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'If I speak English, does it make me less black anyway?' 'Race' and English in South African desegregated schools

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This article focuses on the role language plays in constructing youth identities that are in flux in desegregated suburban schools in South Africa. Interview and participant observation data were collected in three racially mixed schools in Johannesburg. My analysis of the data is set against a discussion of the problematic concept of *race* and of the historical classification of South African English according to 'race' as well as the position of English in South Africa at present. The article presents an analysis of the ways in which learners recognize and characterize the different kinds of English used around them, attaching prestige to varieties perceived as *white*. The tension between learners' valuing of what is perceived as *white English* and their labelling of black learners who 'speak like a white person' or who no longer speak African languages (either through lack of proficiency or choice) as 'coconuts' is explored. The article attempts to open up a debate on race and language use among youth in South Africa, and on race and varieties of English in particular.

Keywords: desegregated schools; race and language; varieties of English; youth identities

Introduction

This article is concerned with identifying and analysing the role language plays in constructing youth identities that are in flux in desegregated suburban schools in South Africa. My analysis of data drawn from three secondary schools in Johannesburg is set against a discussion of the problematic concept of 'race'¹ and of the historical classification of South African English according to race as well as of the position of English in South Africa at present. In discussing the data, the article explores the ways

in which learners recognize and characterize the different kinds of English (and English accents) used around them, attaching prestige to some varieties and, by implication, deficit to others. I highlight the tension between learners' valuing of what is perceived as 'white English', with their labelling of black learners who 'speak like a white person' or who no longer speak African languages (either through lack of proficiency or choice) as 'coconuts' and go on to consider some of the implications of such labelling for youth identities in South Africa. 'Race' is inevitably an important concept in an article that focuses on the way in which young people draw on discourses of 'race' to describe varieties of English used around them. I thus begin with a brief discussion of 'race' and its current use in South Africa.

'Race' as a concept

Omi and Winant (1993, 5) argue that although the category of 'race' has been shown to have neither a natural nor biological validity,² it has come to be, over a long period of time, 'a fundamental principle of social organization and identity formation'. The essence of Omi and Winant's view is that while the concept of 'race' might be justifiably rejected on scientific grounds (since it has no biological basis), as a social construct it is real in the lives of many. The point is that it continues to have significant effects in the understandings that people and groups have of each other and the relationships they construct with one another as a result. It cannot, therefore, simply be disregarded. This is particularly true for South Africa where the imposition of 'race' and ethnicity during the colonial and apartheid eras had devastating effects for people, many of which persist in the present. It is perhaps not surprising then, more than ten years after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, that racial classification is as prevalent in public and private life as it was during apartheid. Controversy, consequently, surrounds the use of racial designations with many arguing for its abolition and others, such as government, suggesting that there are compelling reasons for its continued use. Arguably, 'race' remains central to the current government's project of achieving redress and equity. The counter-argument has been made that use of racial labels entrenches apartheid's artificial categories. Recognizing that redress is essential, the question has been posed why the government has not used the overarching category of black,³ which includes Africans, coloureds and Indians, or resorted to more nuanced ways of identifying disadvantage in the country such as invoking the category of social class. I would argue that the continued and unproblematic use of the apartheid categories reinforces a static, or essentialist, approach to 'race.' These approaches imply that coloured, 'Indian' people, white and African people in South Africa form homogeneous and unified groups.

Post-colonial hybridity theories such as those of Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall theorise 'race' from a more complex and multifaceted standpoint providing useful alternatives to essentialist views. In his deconstruction of the category 'black', Hall argues for 'the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category "black"; that is, the recognition that

“black” is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category,’ (1992a: 254).

Important about Hall’s explanation, apart from rejecting the idea that the category ‘black’ is fixed and stable, is his use of the notion of hybridity. The black subject he presents is not only de-essentialised but is also the focus of a multiplicity of social and cultural influences. These include tradition and modernity, memories of the past in engagement with current fashions and trends, linguistic creolisation, and the fusion of aesthetic styles. It is this that produces the hybridity of identity. Significant about his use of hybridity, however, is that it remains within the realm of the political. Multifaceted as his subject might be, he or she remains rooted in the politics of his or her context. He recognizes the positioning processes that take place in society which produce dominant identities of whiteness and subordinate identities of blackness. His notion of *new ethnicities* draws on these positioning processes. Hall posits

a recognition that we all speak from a particular place, out of a particular history, out of a particular experience, a particular culture, without being contained by that position . . . We are all in that sense, ethnically located and our ethnic identities are crucial to our subjective sense of who we are. (Hall 1992a, 258)

‘New ethnicities’ is both a reaction to the more ‘closed’ and traditional sense of ethnicity in which it is tied to ‘an essential conception of group, tradition or homeland,’ as well as to, and therefore against, particular forms of post modernity which project identity as completely free-floating – the idea that we can be whatever we like. In an interview with Yon (1999, 89) he challenges the idea that we can, chameleon-like, continually change who we are. Instead, he argues that identity is rooted in, but not contained by, collective or group identities. Hall explains that along with feminism and post-structuralism, ‘new ethnicities’ was influenced by Gramsci: ‘Gramsci’s notion that the individual subject is the combination of traces from the past plus the aspirations of the future is exactly what I am talking about in the new ethnicity’ (interview with Yon 1999, 92).

