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Collins, J.

*Publication date:*  
2015

*Document Version*  
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Tilburg University Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Collins, J. (2015). *Dilemmas of race, register and inequality in South African schools*. (Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies; No. 142).

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# Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies

## Paper 142

### **Dilemmas of race, register and inequality in South African schools**

by

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July 2015



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## **Dilemmas of race, register and inequality in South African schools**

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**Draft:** Submitted for Adrienne Lo & Joseph Park , eds., *Mobility, Mediatization, and Enregisterment*, forthcoming special issue of *Language in Society*. Please acknowledge publication status in any circulation, citation or quotation.

**Abstract:** There is strong evidence that the ‘legacies of Apartheid’ remain in place in South Africa’s education system, entangling economic inequality, racial categorization, and *de facto* language hierarchy. This study draws from an ethnographic study of language diversity in a Cape Town public school, focusing on how classroom practices regulate and school staff frame language diversity and social inequality among their pupils. It uses the concepts of language register, sociolinguistic scales, and racialization to analyze how education policy, classroom practices and school discourses about language in South Africa implicate class and racial hierarchies. It shows how register analysis helps reveal multi-scaled connections between linguistic and social inequality and prejudice.

**Keywords:** Language registers, social inequality, South Africa

## **Introduction:**

The South African Constitution was negotiated in the final years of a century-long struggle against white supremacy and an apartheid state, by activists and revolutionaries who had spent decades in civil protest, armed struggle, and exile. A utopian document, envisioning a better future for the culturally, politically and economically dispossessed, the constitution is famous for its vision of democratic human rights and its commitment to multicultural values. Among those values are equality of opportunity and linguistic pluralism: The 1996 Constitution guarantees education as a human right of all citizens and recognizes eleven official languages in the new republic (Constitution, 1996).

In the subsequent two decades, education policy has focused on widening access to education, and now 99% of all children attend primary school, and 86% attain grade 9 education. This significant expansion of education has, however, taken place in a national context of persisting polarization of economic resources that correlates closely with apartheid-era racial divisions and language differences (Spaull 2013). Post-apartheid South African education policy has been effectively Anglophone, in that nearly all school children are expected to be taught and tested in English after grade three. The irony is that the apartheid state was rigorously bilingual, with English and Afrikaans taught from primary through tertiary education, though this bilingual education was only for whites (Heugh 2002). In the current era, despite the formal status of eleven official languages, English is hegemonic, which ‘consolidates middle-class dominance in society, in the economy, and in politics, with the consequent marginalization of the vast majority of the people’ (Alexander 2002:8).

It is common throughout post-colonial Africa that newly liberated nations have committed to multilingual education and opportunity, only to shift rapidly to education systems

in which elite international languages are given priority (Heugh 2002). Understanding this outcome requires that we probe notions of language, school, and community for their multiple fault-lines as well as principles of unity. In what follows I will present data from a four-month ethnographic study of an ‘English-medium’ primary school which served a transnational, linguistically diverse working class and working poor population in Cape Town, South Africa. My descriptive focus will be on relations between languages in the school, especially between English and Afrikaans. I use concepts of language register, sociolinguistic scale, and racialization in analyzing diacritics of class and race revealed in the classroom interaction and staff commentary about varieties of Afrikaans and English that occurred in the school or were attributed to the community.

**Theoretical contexts: Register, scale, and racialization:**

**Register and sociolinguistic scale:** A dynamic arena of investigation in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology in the last decade has been the study of power, social inequality and language in diversely-scaled local, regional, national and transnational settings (Blommaert 2007; Collins, Slembrouck & Baynham 2009; Jufferman & Van der Aa 2013; Phillips 2013). One line of inquiry studies processes of register formation or ‘enregisterment.’ In Agha’s (2005:47) concise formulation, registers involve a three-part linkage between linguistic form, cultural models, and social groups:

There are cases where a repertoire of speech forms is widely recognized or enregistered as indexing the same “social voice” by many language users. In such cases we have a social regularity of typification—a system of metapragmatic

stereotypes—*whereby a given form, or repertoire of forms, is regularly treated as indexical of a social type by a given social domain of persons.* (emphasis added).

