"They talk to us like children": language and intergenerational discourse in first-time encounters in an African township

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Abstract

This paper analyses language discourse in first-time encounters between young and old women in an African township. Forms of address, stories and complaints are analysed in terms of generational differences and similarities in identity ascription. Young women identify themselves on the basis of their ethnic membership and class, while old women do so on the basis of family relations and implied ethnic membership, which can be gleaned from their name and place of birth or origin. The discourse is marked by frequent complaints by old women to young women about the youth. Some complaints may be interpreted as masked forms of bragging. Old women complain that "they [the youth] talk to us like children," but their words were initially used by the youth to describe old people. Within their use of language old women try to reinforce traditional power to withstand youth power and to retain some influence, even within non-familial intergenerational encounters.

Introduction

This paper analyses the use of language by old and young women in first-time encounters in an African township in post-apartheid South Africa. As far as the author is aware, no studies have been conducted on this topic in South Africa. The literature on the topic is predominantly from Western countries. Further, the majority of analyses of the discourse of older persons has been quantitative and from a psycholinguistic approach (see e.g. Coupland, Coupland & Giles, 1992).

Much of the psycholinguistic research has been fraught with methodological problems, and the results have been inconsistent and difficult to interpret. The research has been influenced by a deficit model which seeks to investigate the extent to which the comprehension and speech production abilities of older persons, particularly in the areas of syntax and vocabulary, decline with advancing age. Hamilton (1994) argues that psycholinguistic studies have overlooked how the expectations and communicative reactions of a healthy speaker shape the language of an older person who is being assessed. Coupland *et al.* (1992) point out that isolating the effects of age among subjects separated by at least two decades is extremely demanding as it involves controlling for a host of factors, including education, life history, motivation and the subject's intelligence. A lesson from the psycholinguistic studies is that it may be prudent to investigate the discourse of older persons by analysing typical discursive practices which include forms of address, self-identification and complaints.

Forms of address

According to Wood and Kroger (1993: 264) forms of address superficially appear mundane but the forms in fact have special pragmatic functions: they open the communicative act and set the tone of the conversations which are to follow. The forms of address used in conversations between people who meet for the first time are particularly important in signalling either the distance or the degree of solidarity developing between the conversationalists. A comparison of the forms of address used in the interaction demonstrates the dynamics involved. For example, a predominant usage of group over personal names reflects the importance attached to conforming to group norms. (Groups may be gender or ethnic based.) Hence an old woman is expected to behave like an old woman and a young woman to behave like a young woman in the interaction (Raum, 1973; De Kadt, 1994).

Kinship and generational identities

Identity is a transitive phenomenon. To realise one's identity a person needs to identify with someone, some group or something else. Individuals have a range of identities. For example, older persons may gravitate towards or distance themselves from what they perceive to be elderly group norms. The identities may be organized along a number of dimensions, including gender, age, religion, ethnicity and kinship. All identities are not necessarily activated at the same time or, to use Giddens' (1991) words, identities which are "brought along" are not necessarily always "brought about." Coupland *et al.* (1992) investigated how old people activate different identities depending on whether they are interacting with peer older persons or relatively young conversationalists.

Changes in identity can also occur within a single interaction. The variability is permissible within the constraints that are negotiable within an interactional event. In urban settings individuals may appropriate different types of discourse (cf. Rampton, 1995a); for example, older persons may appropriate ways of talking associated with younger persons, or with persons having a particular profession or belonging to a particular religion.

However, there are two major problems inherent in this approach to self-identification. First, the approach implies that the identity which an individual ascribes to himself/her-

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self, or has ascribed in an interaction, remains constant. This paper therefore seeks to examine some of the changes which occur within an interactional event, which suggest that an individual's identity is continually changing. Second, the approach claims that the central organizing principle is the notion of the self as the basis on which identity is constructed. An emphasis on individual identity downplays the extent to which "relations are structured by group identities" (De Kadt, 1994). Group identities are particularly important in intergenerational encounters since one "relates as a young man to an older man, as a child to a parent, etc." (De Kadt, 1994: 105).