Historical classification of South African English according to ‘race’

Sociolinguistic work on varieties of English in South Africa has brought to light the impact of the colonial past and the apartheid ideology of racial classification on language use. This work has shown how different varieties of English have largely come to be identified in racial terms: White South African English (WSAE), Black South African English (BSAE), Coloured English, South African Indian English and Afrikaans English (see Lanham 1996). Such classifications or labels, however, may create the false impression that all people of the same ‘race’ speak exactly the same variety of English. This contributes to an essentialist view of ‘race’. While it is true that apartheid racial segregation has had a powerful effect on the use of English and on the construction of what Mesthrie (pers. comm.) refers to as ‘ethnic Englishes’,

empirical reality also shows considerable variation within 'ethnic Englishes' such as White South African English (WSAE) and Black South African English (BSAE). Some work has been done on classifying White South African English (WSAE) into sub varieties (Lass 2002), but the category of Black South African English has only begun to be explored. In fact, as De Klerk and Gough (2002) point out, the category itself is contested, unstable and includes a range of features from those related to low proficiency in English to those approximating standard English. Until recently, Black South African English (BSAE) 'tended to be discussed in prescriptive terms as a variety deviating from the norm, not acceptable in formal contexts at all' (De Klerk and Gough 2002, 356). Based on linguistic research, Van der Walt and Van Rooy have tentatively argued that 'BSAE is indeed an emerging norm for South African Englishes, but one that has not yet been established securely' (2002, 113). Wissing (2002), on the other hand, posits that Black South African English (BSAE) is an interlanguage rather than a stable variety of English. Recent research on Black South African English (BSAE) by Van der Walt and Van Rooy (2002) and Wissing (2002) also points to variation according to speakers' mother tongues.

It is interesting to consider the extent to which accents and varieties of English were and still are used in everyday South African life to make judgements about an individual's racial or ethnic 'belonging', especially of course when the speaker is unseen as in telephone conversations. In her studies of Afrikaans first language parents' (De Klerk 2001) and Xhosa first language parents' choices (De Klerk 2000, 2002) in sending their children to English medium schools, De Klerk reports parents' pleasure in their children confusing callers when answering the telephone, because they sound just like 'a [white] English speaker'. In one example, an Afrikaans parent says that callers frequently put the phone down believing they have called an English-speaking household by mistake. In her research on the language use of black learners attending private open schools, Gaganakis (1992, 51) pointed out how 'being "white-white" in the learners' words was associated with 'speaking "proper English" in the school'. The power of racial categories not only in defining but also in placing value on varieties of English in the ordinary discourses of young people who are still at school is explored through the data in this article.

English in South Africa at present

Much has been written about the powerful role played by English in South Africa today. This is the case despite post-apartheid language policy which has explicitly recognized 11 official languages and has made a special commitment to the promotion of previously neglected African languages (Granville et al. 1998; Heugh 2002; Kamwangamalu 2003; Mda 2004). Parents have also, significantly, been granted the right to choose the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in schools by the language in education policy (DoE 1997). It has become *passé* to point out the huge gap between government language in education policy that promotes additive bilingualism and initial education in mother

tongue, and practice in schools where English has become increasingly hegemonic in the post apartheid era. In the very first year of democracy, 1994, Naledi Pandor, Minister of Education, found that 87% of parliamentary speeches had been conducted in English although 'the majority of members [were] fluent in three or four African languages' (in De Klerk 2000, 89). Kamwangamalu (2003) has also pointed out the dominance of English in South African public television broadcasting.