By focusing on how registers are recognized as varieties of language (stereotypically) associated with a social types and activities, researchers have been able to examine in detail the historical process underlying the stratification of languages (Silverstein 2003). Some have examined the longer-term conflicts and contests resulting from inequalities among language varieties and their normative users and defenders (Blommaert 2010; Wirtz 2013); others, examining enregistering discourse, or metapragmatic framing of social types and their ways with words, have analyzed real-time processes of interactive racialization (Chun 2011; Lo & Kim 2011).

Because registers have a social domain of recognition, and involve cultural models of typical users and activities, they intersect the concept of sociolinguistic scale (Blommaert 2007), which postulates a vertical organization of contexts of language variation, shaped by interconnected political-economic and cultural-discursive processes (Collins 2012; Collins & Slembrouck 2015; Kell 2009; Vigouroux 2009). In the analyses that follow, we will discuss several distinct register processes and associated scale-relations, understood in their normative and emergent aspects. The register processes include efforts to stabilize the registers of standard English and standard Afrikaans in classroom interaction processes; enregistering commentary about language diversity by school staff, aimed at non-standard registers of English and Afrikaans; and, lastly, an emergent effort to widen the domains of use of multilingual registers. The scale relations emerge from totalizing projects regarding language use, such as the standardizing of Afrikaans (Deumert 2004) and the development of schooling in polyglot South Africa (Murray 2002), as well as the protean emergence of polyglot repertoires (Brookes & Lekgoro 2014; Hurst 2013) and multiracial lingua franca (McCormick 2006; Mesthrie 2002b).

Racialized associations among varieties of English, Afrikaans, and African languages are a substantive issue in all the above register phenomena. This issue also concerns analysts of register and sociolinguistic scale, who recognize the interpenetration of large-scale economic subordination, racializing practices, and constructions of linguistic value (Collins 2012; Dong & Blommaert 2009; Kell 2009; Lo this issue; Vigouroux this issue). These converging lines of inquiry are anticipated in Pratt's (1991: 34) seminal essay on what she termed the 'contact zone': "spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as slavery, colonialism, or their aftermath as they are lived out in many parts of the world today."

**Racialization of language:** A valuable theorization and analysis of "highly asymmetrical relations of power... as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" is provided by Urciuoli's (1996) study of Puerto Rican experiences of language, race and class in the contemporary United States. She argues for a distinction between ethnicizing and racializing discourses, which both depict and construct a contrast between racialized minorities and those enjoying 'white ethnic' or 'model minority' status in the contemporary U.S. She argues, further, that groups are subject to racialization to the extent that their labor is controlled. In this account, African-American slaves in the U.S. are the limiting case, that against which all other racialized and ethnicized groups have historically been defined. Fredrickson's (1981) "White Supremacy: A Comparative Study in American and South African History" forms a useful complement to Urciuoli, showing that both the US and South Africa used slavery as labor regimes, followed by other forms of racialized labor control and, further, that the post-slavery defence of white supremacy entail cultural and political as well as economic domination, which had strong effects on the value attributed to racialized varieties of language.

In the U.S., slavery was followed closely by Jim Crow segregation, dooming ostensibly ‘free’ African Americans to political, economic, and cultural dispossession from the 1870s until the 1960s. One result of this legacy of racial oppression has been the sharp stigma associated with their vernacular variety of English, despite the wide-range of influential ‘artful’ uses of Black English in literary, religious, musical and political realms (Alim & Smitherman 2012; Baugh 1983). In the decades since the end of formal segregation, achievements by racialized minority groups in economic, cultural and political realms has greatly complicated the field of language in the U.S., but strong evidence of the legacies of racialized class domination remains, in job markets, education, and criminal justice. A sense of the contradictions embedded in issues of language and race is suggested by Alim and Reyes (2011: 380). In their Introduction to a journal issue devoted to “complicating race” by studying how it is “discursively articulated across multiple social dimensions” they note:

...we are constantly discussing race while seeking ways to avoid having to do so, constantly divided by race while staking claims that ‘it doesn’t matter’, and constantly orienting to race while at the same time denying the overwhelming evidence which demonstrates that myriad ways that American society is fundamentally structured by it.