Intergenerational discourse

The literature on intergenerational discourse has been strongly influenced by American constructs of communication. Central to these studies has been a simplistic notion of the self as speaker and hearer. A number of critiques have pointed out this weakness, notably Hsu (1985). Scollon and Scollon (1992) have more recently argued against what they call "American ontological individualism," whereby "... the individual has a primary reality whereas society is a second order, ... furthermore ... even in the anthropological and sociological sciences, culture and society are seen as being built up out of the association of individuals, not as primary realities in themselves" (1992: 334).

Studies on intergenerational discourse, particularly those conducted in Europe and America, may not be directly appropriate to a cultural context in which the notion of a collective is extremely powerful. The research conducted by Coupland and his associates into the role of "painful self-disclosure" in intergenerational discourse, because of the impact of ontological individualism on their thinking, fails to realise that in some cases "the person giving voice to the words may not be the author of the words. In such a case the source is composite of [at least] two persons" (Coupland *et al.*, 1992: 47). What is required is a more complex model of interaction which goes beyond the "straightjacket of first and second person" (Levinson, quoted in Scollon & Scollon, 1992: 233). To avoid some of the pitfalls of the American and European studies of communication, it is necessary to draw a distinction between individualistic and collectivistic conceptualisation of the self (Tracy, 1990). For example, there is a subtle but important distinction between giving voice to somebody's words and quoting; in the latter instance the person giving voice to the words is aware that the words are not his/hers and publicly acknowledges this, but in the former case the individual is giving voice to a collective experience which he/she feels part of, and to which he/she has a legitimate claim.

Complaints

The discourse of old people tends to be characterized by complaints, particularly when it is about young people, or directed at them. Cattell (forthcoming) defines complaints as "... multivocal or multidimensional, simultaneously holding several meanings, fulfilling several needs, and/or having one or more intended results. ... Complaints can be expressions of person-environment dissonance, or the sense of unease that follows from being in an environment in which one feels more or less like a stranger ..." The person-environment dissonance creates an environment conducive to complaints. In South Africa this dissonance may arise from the social and political changes that are taking place, whereby the black African youth have become empowered through the significant role which they played in the politics of the country since the 1960s, particularly their political agitation towards the end of the apartheid era; however, older Africans were not em-

powered to a comparable degree. Since the April 1994 first democratic elections the youth have become yet further empowered; again, this has not been the case with older Africans.

An analysis of forms of address, self-identification and complaints in first-time encounters between old and young African women is made within the context of these rapid social and political changes in the country.

The study

Aims

The aims of the study were to investigate the nature and type of language used in first-time encounters between old and young African women. An effect of modernization has been changes in the traditional roles played by old women; for example, old women are no longer as responsible for the socialization of young women as they were in the past – a role which previously accorded them considerable influence. Some old women may indeed feel that they are unable to exercise as much influence as they were able to in the past. If this is true, Cattell's argument is valid that complaints arise in situations of "person-environment dissonance"; in such cases it would be natural to expect complaints to arise in intergenerational discourse because of a discrepancy between the power which old women would expect to wield and that which they will wield. Hence the study aimed to analyse what older people complain about, as well as a relationship between complaints and other types of speech acts such as bragging. In some cases the acts of complaining and bragging may fulfil multiple functions, e.g. they may function as a complaint and be an exercise in "complaint administration."

The study was conducted in late 1994 and early 1995 – a time of radical change in South Africa, when a division between the young and the old was becoming more marked.

Method

Ten women participated in five meetings (n = 50), which are referred to in this paper as "first-time encounters." Five women were "old" and five were "young". The old women were in their mid to late seventies and all were social pensioners. They were all recruited at a senior citizens' centre in Guguletu, a predominantly African residential area of Cape Town. The women attend the centre five days a week where they are provided a meal, recreation and health support. The old subjects were all unimpaired and relatively healthy.