De Klerk's research exploring language shift from Xhosa to English among predominantly affluent and middle-class parents in the Eastern Cape found that African parents who could afford to do so were specifically choosing English medium schools because of their 'dissatisfaction with conditions at local Xhosa schools' (De Klerk 2002, 11). De Klerk argues that

[t]he parents in this study are actively and knowingly promoting [a] shift from Xhosa to English in their children. For political, economic and educational reasons, they *want* their children to be assimilated into a single unified national culture which will probably be Western to the core. (2002, 11)

While access to good proficiency in English is perceived to be an outcome of education at a former white English medium school, the data shows that not all learners are equally successful in their mastery of the kind of English proficiency necessary to succeed academically in this environment. For many, however, speaking a particular brand of fluent English, often identified by learners as 'white English', apart from being valued as an economic resource, is already a signal of being well-educated (Gaganakis 1992; Kamwangamalu 2003). As Bourdieu points out, schooling is one of the most important sites for social reproduction and is thus also one of the key sites, 'which imposes the legitimate forms of discourse and the idea that discourse should be recognized if and only if it conforms to the legitimate norms' (Bourdieu 1997, 650).

By contrast to White South African English (WSAE), Black South African English (BSAE) carries a great deal of stigma. It has been characterized by sociolinguists as a deviation from the norm provided by standard South African English (De Klerk and van Gough 2002). Given the nature of white hegemony in the economy and the broader cultural environment, it is not surprising that varieties of English spoken by white people have come to define the standard for how English should be spoken. In analysing the relationship between language and power, Bourdieu has argued that '[d]iscourse is a symbolic asset which can receive different values depending on the market on which it is offered' (1997, 651). Simply put, 'language is worth what those who speak it are worth' (ibid.) and 'the dominant usage is the usage of the dominant class' (1997, 659). Speaking, therefore, a variety of fluent English which approximates to a variety of White South African English (including in the key audibility aspect of accent) is thus a form of cultural capital, or more precisely linguistic capital, in South Africa.

Youth views on English

It is also significant that recent research documenting attitudes to English among youth residing in and attending township (sub-economic areas) schools (township learners) reveals ambivalent attitudes to English rather than straightforward valorisation. Kapp's research in the Western Cape province shows that while learners view English as very important for instrumental reasons and are pragmatic about the necessity of proficiency in English to get ahead, thus tying it to their aspirations, they are wary of people around them who have been seen to abandon the use of their African languages:

English signifies mobility – transcendence of the boundaries of the township. However to be seen to be investing in English through using the language publicly or openly declaring an interest (as the 'going'⁴ students do) is to risk humiliation and derision in class. The 'going' students had earned the label 'Model Cs' for their use of English outside the classroom. (Kapp 2004, 258)

Similar attitudes have been documented elsewhere in the country. Rudwick's research in the KwaZulu-Natal township of Umlazi shows how adolescents simultaneously acknowledge the instrumental role of English, and have come to 'perceive [it] as the ticket to success' (2004, 165), while they are resentful of the powerful economic status of English believing that isiZulu should play a much more significant role in a province like KwaZulu-Natal which is overwhelmingly Zulu speaking. Learners in Rudwick's study also strongly associate English with what they call 'white culture' which is clearly differentiated from 'Zulu culture' (ibid.). As one participant in Rudwick's study put it: 'We don't practise "white culture". I think we must not speak so much of English, because if they do they forget about our culture and that is bad.' (Grade 11 Female) (Rudwick 2004, 167) These ambivalences have produced complex new peer-group relationships in the townships. Rudwick's participants viewed learners attending former model C schools as 'others' with their use of English featuring as 'the crucial dividing agent' between them (2004). They manifested a strong commitment to isiZulu and were derisive of those who could not speak isiZulu.

The ambivalence towards English and valuing of African languages revealed by Kapp and Rudwick is an indicator of the emergence of a new and different kind of cultural or linguistic capital (possibly even sub-cultural capital) in the country. Marking it is its link with African languages. It is, perhaps, not surprising that township learners with little access to good proficiency in English value African languages more. For these young people who are usually viewed as disadvantaged and relatively powerless, it is empowering to be able to label and exclude those usually considered as the privileged and the elite (i.e. model C learners) from the social networks central to youth culture in the township, thus limiting their access to what is considered 'hip' and 'cool' in this domain.

Language and identity

Such ambivalent positions on language and its users among South African youth highlight the extremely complex relationship that is taking shape in the country with regard to language and identity. Perhaps it is as a result of this kind of complexity that sociolinguistics as a discipline has not made enough progress in theorising the relationship between language and identity (Hewitt 2003, Blackledge and Pavlenko 2004). Le Page and Tabouret-Keller's (1985) seminal work theorising linguistic behaviour as 'a series of *acts of identity* in which people reveal both their personal identity and their search for social roles' (Mesthrie and Tabouret-Keller 2001, 166) is, however, useful in its emphasis on the performative and the contextual moment. In this article, I draw on this idea of identity as performative alongside a poststructuralist theorising of discourse and subjectivity. This approach views identity as multiple, fluid and in process, but also anchored in particular ways through investment and desire (cf. Hall 1992a, 1992b, 1996; Davies 1991, 1997; Weedon 1997). As Pavlenko and Blackledge put it, 'a poststructuralist framework allows us to examine and explain negotiation of identities as situated within larger socioeconomic, socio-historic and socio-political processes' (2004, 3). Identity in this context is, of necessity, fluid. Individuals, drawing on and having to respond to different linguistic contexts and the semiotic resources that circulate within them, take positions and are positioned in different ways in different contexts or geographical spaces. Important in understanding this is recognizing the degree to which positioning and the resources one can draw on are constrained by unequal power relations. As Blommaert argues, 'identity repertoires [are] conditioned by unequal forms of access to particular identity-building resources' (2005, 207).