In South Africa, an analogous path to that of the U.S. was followed in the move from slavery to segregation to the end of *de jure* segregation. The ending of slavery and ‘freeing’ of African majorities was organized and administered by British Colonial and Afrikaner Apartheid states, each defending white supremacy (Berger 2009). A system of stark geographic segregation sequestered Africans on so-called homelands, rendering millions of African workers ‘guest workers’ in their own country, a regime of labor subordination and (non-)citizenship enforced by

the infamous 'Pass Laws' system (Fredrikson 1981). A system of 'Bantu Education' separated White from Black, requiring African education to be in home languages and rudimentary English or Afrikaans (Reagan 2002). Meanwhile, the apartheid state built an extensive system of English-Afrikaans bilingualism, both in education and employment, most of which was reserved for Whites (Deumert 2004; Heugh 2002). In the long struggle against Apartheid and the transformations of post-apartheid South Africa, a complex, conflicted language terrain has resulted, in which desires to be 'post-racial' jostle against ubiquitous social inequalities.

### **Language registers in South Africa:**

As noted earlier, post-apartheid South Africa has a multicultural constitution that recognizes eleven official languages, but each of these is, as we would expect of speech communities numbering in the millions, further differentiated distinct linguistic registers. One general division is that under colonial and apartheid educational policy, African languages were differentiated into standard or 'school' registers versus other varieties. The school registers continue to be given priority in post-apartheid education policy and practice, despite their not being spoken by the majorities. For example, although standard **Xhosa** is used in Xhosa-medium schools, a survey of language and education issues in South Africa notes the following:

Standards' are problematic, in that most African languages, such as Xhosa, have *a majority of speakers, including the urban middle class and socially mobile, who are not speakers of the 'standards'* for African languages developed under missionary systems on 'homelands (Murray 2002, p. 444; emphasis added).

There are several issues suggested here, but let us merely note that these Xhosa and other African language registers have different socio-historical loci: the geography of homelands and

apartheid sequestration for the standard registers (‘developed under missionary systems on ‘homelands’’) versus the ongoing rural-to-urban labor migrations for the urban varieties and their social domain (‘a majority of speakers, including the middle class and socially mobile’). A sense of the educational issues is given by Herbert & Bailey (2002, p. 67), who characterize the situation between standard and urban **Zulu** registers as follows:

‘Within the education arena, adherence to rigidly conservative rural language standards worked to the severe disadvantage of urban schoolchildren, many of whom consistently failed ‘mother-tongue’ matriculation examinations.’

The situation with **Afrikaans**, the second largest national language after Zulu, has been deeply marked by the ethnic Afrikaner struggle for political autonomy and racial supremacy. Standard Afrikaans was associated with apartheid political oppression, and lost political status and institutional support in decades since 1994. Although Afrikaans is often considered the other language of white privilege, a majority of speakers are not ethnically white. It is typically spoken of as a single language, but better understood as a hierarchy of registers, some richly documented, the full range riven by class and race divisions, ambiguities, and antagonisms (McCormick 2006; Stone 2002). The post-apartheid transformation in the status of Afrikaans in the national field of language seems to have left the millions of mixed-race South Afrikaans speak various registers of Afrikaans in a quandary. On the one hand, the apartheid-era pathways to limited occupational mobility through education in Afrikaans have lost viability. On the other hand, the majority remain shadowed by what Anthonissen (2013) calls the stigma aimed at those who speak racialized varieties of Afrikaans. In response to this dilemma, many have encouraged their children to learn English as a first language. As we will see in the case below, speaking

nonstandard varieties of Afrikaans remains a liability in many educational arena, in part because it is associated with ‘mixing’ languages.

**English** is a global language and fourth-ranked among South African languages in terms of first language speakers. Major register differences in English are suggested by the discussions of ‘White South African English,’ ‘Coloured South African English,’ ‘South African Indian English,’ and ‘Black South African English’ in McKinney’s (2013) discussion of English in post-apartheid South Africa and by Mesthrie’s (2014) careful contrastive analysis of White South African and Black South African English. We may note, as these researchers do, that the apartheid era racial categories are problematic. Nonetheless, they inform everyday and academic discourse about kinds of people and kinds of language use in contemporary South Africa (Stone 2002; Wale 2010).

