a primary way for Afrikaner leaders to oppress black Africans was through policies on language of instruction. One policy in which this was most evident was with the *Bantu Education Act of 1953* (PSA, 1953). The main components of the act promoted Afrikaans, reduced the influence of English in schools, and used mother-tongue education to support apartheid's racial and linguistic separatism (Taylor, 2002). As a response to this linguistic oppression, although English became the language of protest and freedom against apartheid, while the use of African languages in an educational context began to diminish. However, while English was viewed as the language of anti-apartheid protest, it was still associated with British rule and colonization, making its presence in South African education complex (Kamwangamalu, 2002).

The 1994 democratic elections brought the apartheid regime to an end and two years later the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa was implemented. The Constitution supported new policies promoting equality for all South Africans. This included the recognition of 11 official languages including nine native African languages, Afrikaans, and English. And yet, after over 20 years of official policies promoting multilingualism in education, a drift to English-medium education persists (Ferguson, 2013).

Methods

Adhering to South Africa's complex educational and linguistic history, I used a methodological framework that combined the individual stories and narratives of participants with the larger macro histories of the country. I combined ethnographic research with Critical Narrative Analysis (Souto-Manning, 2014) to form what I called Critical Ethnographic Narrative Analysis (CENA). CENA utilizes Narrative Inquiry, which explores individual narratives or stories, and draws on the critical and historical perspectives of language, identity, and power found in Critical Discourse Analysis. Additionally, CENA recognizes how the role and prior experiences of the researcher influence data analysis.

I drew from ethnographic data collection methods to understand why South African domestic workers were learning English in multilingual, post-apartheid South Africa and conducted interviews in three sites. I also observed English language classes and helped teach these classes in the first two research sites. The first site was an English language literacy program for domestic workers outside of Johannesburg. The second site was a weekend class in Johannesburg for domestic workers learning English. This class was operated by a language school that primarily taught isiZulu and TOEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) classes. The third site was an affluent area in Johannesburg, where I recruited domestic workers through word of mouth. The data sources include two- to three-hour, semi-structured interviews with 28 participants as well as

participant observations and ethnographic field notes over a three-year span. Thus, I used CENA to examine how domestic workers' lived and perceived realities connect to the narratives they told, how participants' beliefs about their identities are connected to a South African and global society, and how the historical rhetoric about language and education is embedded in these beliefs and narratives.

Findings

Metonymy

This brief focuses on a key finding related to the conception of metonymy. This term is often described as a figure of speech in a word or concept that is used to mean something else, often closely related to the definition of the actual word. For example, in the phrase "the pen is mightier than the sword," the "pen" is a metonym for "the written word," while the "sword" is a metonym for "military force" (Literary Devices, 2017). Another example comes from my experience as a master's student in Urban Education, when I quickly realized that "urban" denotes more than the geographic location. Instead, urban education has become metonymical for students of color who are often of lower socioeconomic status (Watson, 2011). This example illustrates how words and phrases can take on meanings that differ from their definition—meanings that conjure politically and historically laden images and concepts.

Metonyms are neither simply poetic and rhetorical devices nor matters of language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Instead, "metonymic concepts are part of the ordinary, everyday way we think and act as well as talk" (p. 37). This is significant because metonyms not only reflect how people talk and think, but also *shape* how we talk and think. This study revealed that South African domestic workers used numerous metonyms regarding notions of education, language, and English. These metonyms not only reflected broader societal notions of these same terms, but also reconstructed how these women personally

thought about and used these terms.

“English” and “Literacy”

Brock-Utne’s (2001) article, “Education for All—In Whose Language?” raises vital questions about which languages are assumed and which are considered legitimate in the process of becoming an educated person. This question stems from various social and political discourses that suggest an inherent link between education, literacy, and the English language. Similar connections are exhibited in my interviews with domestic workers. Although many of them had little formal education or no secondary degree, even those who did attend school or graduated considered themselves uneducated because of their discomfort with speaking English. For example, when I asked Zothile¹ whether she considered English a sign of education, she responded, “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.”

Moreover, even though the women I interviewed spoke and were able to read and write in numerous Bantu languages, they considered themselves “illiterate” if they could not read and write in English. In this way, being educated did not signify going to school or even graduating. Instead, it implied being exclusively educated in English. Similarly, “literacy” did not connote being able to read and write in any language but referred to reading and writing solely in English. Consequently, “education” and “literacy” became metonyms for these women. Yet these metonyms are not solely used by South African domestic workers but are also found in myriad policies and practices throughout South Africa and internationally.

The presence of English—and its link to education—is a worldwide phenomenon. Discourses about English are tied to everything done “in the name of education, all the exacerbations of inequality

that go under the label of globalization, all the linguistic calumnies that denigrate other ways of speaking, all the shamefully racist institutional interactions that occur...” (Pennycook, 2017, p. xv). English’s global presence as a lingua franca is a growing issue in policy and research, including adult education research, around the world. While global discourses are circulating the belief that learning English is essential, the South African constitution and multilingual policies are concurrently maintaining the necessities of multilingualism as a form of historical redress. For

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example, a Gauteng Province Department of Education (2013) webpage noted that schools across the country would celebrate International Mother Tongue Day as a way to embrace mother tongue learning. Additionally, the National Development Plan of 2030 (National Planning Commission, 2013) stated that “All South Africans should be encouraged to learn an African language and government programmes should work to make this a reality” (p. 26). And yet, youth and adults are continuing to assert the necessity of English. Thus, tensions exist between beliefs about the essential nature of English and policies and practices supporting multilingualism. These tensions lead to continued popular beliefs asserting the importance of English.