Data collection and research sites

The data discussed in this article was collected using ethnographic methods such as non-participant and participant observation, video and audio recording, and semi-structured group and individual interviews. Data was collected over two school terms in three Johannesburg secondary schools: one all girls and two co-educational schools. The girls-only school (here dubbed Girls' School) is situated to the north east of central Johannesburg and accommodates about 750 learners. While previously a white English medium school catering for a predominantly Jewish intake, the school now accommodates black learners from a wide range of areas around Johannesburg. Learners are predominantly African with about 25 Indian and coloured and two or three white learners. Forty-five per cent of the sample group of Grade 10 learners commute from townships across Gauteng. The school fees are set at R5 500 a term. While this places the school on the elite end of the continuum of South African public schooling, only 50% of learners pay full or partial fees. The school ethos is characterized by a strict disciplinary regime largely enforced by the Principal who is very 'hands on' in running the school. The language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is English with Afrikaans

offered as a second language. isiZulu is offered as an additional subject in Grade 12 only and this is through extra classes after school. Although all the girls take English as a first language, only ten of the 69 learners (14% of the sample) reported English as their first language.

The two co-educational schools are both situated in the Northern Suburbs: Fairview High School⁵ is north of Sandton (an affluent part of the city) and Excel High School is about 10km north of the Johannesburg city centre. Fairview High school has about 750 learners, the majority of whom are African and Indian with a fair proportion of white learners. School fees are set at R8 100 per term with 65% paying full fees and a further 10% paying between R400 and R2 500. The school ethos is characterized by openness to change with a balance between social activities and academic achievements, and some laxity in relation to students' behaviour. English is the LoLT with Afrikaans and isiZulu offered as second languages as part of the formal curriculum. Although all learners take English as a first language, only 15 out of 43 participants reported speaking English as a home language, making up 35% of the sample.

The third school, Excel, accommodates over a thousand learners. It has more black learners in the lower grades than in the upper grades (Grades 11–12). School fees are high at around R12 000 with 85% of learners paying full or partial fees. The school ethos places a high premium on academic success and discipline. Both learners and teachers at the school constantly refer to the 'Excel standard' believing it to be superior to that of other schools as well as to the external Department of Education examinations. As with Fairview, English is used as the language of teaching and learning and is taken as a first language, while isiZulu and Afrikaans are offered as second/ additional languages. At Excel, 18 out of 43 learners report speaking English as a first language, constituting 43% of the sample.⁶

Data discussion

Attention is now turned to an analysis of the data collected at the three secondary schools. Data was analysed using an ethnographic and interpretive approach through which common patterns or themes as well as anomalies and ruptures were identified. In some instances, the thematic analysis is supplemented by a linguistic form of discourse analysis such as, for example, analysing positioning through pronoun use. Three themes relating to 'race' and language across the data were identified. The discussion begins with learners' recognition of different kinds of English and the prestige they attach to White South African English (WSAE). Then learners' expression of their awareness of different varieties produced by township and suburban schooling is explored. Finally, I consider the use of the pervasive label 'coconut' and the destabilisation of racial categorisation through language practices that it seems to indicate. Alongside this, the identity work of two female learners in their resistance to such categorisation and labelling is explored.

Prestigious and other Englishes: ambivalences

Echoing the prestige attached to White South African English (WSAE) in South African sociolinguistics in the past and the simultaneous stigmatisation of Black South African English, learners in all three schools spoke about 'White English' as 'proper English' marking this, therefore, as a highly prestigious variety. In the extract below, taken from an interview with Gugu, a female learner at Fairview, the notion of 'White English' as a prestige variety is reinforced. Here, Gugu and the researcher are discussing different kinds of English and Gugu begins talking about some of her 'stuck up friends' who speak 'posh':

Extract 1

Gugu: You can have the rich spoiled ones [friends], I have like three of those. Louis Vuitton or Gucci, that's all they talk about, their clothes and themselves.

R1: Ee!

Gugu: And their English is actually like wow . . .