An emergent register linking inherited racial categories, social mobility and linguistic change is shown in McKinney’s and Mesthrie’s discussions of ‘Model C’ students. The term refers to Black South African students who attend previously all-white, English-medium schools. Wale (2010, p. 9) analyzes the register characteristics as a sociological configuration: ‘Model C comes to refer more generally to black South Africans who are well versed in white ways of being, knowing and speaking, and thus occupy an in-between racial position.’ Consider below the traits of speech and personhood attributed to ‘coconut’ or ‘Model C’ students (from McKinney, *ibid.*, p. 25; see Mesthrie, *ibid.*, p. 6, for a differently sourced but similar list of traits):

- 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’

These traits encompass repertoire features (speaking ‘like a White person’, ‘unable to speak an African language’); features of use (‘English most of the time’, ‘English rather than [a contextually appropriate] African language’); and kinds of person or persona (‘acting White’ or ‘Black on the outside but White on the inside’).

The linkage of semiotic repertoire and cultural model holds whether it pertains to registers of English associated with Apartheid’s major racial categories, or to the more recent socially emergent registers, such as those of ‘Middle-C’ students. The former testify to the legacy of apartheid state classifications, the power of institutionally enforced ideologies linking hierarchies of persons and language, whether varieties of English or other languages. The ‘Model C’ register conjoins an ambivalent category of ‘in-between racial status’ and the imputed speech of black South African middle-class youth, oriented by socialization and aspiration to the register of White South African English. As Mesthrie (2014) shows with careful sociophonetic analysis, at issue are contrasts between English registers as well as between English and African languages. He reports interesting gender dynamics in the speech of those who fit the stereotype of person. Females who fit the ‘Model C’ social profile are shifting towards White South African English pronunciation; males, however, are more likely to retain Black South African English pronunciation associated with older township generations and influence from African language phonologies. It appears to be another case of masculinity aligned with nonstandard speech registers and a dominated social essence, in this case, Blackness. As such, it calls to mind earlier

sociolinguistic research on gender, class and nonstandard speech (Trudgill 1972). Slightly revising Bourdieu's (2001) observations on these matters, we may posit an interaction between gender, social domination, and speaker orientation toward the registers of dominant or dominated social groups.

What remains unclear, however, is the relation between the registers of English expected in South Africa schools and educational assessments, and the many registers of English spoken by South Africans who claim English as their first language (Laas 2002), or by those larger populations who use English as a lingua franca, although it is not their first or primary language (Blommaert, Muyliaert, Huysmans & Dyers 2005; McKinney 2010; Prinsloo 2011). In the following section we examine these issues using data drawn from an ethnographic research project on language diversity in a South African primary school. Although we comment on migrant languages, which were well-represented at the school, our focus is on relationships between registers of English and Afrikaans, in and out of school, and we give particular attention to dimensions of race and class implicated in scale-sensitive language practices and commentary about language use.

### **Language registers in a South African primary school:**

**Methods and terminology:** The study reported below was conducted over a four month period in February-June 2014. My primary focus was on language diversity and school policy-in-practice. In order to have a realistic sense of the range of languages being used in the school, I obtained permission to observe and audiotape classroom lessons to visit once or twice a week. Eight lessons were observed in their entirety; these were reviewed weekly and selectively transcribed. After a month of observation, I began to conduct interviews with school staff, asking

how viewed the students' language diversity in light of the education mission of the school. Nine interviews were conducted, reviewed, and selectively transcribed. On a more informal basis, I also attended sessions offered by a literacy support NGO working in the school, weekend workshops held at the school which instructed parents in how to support their children's learning, and offsite school events such as a day-long trip to the beach. As the contrast between English and Afrikaans emerged as a topic of interest, I took opportunities to attend an *Oesfees* or Harvest Festival featuring Afrikaans music, food, and drink, and take part in a Paarl Language Monument moonlight picnic. During and after wards, I made ethnographic notes about activities, multiracial interactions, languages used, and remarks about language and life.