The young women were all in their twenties, and were relatively well-educated and studying part-time towards obtaining a postgraduate degree. Two of the young women were employed as junior teaching staff members at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) and three worked in the publishing field.

The meetings were held at the seniors' centre in Guguletu. At each meeting five old and five young women were paired. They were advised that the purpose of the meeting, or pairing was for them to get to know one other (Coupland, Coupland, Giles & Wiemann, 1988). Each woman was told that she would meet a woman of a different generation for the first time. It was explained that the purpose of the study was to observe the interaction between each pair of women.

Following on an earlier study by Coupland *et al.* (1988), the study was designed as an open-ended and exploratory investigation of talk between generations in a controlled and relatively formal setting. It was expected that the study would yield data suitable for a discourse analysis of complaints, stories and forms of address.

Recording

The conversations between the pairs of subjects were tape recorded and the recordings subsequently transcribed. The subjects agreed to have the conversations tape recorded on condition that they could afterwards listen to the recordings. The visible presence of a tape recorder had an unexpected effect on the old subjects. It was initially anticipated that these subjects might be reluctant to talk because of the presence of the tape recorder and that it would stifle vernacular elderly talk. However, it was found that the recorder actually stimulated rather than stifled talk, particularly among the old subjects who in their life times had never listened to their voices (cf. Milroy & Milroy, 1980).

The conversations each lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The subjects spoke in Xhosa, the African language mainly spoken in the Western Cape province. Following on the conversations, retrospective commentary was obtained from the old subjects and recorded. The retrospective commentary was of about 15-minutes duration. Retrospective commentary was introduced to triangulate the analysis, and involved playing back the recorded conversations to the subjects and asking them for their reactions and comments. In the majority of cases, the retrospective commentaries were played back to the subjects about two weeks after they were recorded (cf. Erickson & Schultz, 1982; Rampton, 1995a). Triangulation is a research technique used to gather data from several sources to enable an investigator to arrive at a more reliable interpretation of a situation. The use of a triangulation strategy meant that the analysis did not only rely on the recorded conversations but could also use information from other sources to substantiate the findings.

The transcripts of the recordings and the retrospective commentary were subsequently translated from Xhosa into English for the purpose of analysis. The transcriptions were treated as documents which would provide insight into the use of language in the first-time encounters between the young and the old women (cf. Taylor, 1992).

Analysis

The analysis focussed on forms of address, the construction of identities and the nature of the complaints in the discourse. As such, the analysis went further than the analyses of Coupland *et al.* (1992) which focussed on discourse processes in painful self-disclosure.

Findings

Forms of address and the construction of identities

The extract below describes a conversational opening between a young woman (YW) and an old woman (OW). The young subject, referred to as YW1, is a staff member at the University of the Western Cape. The old woman (OW1) was involved in setting up the senior citizens' centre in Guguletu.

YW1: **Makhulu mandithi ndingu P ndisuka kuTsolo e Transkei. Ndisebenza eUWC.** (*Grandma, let me say I am P. I'm coming from Tsolo in Transkei. I'm working at UWC.*)

OW2: **Igama Iam nguS. NdiyintombikaVMaseko.** (*My name is S. I'm the daughter of V. Maseko.*)

YW1: **Maseko**

OW1: **Maseko**

YW1: **Ei**

OW1: **Ndanditshate no Mr Mgola.** (*I was married to Mr Mgola.*)

YW1: Identifies herself in Xhosa by name and the region which she comes from.

Greetings and self-identification are an obligatory preliminary phase of first-time encounters among Xhosa speakers. The greetings and self-identification may be expected to be initiated by a young person and will occur in most intergenerational encounters. By identifying herself as coming from Tsolo in the Transkei, the young woman implicitly described herself (ethnically) as being a Xhosa speaker. To define and hence to identify herself, in addition to her ethnicity, she described her professional affiliation, i.e. she works at UWC. By referring to her profession as a university teacher, the young woman described her social class. A tendency to construct one's identity in terms of implied ethnicity and social class is typical of most young Xhosa women.