R1: Their English is what?

Gugu: It's wow! It's like you're speaking to a white person.

R1: Oh, maybe

Gugu: But she is as black as black.

R1: But it's like whites.

Gugu: Ja ja [Yes, yes].

R1: And the clothes they wear?

Gugu: All those labels.

(Interview with Gugu, Fairview; R1 indicates researcher 1, Clifford Ndlangamandla.)

Gugu's description of her friends' use of English – 'it's wow!' – indicates that she is clearly impressed by their use of English. In considering the way in which these 'stuck-up girls' speak, Gugu shows her association of 'white people's English' with snobbery and furthermore with a particular kind of elite consumerism in the reference to exclusive international fashion designers such as Vuitton and Gucci. Similarly, on another occasion where learners at this school were discussing varieties and different accents of English in their English lesson, Gugu speaks about 'Louis Vuitton English' as a kind of 'posh' English (video recorded English lesson, 13 April 2005, Fairview). 'Louis Vuitton English' speaks of the social class dimension in different accents and varieties of English in South Africa; Gugu is not merely linking posh English to white speakers but also to wealth and the ability to consume or at least to the desire for elite consumption. Gugu's exclamation 'It's wow!' in referring to her friend who is 'black as black' speaking like a 'white person' also highlights the continued power of racial labelling of accents and brands of English as well as people's expectations that one should be able to identify 'race' from audible features such as accent and variety of English used.

Learners frequently associate White English with previously white schools in the

suburbs, while Black English is associated with the township and specifically township schooling. In Extract 2 below taken from an interview with two Grade 10 girls at Fairview, the girls are clearly able to describe the kind of English they use, and simultaneously to show the continuing power of racial categorisations in people's thinking about the different varieties of English present in South Africa.

Extract 2

[The interviewees had been discussing the different languages that they speak and mentioned "proper English"; the researcher is following up on this.]

R1: What kind of English do you speak?

Lulu: English?

R1: Mm . . .

Lulu: I think I speak a type of English that eh, (pause) I don't know because (pause)

Lindi: It's hard.

Lulu: I know. It's like, I don't know.

Lindi: Her English is good.

Lulu: It is the type of white people, type of English.

Lindi: Mm!

Lulu: You know what I mean? It's not the Coloured English; it is not the Indian English.

Lindi: It's not the one mixed with your, with your . . .

Lulu: Language?

Lindi: African language, ja, ja!

Lulu: So, it's basically that, because you can't, you know how black people, like my mama . . . for example, how she speaks English.

Lindi: Ja!

Lulu: You can hear that she comes from black schools and she was, you know what I mean? . . .

Lindi: Ja!

Lulu: So, I don't speak English in that way. I don't speak English in the coloured ways . . .

Lindi: (laughs)

R1: (laughing) And you?

Lindi: The same.

(Interview with Lulu and Lindi, Fairview 08/06/05.)

If one were working with a static, unified category of blackness, there would be some irony in Lulu's emphatic description of her English as 'white people's' type of English, especially when she addresses the researcher (a black male himself) saying: 'You know how black people [speak].' Lulu's English is described as 'good' by her friend and then as 'white people's type of English' which conflates 'good' English with 'White' English. However, despite these statements, Lulu is clearly working with heterogeneous categories of 'black' and positions the researcher as being differently black from her mother. Lulu goes on to clarify what she means here: she is referring to people, like

her mother, who are a product of township or rural schooling ('black schools'). This relates to the work that has been done on Black South African English (BSAE) in South Africa which also sees this form of English as a product of the Department of Education and Training (DET i.e. the former apartheid government department for black schools) schooling (cf. De Klerk and Gough 2002). However, the data in Extract 2 as well as that in Extract 3 below indicates that, despite the clear racial labelling of varieties of English as 'White' and 'Black', learners are aware that black people speak English in different ways. In associating White English with prestige English in the next extract, the learner also qualifies her description of black people's use of English as Lulu does in giving details of her mother's education:

Extract 3

R2: Do you think that people speak English in different ways, or does everybody sound the same?

Girl: I think people speak in different ways because of their backgrounds and where they come from and how they are taught to speak. Like, if let's say she's brought up by people, let's say white people and I'm brought up by blacks who can't speak English, I'm going to speak that broken English and she's going to speak that smooth perfect English. So . . . And your primary school . . . the people who taught you at primary school, it depends on how they taught you.