South Africa has distinctive phrases and conventions of language use, some of which I have tried to observe, while departing from others. While English-speaking South Africans refer to students in primary and secondary school as 'learners,' I have used American the term 'student,' which is readily recognized in both countries. Similarly, I use the term 'math' as the short form for mathematics, rather than 'maths,' which is common usage in South Africa. The apartheid-era racial categories – Black (African), Coloured (mixed race), Indian (of descent from the Indian subcontinent), and White (white) – no longer have official status as strategies of governance, and provoke political and interpersonal awkwardness. Nonetheless, as in the U.S., the legacies of segregation are manifest, reflecting continuing social divisions of wealth, education, and opportunity (Posel & Casal 2008; Spaull 2013). I use the lower-case versions of each term adjectivally, for example, in 'formerly white schools,' reserving capitals for proper nouns, such as 'White South African English.' In the interests of preserving the privacy of my research participants, I avoid names, using pseudonyms where necessary, including the name of the school.

**Setting:** South City Primary School is located in a socioeconomically diverse section of Cape Town, in what had historically been a racially mixed industrial area. When I first visited the school to discuss my study, the principal informed me that based on a survey of the school, two thirds of the students had first languages other than English. In subsequent conversations, he also informed me that nearly a third of the students were refugees, and that half of the student families were eligible for reduced- or no-tuition subsidies. In brief, South City Primary is a diverse school serving a working-class and working poor population, a sizable portion of who lack the protections of citizenship. Although it has an unusually high number of refugees, South City is not unusual in its proportion of students on reduced fees and students who do not speak English as a first language. In South African schools, a majority of students do not have English as their first language, and a majority are working poor families and living in poverty (Hall, Woolard, Lake & Smith 2012).

South City is an English-medium school, which means that from Reception through year six, teaching and learning are to be conducted in English. The school has a formal language policy, specifying hours of instruction to be devoted to the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT), the First Additional Language (FAL) and the Second Additional Language (SAL).

These are shown in table 1:

**Table 1: South City Primary School Language Policy**

**1.1. Language of learning and teaching of the school:**

The LOLT from Grade R – Grade 7 will be English

**1.2. Languages to be offered as subjects and the time allocations for**

**these:**

**Years 1 and 2:**

- 8¾ hours a week English
- ½ hour a week Afrikaans (FAL)
- ½ hour a week Xhosa (SAL)

**Year 3:**

- 6 hours a week English
- 3½ hours a week Afrikaans (FAL)
- 35 min a week Xhosa (SAL)

**Years 4 to 6:**

- 4 hours a week English
- 2½ hours a week Afrikaans (FAL)
- ½ hour a week Xhosa (SAL)

(adapted from South City Primary website)

What this distribution of instructional time shows is priority given to English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa, in descending order of importance and resources allocated, reflecting national and provincial language policies. Although each school is charged with developing its own implementation plan, the Western Cape's provincial policy of three official languages for instruction – English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa – shows in the South City policy. What is also indicated, in the small allocation given to Xhosa, is the ongoing difficulty of implementing Xhosa instruction in English or Afrikaans medium schools in the Western Cape. There appear to

be multiple reasons for this neglect of classroom instruction in Xhosa, including shifts in education policy and staffing shortages (Jones 2013; Kerfoot 2014).

**Classroom practices and linguistic diversity:** During my first visit to the year three classroom in which I conducted regular observations, the teacher, Ms. M, provided me with a list primary languages spoken by her students. These are summarized in Table 2:

**Table 2: Language profile of a classroom at South City Primary:**

Xhosa	12
English	9
Afrikaans	5
French	5 (several from the DRC)
Shona	5 (from Zimbabwe)
(first languages of 36 students; fieldnotes, 28 February 2014)	

The teachers that I subsequently interviewed reported similar proportions of English and non-English first languages for their classrooms, although the particular languages languages somewhat. One teacher had students present for my benefit a ‘language panel’ featuring the seven home languages of classroom members. The panel had initially been prepared as part of a geography lesson on parts of Africa. One by one, seven students proclaimed the same sentence ‘We go to the shop’ in their first languages. The results are shown in table 3.