The old subjects on the other hand described themselves first in terms of their ethnicity, which may be inferred from their places of birth, before describing themselves in terms of their social relations. No mention was made of their social class, unlike in the case of the young women.

The following extract is from a conversation between an old woman (OW2) and a young woman (YW2).

OW2: *I was born at Peddi and moved to Qoboqobo where I got married. I'm Mrs Ratshi.*

The extract illustrates how the old woman (OW1) and the young woman (YW2) in the first extract differently constructed their identity. Subtle differences were also apparent between widowed and non-widowed women. The old women whose husbands were still living, or who had died and the women had remarried, defined themselves by using their husband's name: e.g. *I'm Mrs Rhatshi* (OW2). They only disclosed their father's name when explicitly asked to do so in a conversation, unlike the widowed woman (OW1) who began by introducing herself by using her father's name: *I'm the daughter of V. Maseko.* In the retrospective commentary it transpired that the husband of OW1 had died in 1940 and she had not remarried.

One older woman had a dramatic way of introducing herself: she simply presented her identity card. (It is compulsory in South Africa for all citizens to carry an identity card. The card bears the name of the holder, his/her date of birth, and the district in which the holder lives.) Cattell (personal communication) points out that when strangers meet in Kenya, they are quick to ask "Where are you from?" When one meets someone, one gives one's name. The other person will ask: "From where?" One then says "Machakos," meaning "I'm Mukamba," or "I'm Muluyia." (Cf. Coplan, 1994, for a similar description of how strangers greet one another in Lesotho.)

Scollon and Scollon (1992) demonstrate how relations between generations can differ along several dimensions. The authors identify seven dimensions, among which are the pluralistic-holistic, kin-peer, and egalitarian-hierarchical dimensions. It is the hierarchical-egalitarian relationship which is most relevant in the present analysis.

When old women counsel young women about matters relating to their social life, there is a tendency for them to use terms such as "my child," which gives authority to their advice and at the same time strengthens the relationship through the use of the quasi-kinship terms. The following extract is from a conversation between an old woman and a young subject.

YW3: *You will correct me if I make a mistake. To me there is a difference between* **umendo** *and* **umthshato**.

OW3: **Umendo** *is when a girl of so and so is married to a particular family name and she has to tell herself that.*

> *When we say that someone is married she is only married to her husband.*

Intergenerational discourse is characterized by a format in which young women typically ask questions about traditional social life. For example, in the above extract the young woman wants to know something about different types of marriage. The intergenerational relationship which emerges is radically different from the one described by Coupland *et al.* (1992), where the interrogatory rights of the young over the elderly are referred to. In the retrospective commentaries the old women emphasized how the encounters had given them an opportunity to socially educate the young women. The old women relished this opportunity, in view of the circumstances in the country whereby families have become dislocated and people of different generations spend relatively little time together. Further, the youth tend to spend a great deal of time either at school or away from home, working or seeking employment, which makes it difficult for old women to socialize young women and to exercise control over them. In addition, older persons would probably view educating or advising the young as positive functions, since even though young women tend to have higher formal education, the old still retain valuable knowledge.

By using the term "my child" an old woman underscores an hierarchical relationship. The use of the term *sisi* towards the end of a conversation reflected attempts by old women to move towards a more egalitarian relationship with a young woman. (The term *sisi* is also used among older women.) However, the move is not reciprocated by young women who maintain a sense of respect and distance. Even within families relations tend to be formalized (De Kadt, 1994).

Old persons seem to be fairly prescriptive in terms of the social discourse which they will engage in and the form which they maintain the discourse should take. They are willing to depart from the norms themselves but will not allow others to do so. For example, one old woman "complained" that *Ukuba abantwana abakuhloniphi bathetha nawe njengomhlobo wabo. Kuthi elo lihlazo.* (If children do not respect you they talk to you as if you are their friend ... to us [older women] it is an insult.) Perhaps what this old woman objected to was informal discourse which she may have felt undermined her power. Paradoxically, in some of the retrospective commentary the older women commented on how they had appropriated terms which were initially used by the young to describe them, such as "radio gogo" and "local police." *Gogo* is an abbreviated term for grandmother. Some older persons are called "gogos" because they are perceived by youths to talk too much.)