(Girls' School, 10Y whole class discussion, 16 May 2005. R2 indicates researcher 2, Carolyn McKinney)

Here, white people's English is depicted as 'that smooth perfect English' clearly illustrating the value attached to it and signalling the fluency of first language speakers. But in reference to being brought up by black people, the speaker is careful to qualify this with 'blacks who can't speak English' as those who would produce 'broken English'. The learner does not thus imply that all black people speak English in this way. Her qualification seems to echo that of De Klerk and Gough who, in their discussion of Black South African English (see also Makoni 1999), signal the difficulty in conflating English produced by black learners of English who are not yet proficient (or indeed never achieve full proficiency) with the accents and varieties of well-educated speakers including many politicians and television and radio presenters.

Further evidence of learners' developing awareness of different varieties of English being produced through township and suburban schooling is seen in Extract 4:

Extract 4

Mandy: Ja, it's also like, it's also like people who go to Soweto schools, their English is different from ours now (loud interjections from other learners all speaking at once).

Themba: Hawu! hawu!

Kg: Ae! It's not different.

Mandy: Aaa! Aaa! Aaa! Wait a minute. Wait. (noisy objections from other learners). Shh!

Shh! Shh! You know like, ok, in other schools, ok let me say schools in the township, ok. Are you satisfied? (noisy objections) (to B) Shut up man!

Themba: (laughs)

Mandy: It's like in accent their English is different from ours because you know they're like used to black people, (inaudible) it's like, *Hayi* [no], don't do that (laughter) . . . (to Themba) I did not say their English is wrong. I just say their accent is different. *Wena* [you], you're twisting my words.

(Extract from Excel class discussion 18 April 2005.)

The female learner, Mandy, is clearly making a distinction between the variety of English or accent produced by township schooling and that produced in suburban schooling ('our English') on the basis that township learners are exposed to 'black people' and not white people at school. However, this did not go down well with some of the boys who live in the township and there was definite resistance to making this distinction from others in the class as seen in the frequent noisy objections from some learners. In the extract above, we see resistance through Themba's interjections 'Hawu, Hawu' and Kg's direct contradiction of Mandy, 'Ae! It's not different', although such challenges were playful in tone as indicated by the laughter from these boys and others in the class. Mandy's pronoun use shows how she clearly separates herself and her classmates from township schooled youth and creates the categories of 'us' (model C or suburban schooled) and 'them' (township schooled): '*their* English is different from *ours*.'

'Coconut' labelling and resistance

While there may be significant prestige attached to varieties of English perceived as white, the labelling of black learners who attend suburban, former model C schools and who speak a brand of English approximating White South African English (WSAE) as coconuts, problematises such prestige. In both individual and group interviews, learners from all three schools consistently identified the label 'coconut' as referring to:

- black people who speak "like a white person"
- black people who speak English most of the time
- black people who choose to speak English rather than an African language (e.g. in a township or rural setting) or who are unable to speak an African language
- black people who are considered to be "acting white" or as "black on the outside but white on the inside".

While many of the black learners participating in the study report being labelled as coconuts by township peers, this is certainly not a label they accept for themselves. Although they are often irritated by and uncomfortable in being thus positioned, this also does not stop them from labelling others as 'coconuts'. For example, in an interview with two female learners at Fairview (Lulu and Lindi), they are quick to label another

learner who ‘doesn’t know an African language’ as a coconut and go on to explain that this learner ‘acts like she is white basically and then . . . outside . . . outside she is black’; they go on to report that there are many ‘coconuts’ at Fairview: ‘Ja there’s lots in the school. People who speak English, they don’t wanna [sic] speak their home languages’ all the while using the third person pronoun ‘they’ to distance themselves from this group of learners. The assumption that some black people ‘act white’ or are ‘white on the inside’ draws on essentialist and static discourses of ‘race’ which construct ‘white’ and ‘black’ as homogeneous categories. Apart from the fact that the biological category of ‘race’ has been deconstructed as a myth (cf. Omi and Winant 1993), post-structuralist or hybridity theories of ethnicity, as discussed earlier, posit a fluid view that problematises the notion that one can be ‘white on the inside’ (cf. Hall 1992a). An interesting contrast to homogeneous views of ethnicity is the hybrid and fluid discourse of identity that another female learner at Fairview draws on which enables her to successfully resist the coconut labelling. The interviewer has just asked the learner, Gugu, whether she gets labelled for attending a former model C school like Fairview.

Extract 5

Gugu: You one of those, of those “white-wanna-be”.

R1: Mm, mm . . .

Gugu: Just because I go to a white school does not mean that I wanna be white.

R1: Oh, white wanna be!

Gugu: White wanna be, coconut!

R1: Oh!

Gugu: Oreo, topdeck,⁷ ja, there’s everything, man.

R1: And then what do you think of those labels?

Gugu: I don’t care. I am not one of those people who listen to what others say.

(R1: Mm) I might go along with what others say but I don’t take it to heart or mind.