**Table 3: Language Panel from a South City Classroom**

**English:** *We go to the shop*

**Afrikaans:** *Ons gaan winkel toe*

**Xhosa:** *Siya e evenkileni*

**Swahili:** *Tirenda kushop*

**Lingala:** *Duzuke ndishop*

**French:** *On allez shop*

**Shona:** *Takaenda kumashops*

(fieldnotes, 20 March 2014; transcription by A. Manganyi).

In these sentences we see vernacular versions of numerous languages, with all non-SA languages showing the incorporation of English *shop* into noun phrases in Swahili, Lingala, Shona and French. All teachers reported a preponderance of languages other than English spoken by the students in their classrooms. As discussed more fully below, staff perceptions varied about how such diversity influenced classroom learning and how best to respond to it.

In Ms. M's classroom, the day began with regular routines, familiar in schools throughout the world. Students began the day by gathering on the rugs at the front of the room for attendance to be taken, announcements made and discussed, and achievements, such as prizes at a regional school sports competition, noted and congratulated. In lessons, whether English, Math, or Afrikaans, Ms. M strove to connect what students' knew to the subject at hand, though the organization of school subjects was shaped by South Africa's latest statement of a national curriculum, *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS)*.

CAPS provide a framework for the South African national curriculum for Grades 1 to 12 in public schools in South Africa. The implementation for grades 1-3 began in 2012, and CAPS classroom materials for those grades attempt to more closely regulate what teaching and learning consist of, focusing on ‘Greater specification of content... [d]etailed teaching schedules... [and] [n]ew content in some cases’ (WCED 2014). In the English workbook used in this class, for example, there was early and continuing practice of identifying and learning recurring sounds in words (e.g. denoted by ‘th’ or ‘y’ or ‘o’ in given words and positions); there were ‘who did what’ questions asked of reading passages; there were grammar exercises (e.g. identifying past and future tense with verbs such as ‘drive’); and there were frequent exercises in ‘writing in sentences.’ This is a familiar sequencing and arrangement of school knowledge, in which students begin by naming and identifying parts of language; named parts are then assembled into larger segments (e.g. words into sentences); and cognitive tasks such as analogic reasoning or narrative inference come only later (Heath 1983).

Working within the confines of the CAPS approach to language, Ms. M focused on what the students knew about a given domain, typically by eliciting a set of words known by the students within a given field (e.g. food, animals, family), which then formed the basis for the exercises in grammar and sentence construction. One morning, for example, the teacher began by asking students ‘who gets a newspaper?’ and ‘whose mommy buys a newspaper?’ Eliciting the names of free local area papers ‘[Peoples’] Post’ and ‘the View’ as well as the city’s general newspapers, the ‘Daily Argus’ and ‘Cape Times,’ she set them the assignment to cut out ‘a story from your newspaper’, bring it to class, and be prepared to talk about it in a subsequent class. This was followed by a vocabulary activity, in which the children were asked about various ‘emotion words.’ MS. M would ask ‘What makes you (happy, angry, or jealous)’ to which

prompt children would eagerly bid for a turn at relating what situations or actions made them happy. These were usually short accounts intended to exemplify a state or emotion. As one boy said ‘I feel jealous when I don’t get chosen for soccer.’ MS. M usually evaluated the accounts, approving or suggesting modifications given her judgment of whether they illustrated the sense of a given word for an emotion.

Sometimes the subtleties of language use concerned social rather than grammatical expectations. In the following excerpt from field notes, the teacher is leading the students through a sentence making exercise. She points to a word written on the blackboard, in this case *read*, and the students, who are gathered as a full class, bid for turns at providing a sentence which uses the word:

**(1) Making English Sentences with *read***

C1: I read books

M: ‘I read books’, yes (selecting next student)

C2: I like to read

M: Good

C3: I hate to read

M: No, you’re joking (said with smile)

(28 February 2014)

C3’s sentence contribution ‘I hate to read’ attracts Ms. M’s attention. Although it is a lexically and syntactically well-formed sentence using *read*, it violates an unstated assumption: People may indeed ‘hate to read’ in the wider world, but in schools, everyone is supposed to ‘like to read.’ The humor, suggested by Ms. M’s smile, depends on the juxtaposition of appropriate and

expected content ('like to read') followed immediately by inappropriate or unexpected content ('hate to read').