An interesting clash of perceptions emerged. When the old women complained that "They [the youth] talk to us like children," they were objecting to the manner in which youths engage in intergenerational talk. When the young women described the elderly as "radio gogos," they were objecting to what they perceived to be a lack of taciturnity on the part of older people. What is apparent here is that there are different perceptions about the manner and quantity of talk between people of different generations.

The elderly were also described as "local police" – a term used by some youths to describe old people whom they perceive become overly involved in other's affairs. (During the apartheid era the local police were viewed negatively since they were seen to be part of the apparatus of the apartheid regime.) The term "local police" is clearly used in an abusive way and is arguably a metaphoric description of conflict between the generations. The youth, because of their involvement in politics, were likely to be in conflict with the local police who were supporting the apartheid regime.

However, the old women frequently used the terms "radio gogo" and "local police" humorously. In the retrospective commentary, when asked about their status as local police, they laughed in response. The laughter may be interpreted as a sign that the term had been partially rehabilitated, or its pejorative connotations removed. Despite rehabilitation, the term still conjures up images of the youth's description of the elderly. Bakhtin (1981: 293) comments: "There are no neutral words and forms ... all words have the 'taste' of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, a day and hour. Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life."

However words do not have a single life, as they can be appropriated by new groups and assume a new life. The appropriation of youthful terms in elderly discourse is an instance of "crossing." Rampton (1995a: 280) defines crossing as focussing on code alternation by people who are not accepted members of the group associated with the second language (or the variety) which they employ. In this instance terms which were previously used by the youth to describe older persons in a negative way, are used in a positive manner by the old women.

In the retrospective commentary one of the issues which frequently emerged was how the youth no longer "listens" to the elderly. To listen in Xhosa, and indeed in most African languages, carries a meaning which goes beyond simply paying attention to what the other person is saying. If a parent complains that a child does not listen, he/she is alleging that the child is disobedient.

As part of their social resistance to what they perceive as increasing youth power, the elderly may have taken the sting out of the abuse of some terms. The process of social rehabilitation of words which previously had negative connotations is usually initiated by people or groups which were the targets of the abuse. The process of "semantic inversion," as Smitherman (1995: 19) terms it, is fairly widespread – particularly in situations where there is an asymmetrical power relationship between groups with the dominant groups assuming the right to name the less powerful group. Makoni (1995) shows how the term "kaffir" now carries with it a mark of solidarity when used by and among black South Africans. (The term was used as a racist marker under the apartheid regime.)

The process of rehabilitation of words is never a complete process; for example, some terms used by the young to describe the old may be regarded as abusive by older individuals. In the study an old woman (OW3) described how young people refer to elderly people as witches, particularly if they have outlived their peers.

OW3: *Do you know that old as we are, they say we are witches? They [young people] will tell you that you are the only old woman in the street, what are you still doing, you killed your friends. That is why they burn old people's houses.*

Individual and collective identity

A characteristic feature of intergenerational discourse is how it frequently slides into narration, not about an individual's experiences but about revelations of a common history, or group experience in which "the key aspect is no longer me vs you but us and me as the repository of the past articulated through me" (Rampton, personal communication, 1995b). In his description of stories told by Basotho migrant workers working on South African mines, Coplan (1994) stresses the importance of maintaining such a distinction.

The following extract is from a conversation between OW2 and YW2. Like most black South African women of her generation, OW2 spent a considerable part of her working life as a domestic servant to white employers. Because of this employment experience, a particular genre of stories has emerged reflecting, more often than not, how white women became dependent on black maids. In the extract, OW2 tells the young woman how she was responsible for looking after an old white woman who had been deserted by her family and friends.