(R1: Mm) Others do that.

R1: You said that they do that for the school you go to, what about for the way you’re speaking?

Gugu: Ja [Yes], I can change my way, the way I’m speaking . . . If I were to leave school now . . . I can even be more Tsotsi-taal, I can be as *Kasi*⁸ [township] as all of them (R1: Mm) and if I were to go to Sandton I can be a nigger and like ‘yo gal’ (mm) If I go to the Eastern Cape I will be Xhosa as Xhosa, and just forget about English . . . I am one of those individual, individuals . . . I can be different from everybody else (R1: Ee) but at the same time, be different and the same. (Interview with Gugu, Fairview.)

In the examples Gugu gives of using the languages of English, Tsotsi-taal and Xhosa, she describes her ability to ‘perform acts of identity as an ongoing series of social and cultural performances rather than as an expression of a prior identity’ (Pennycook 2004, 8). In each case, she refers not only to the use of a particular language, for example, Tsotsi-taal or Xhosa, but links this to different ethno linguistic identities as well as

to distinct geographical spaces (school/suburb, township, Sandton/shopping mall, and rural Eastern Cape). Thus Gugu can use Tsotsi-taal to position herself as 'as *kasi* as all of them' with all that goes along with this, American hip-hop English to position herself as 'nigger' and as part of this youth sub-culture, and in using Xhosa in the Eastern Cape she will 'be Xhosa as Xhosa'. Gugu also shows her understanding of the need to master and deploy different languages and varieties of language in order to be accepted in the sub-cultures she participates in.⁹ Her multilingualism and awareness of language are invaluable in giving her the resources to move across what many other young people might consider impermeable boundaries (e.g. the rural-urban divide) and mutually exclusive geographical spaces, but what Gugu shows to be far more porous allowing her to be continually 'different and the same'.

Gugu signals her awareness of the notion that 'discourse is a symbolic asset which can receive different values depending on the market in which it is offered' (Bourdieu 1997, 651) and draws on her different forms of linguistic capital in accordance with the shifting markets or fields in which she participates. While speaking a prestige variety of White South African English (WSAE) may help one to get a job, it can also lead to exclusionary labels such as 'coconut' and can inhibit social interaction with peers who are not proficient in this variety. Thus, as discussed in relation to the views of township youth in Kapp and Rudwick's studies earlier, prestige attached to White South African English (WSAE) varieties is not simple. The use of the coconut label, while it exposes problems of acceptance and belonging for some young people both within desegregated school environments and in township and rural environments, destabilises traditional apartheid 'race' categories, bringing to the fore the complexity of what it means to be or to perform 'white' and 'black' in South Africa. The continued discursive policing of racial boundaries and of what it means to be 'black' and 'white' among youth in South Africa sits uncomfortably with the history of the struggle against the discriminatory apartheid racial classification system. Yet, when one links 'race' categories to social class and to access to resources, the policing of boundaries makes more sense. Hall (in an interview by Yon 1999) has acknowledged the power of identity politics and the strategic assertion of essentialist identities by those who are or feel threatened and disempowered. Defining what it means to be black and who belongs in this category is a cultural resource in a context of widespread poverty and material deprivation. Earlier mention was made of the power of exercising social exclusion for those who have few material resources. This is more marked when one considers the current valuing of 'township culture' and modes of blackness in youth culture and popular culture more generally (Bogatsu 2002; Nuttall 2004, 2005; see discussion in McKinney 2005).

Gugu explains that going to a former white school does not mean she wants to become white. Likewise, some learners were explicit in their rejection of racial labelling and categorising according to language use. For example, an initial assumption was made that Maria, in Girls' School, could not speak an indigenous South African language as she was always heard speaking English. However, as the fieldwork period continued,

she was occasionally heard to be speaking isiZulu and Sesotho. In one of the group interviews, her classmates accused her of being a snob for mainly speaking English. Maria strongly objected to this and on several occasions (in three different interviews) she raised the question: 'If I speak English, does it make me less black anyway?' In this repeated question, Maria, implicitly challenging the homogenisation inherent in labels such as White South African English (WSAE) and Black South African English (BSAE), points to the much more complex reality of the relationship between 'race' and language use as well as to the shifting relationships between 'race' and performing identity in South Africa. Her question deeply probes what it currently means to be black in South Africa and rejects the apartheid linguistic ideology that attempted to separate and divide people according to ethnicity matched up with language.¹⁰ Maria's own language history further highlights the longstanding complexity of multilingualism in urban South Africa and the erroneous alignment between language and ethnicity that apartheid ideology in the past and many South Africans today continue to assume to be the case:

Maria: Miss, miss, miss what about us? I mean like *mina* [me, Xhosa] my dad is Venda, I know how to speak Venda. My mum is Xhosa, I mean like half of the time I need to twist my tongue and I need to do or else, what else. There are some of us who can't actually say am I Sotho, am I Tswana or am I Pedi?