“Stupidity”

In addition to understanding how metonyms shape adult learners’ conceptions of language and literacy, we must also explore how these terms influence personal and social conceptions of learner identity/ies. It is these notions of identity that shape learners’ further educational aspirations. For many of the participants, English was not only associated with being literate and

¹Names have been changed to protect participant privacy.

educated, but a lack of English was connected to being viewed as “stupid” and thus being disrespected by employers.

For example, when I asked Pula, “Do people treat you differently if you don’t know English?” she responded:

Yeah, ...we don't speak perfect in English because it's not our language. Sometimes when you speak to people, they look at you like— Maybe you speak to them [and] they don't understand you. They look at you like you are stupid. You feel that thing because you can't speak properly because it's not your language. We don't feel comfortable to speak English, but as I said, it's the language that we are using in Joburg [Johannesburg]. We have to accept that. You can't do anything.

Similarly, I asked Margaret whether she thought her employer would respect her more and treat her better if she learned more English. She replied:

When I can speak English better than this, maybe she will— Yes, she will respect me. She will give me respect...Maybe she's not giving me respect just because...she thinks maybe I don't know anything. If I don't know English, she thinks maybe I don't know anything because sometimes I can't tell her things that I don't like. If she's doing things that I don't like...sometimes I can't tell her, 'You see this and this and this I don't like.'

In Pula’s view, a lack of English language literacy diminished respect by her employers and by larger South African society. It did not matter that Pula could speak numerous languages or that she had worked in an extremely difficult career for over 15 years. From Pula’s experience, her lack of fluency in English was directly linked to her feelings of insignificance.

Links between adult illiteracy and feelings of “being stupid” have previously been explored in

adult literacy and language research—particularly regarding women learners (Horsman, 2006). For example, Prin’s (2005; 2011) research on adult learners in El Salvador highlighted the *pena* (shame/embarrassment) that many adult learners feel when they don’t have an *educacion*, or “a concept that integrates academic knowledge and culturally valued forms of communication and social interaction” (p. 1478). Bartlett (2007) interviewed Brazilian adult learners and found that many of them have feelings of speech and literacy shame linked to social blaming of those lacking literacy skills. Auerbach and colleagues’ (2013) case study exhibited how many adult Haitian students associated illiteracy with feelings of stupidity and social disrespect. One woman stated that when she couldn't read and write, people looked down on her, but “becoming literate meant a change both in how others viewed her and how she viewed herself” (p. 184). Payne’s (2006) article on functional illiteracy revealed that views of illiteracy often connote ignorance, lack of education, and stupidity for those who are literate and even for those who are not—a connotation he found inherently problematic and untrue. These final two examples, however, assumed that the term “literacy” is English language literacy, again supporting the metonymic significance of this implicit connection.

By closely examining the problematic linkages between “literacy,” “education,” and “English,” we can achieve more nuanced understandings of the purposes and motivations that adults bring to learning English.

Conclusion

This study reveals that South African domestic workers are living in social and linguistic spaces that shapes how they view education, language, and literacy—and how they see themselves as learners. Although researchers, policy makers, and instructors assert the importance of multilingual literacies, many adult learners,

including the participants in this study, equate being literate and educated with knowing English. Even more, although all of the participants exhibited multiple forms of linguistic knowledge and many of them had at least some formal education, they remained trapped within metonyms that overlook these forms of knowledge. Thus, analyzing the use of metonymy in global literacy practices is vital both in South Africa and internationally.

This “English-only” notion of literacy and education, however, is changeable. Janks’ (2013) work on critical literacy notes that language, like the world, is not neutral or stable. Thus, because “both the word and the world embody human choice, it becomes possible to choose differently and to effect change” (p. 227). Although domestic workers, like many adult learners, are living in worlds that suggest the importance of English, and though English does remain a language of immense power and prestige, in South Africa and globally (Pennycook, 2013), these notions can be altered. By closely examining the problematic linkages between “literacy,” “education,” and “English,” we can achieve more nuanced understandings of the purposes and motivations that adults bring to learning English. In particular, we need to recognize learners’ multilingual and/or non-English literacy capabilities--and help them to recognize these capabilities as well.

Recommendations

For practitioners and administrators:

- Analyze how terms related to education, literacy, and language are being utilized in classrooms. Think about questions such as: Do these terms connote a specific language? Do they legitimize one linguistic literacy over another? Are multilingual literacies recognized as important? For instance, when asking or determining literate abilities of immigrants in the U.S., it’s important to consider literacy in their native language(s), other languages, and English.

- Examine how terms themselves might influence the motivations of adult language learners. Think about how learners talk about their own knowledge and how they link language and literacy to the terms they use to describe themselves. For example, are learners noting feelings of “shame” or “stupidity” for being “illiterate”? If so, probe into their own definitions of education and literacy and observe how they might connect these terms to English explicitly.
- Recognize that adults have multiple reasons, including symbolic reasons (e.g., language linked to empowerment, identity, and/or prestige), for pursuing education and language skills. Although policymakers and practitioners often connect education and English language skills to better jobs, a higher degree, and more financial capital, adult learners’ motivations to learn are often much more complex. Thus, practitioners need to recognize the symbolic outcomes of education and language learning in addition to the practical or material benefits.

For policy makers:

- Observe how conceptions of “literacy” are constructed within ABE policies. For example, in section 463.30 of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), the term “literacy” suggests English language learning and integrated English literacy, but disregards the role of multilingualism in literacy programs and services. Thus, more inclusive language in policies that recognizes the importance of literacy in multiple languages is essential.
- Review global educational comparisons and explore diverse policies across languages and countries. United States policy-makers often have an America-centric view of examining educational practices (Zhao, 2009). Drawing from global comparisons can inform innovative and more inclusive practices and policies in adult language learning.

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