OW2: *Ndakhetha eyona-yena engcomo. (I chose the best one* [a dress].)

YW2: *For her.*

OW2: *Ndayeka ukumnxibisa. (And the woman stepped* [stood up] *and I dressed her.)*

OW2: *Ndamjonga. (I look at her ... don't think that the strength is coming from you. We get strength from God.)*

Stories about how frail elderly white women abandoned by their families became dependent on their domestic servants do many rounds in African township discourse. In the light of these collective stories it may be argued that old women are giving voice to collective experiences. The speakers would thus be seen as a "composite individual" revealing a common history. The intergenerational discourse becomes a type of reflection on collective experience. None of these complications nor a host of other complications can be easily encompassed within an ontological individualism assumed by a simple speaker-hearer model of communication.

Such collective stories differ from personal narratives. The following extract is a typical example of personal narrative.

OW2: *I don't know whether to explain now because I was living with many children. Those were children of my late father, four of them. There were also three of my granddaughters. I raised my daughter's children whose husband died, but I'm alone now with my son who is 34-years old. He must do away with this new life-style. I want him to follow the example of Daniel.*

The first part of the story is a fairly common experience. A woman looks after children on her own after the death of her husband. The second part of the account describes a set of details specific and perhaps only true to her – the age of her son and her wishes that the son does not succumb to new influences.

However, old women do try to find ways to resist change. Attempts are manifested in women's repeated efforts and appeals to Christianity. As OW3 put it: "The first thing we do as old people is to keep quiet. These children do not choose a correct way of talking. There is a verse in the Bible which says respect your father and your mother and you will live long. Do you know it?"

Complaints

The old women constantly compared the present with what they frequently regarded as a golden age in terms of moral behaviour. For example, an interaction frequently began: *Kwimihla yakudala, msithi umzekelo, xa ithe intombi yanzima abazali bayo babexelelana.* (In our days, let us say for example when a girl became pregnant, parents used to tell each other about it ...) The older women were aware that the golden moral past which they constructed was fiction, albeit useful fiction. It was useful because it enabled them to compare the moral behaviour of the present young generation with their own behaviour when they were young. The complaints

do not necessarily reflect the degeneracy of the present behaviour of the youth but are characteristic of the manner in which the elderly have been socialized into mastering the art of complaint. As one old subject put it: "Every mother of my age complains."

Complaints serve a number of different purposes. On the one hand complaints reveal that older persons think that some changes which they regard as undesirable have occurred. At the same time, paradoxically, some complaints, particularly about the so-called low morality of the youth, are meant to demonstrate the extent to which the elderly are still in control. For example, one of the most vociferous critics of the young generation's lack of discipline was quick to describe how she handled her household with an iron hand: *Andiwavumeli amantombazana alale entwini yamngaphandle ngokulandela inkqubo efanelekileyo Andifuni kumbona. Andifuni mntu uzaa kuza izinto ezzimbi endliwini yam.* (I don't allow girls to come and sleep in my house without following the right procedure ... I don't want to see her. I don't want a person who will come and do bad things in my house.) This type of complaint may also be construed as bragging. By complaining about how the youth no longer obey the instructions of older persons, the old woman is able to boast how she is an exception in this case as she is in firm control of her household.

Complaint discourse is not restricted to elderly talk; the young in turn complain that the elderly talk too much – hence the term "radio gogo". The two generations are also in some cases united in their complaints, e.g. against what they perceive as incompetent and corrupt government officials. President Mandela is however immune from complaints as he is "above Jesus and on the same side with God."

Conclusions

This paper has analysed some typical discursive practices in first-time encounters between old and young Xhosa-speaking women. The structure of the intergenerational dialogue was briefly described, and different forms of address and the manner in which the women constructed their identities were highlighted. Complaints seem to be common in this type of discourse but are difficult to distinguish from other types of discourse practices such as bragging. The study was conducted in a quasi-experimental setting and further research is needed to analyse intergenerational language use and discourse within naturalistic environments.

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