Maria rejects being labelled ethnically and explains the impossibility of this in her case; alongside this she chooses to use English as much as possible despite the censure this brings her from peers. In this instance, choosing English seems to free Maria from a singular, static mode of blackness and allows her to reject the narrow view of blackness that equates it with speaking an indigenous 'ethnic' language.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to open up a debate on 'race' and language use among youth in South Africa, and on 'race' and varieties of English in particular. The data presented indexes complex self and other positioning of 'black' youth in relation to different brands of English as well as to the use of African languages. On the one hand, the young people in this research project use racial labels to characterize the different kinds of English they hear around them, but on the other, they problematise such labels by acknowledging differences in the way 'black' people speak English. They do however attach prestige to certain uses of English (associated with white people and with suburban or former model C schooling) and stigma to others (often associated with black people and with township and rural schooling). While many of the learners seem to valorise what are perceived as 'white' ways of speaking English, their use of the 'coconut' label also references their valuing of African language proficiency, and of 'being black' as opposed to 'acting white'.

The success of the apartheid racial and ethnic classification system depended on

the internalisation of constructed and imposed racial and ethno linguistic categories by millions of South Africans (black and white). However, the young people who are the focus of this article are operating in a different milieu from their parents, one in which rigid categorisation is of course no longer imposed from the state. They have far more opportunities and space to play with their identities, and to perform these in different ways, as well as to shift allegiances. But such choices are also constrained in significant ways: first by the discourses and thus identity positions currently available in society; secondly by their access to identity-building resources which includes access to high levels of proficiency in English (as well as to a particular brand of 'model C' English¹¹) and in African languages. The young people who attend the suburban schools used in this study are privileged in their greater access to opportunities to learn a prestige form of English; but most South African youth are not in this position.

Labelling practices such as the use of the coconut label are extremely interesting in their reflection of contemporary discourses of 'race' in South Africa. As has been argued, they simultaneously challenge and destabilise static categories of 'race' as produced by apartheid while attempting to police racial boundaries. While some (relatively privileged) young people can exercise symbolic power through speaking a particular kind of English, others (relatively disadvantaged and without access to middle-class schooling) can exercise such power in their ability to exclude privileged peers from their social networks. The data in this article depicts young people drawing on both static and hybrid discourses of 'race', identity and language to make sense of their current linguistic and social experience. It is through such discourses that they construct the identity positions of contemporary South Africa that, in Hall's words, are 'the combination of traces from the past plus the aspirations of the future' (Interview with Yon 1999, 92).

Notes

1 I signal 'race' as a social construction by placing the term in quotation marks.

2 Omi and Winant are not alone in presenting this fact. As May notes, the 'process of equating group differences on 'racial' grounds is now considered to be scientifically invalid.' (2001, 51). See, for example, Jones (1993) who explains how the process of gene mapping has discredited the idea of humans being divided into distinct 'races' according to skin colour.

3 For further discussion of this issue see Maré 2001 and McKinney (forthcoming).

4 The 'going' students was a term used by an ex-pupil for the minority of learners seen to be successful: 'Those students who assert themselves as individuals by being well-behaved, responsible achievers, who practise English' (Kapp 2004, 257–258). The ex-pupil remarked that 'the teachers go with the students who are going' (ibid.).

5 Note that I use pseudonyms for the names of the schools as well as all staff members and learners mentioned.

6 It is interesting to note that the percentage of learners reporting English as their first language increases with school fees and the number of learners able to pay school fees per school; thus English first language use correlates with affluence or middle-class social backgrounds.

7 The labels ‘oreo’ (an American biscuit that is brown on the outside and white on the inside) and ‘topdeck’ (a chocolate bar with chunks of white chocolate on top of brown chocolate) operate in a similar way to the coconut metaphor.

8 ‘Kasi’ is a popular term for township, and is derived from *lokasi*, Afrikaans for location which was an apartheid term for townships. The term Kasi is widely used in Tsotsi-taal (a township hybrid language) and in the youth magazine, *Y-Mag* and thus is linked to popular youth culture.

9 Of course whether Gugu is ultimately successful in the eyes of others in moving across these domains cannot be ascertained from this data.

10 I am referring here to the policy of separate geographic areas (homelands) divided on ‘ethno linguistic’ criteria and the internal separation of ‘ethnic’ groups in townships and township schools.

11 The descriptor ‘model C’ English has become quite common in the popular media, for example *Y-Mag*.

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