Sometimes the issues of language use were ambiguously social or linguistic. Shortly after the exchange in (2), in the same lesson, the class took up the word *spider*. Ms. M discussed with the children 'what kind of word' *spider* was, that is, what part of speech. Having established that it was a noun, she then discussed words that 'accompany or qualify' a noun, that is, adjectives. She then asked for examples, stated in full sentences, of words that modify spider. The following sequence of answers was called out:

**(2) English Only in English Sentences**

C1: It is a poisonous spider.

M: Good, who else?

C2: It is a scary spider

M: 'It is a scary spider', yes (selecting child with hand raised)

C3: '((xxxx?)) spinnenkop

M: No, that is Afrikaans

C3: (smiles)

(28 February 2014)

This exchange deserves comment. C3 had earlier joined in the vocabulary- sentence exercises with several correct replies, but in example (1), she is the child who proclaims the mock-scandal of 'I hate to read'. This is received with a smile by Ms. M, probably because C3 is in the top ability reading group. In the next part of the vocabulary lesson, when *spider* is to be discussed and 'used in a sentence', C3 replies with a phrase or sentence ending with ',,, spinnenkop ', which is Afrikaans for 'spider.' The response seems to a lexically and syntactically apt insertion

of an Afrikaans phrase into the lesson frame, and Ms. M immediately replies: ‘No, that is Afrikaans.’ Meanwhile C3 smiles, probably to signal the non-serious nature of her answer. She is one of the students in the classroom whose first language is Afrikaans, but she also seemed to have good control of English and in this excerpt she was offering a grammatically correct phrase, but one which combined English and Afrikaans. This pattern of students using an Afrikaans word or phrase during an English vocabulary lesson occurred at least once per day during the lessons that I observed, but Ms. M maintained a strict distinction between English and other languages, sanctioning each occurrence of an Afrikaans answer.

The policy-in-practice of keeping languages separated into distinct arenas of use, illustrated in example (2), was also enacted when teaching languages other than English. Like many of the educators at South City, Ms. M spoke Afrikaans, and she taught the classroom’s Afrikaans as a First Additional Language (FAL) lessons. She conducted them as immersion lessons, where all or almost all communication was in Afrikaans. For example, in a lesson requiring students to identify names of animals and use those names in a sentence, this was a common initiation-response-evaluation sequence:

### **(3) Making Afrikaans Sentences**

M:     Gebruik BOK in 'n sin (‘Use ‘goat’ in a sentence’)

C:     Hy het 'n bok (‘He has a goat’)

M:     Goede (‘Good’)

(17 April 2014)

Occasionally, either Ms. M or a student would use English as well as Afrikaans in an Afrikaans lesson, but only for side remarks managing interaction, not for elicitation or reply in an instructional sequence. (4) provides an illustration of both languages in use, although there is

uncertainty about whether an English form has been used during the lesson proper. In the following excerpt, students are taking turns calling out portions of a syntactic paradigm, built on a sentence frame *Sy het...*, ('She has...'), which is held constant, while students use different nouns (*hond, kinder, balle*) to create alternate sentences:

**(4) Vigilance about English in Afrikaans:**

C1: Sy het 'n hond ('She has a dog')

Sy het vyf kinder ('She has five children')

Sy het vyf balle ('She has five balls')

...

CC: Sy het 'n rat! ('She has a rat')

M: Who said rat?

C: I said raht, Miss

(24 April 2014)

When pupils get to the word *rat*, which is spelled the same in Afrikaans and English, a chorus chant loudly *Sy het 'n rat!*' Ms. M seems to have heard an English pronunciation of the Afrikaans word *rat*, which is spelled the same but pronounced differently from its English counterpart (rat vs. raet). She immediately questions the classroom 'Who said rat [ræt]?', with emphasis on the vowel. One of the students responds with a claim of pronunciation fidelity: 'I said raht [rat], Miss.' We should note that both teacher and student break language frame, so to speak, asking and answering in English about their fidelity to Afrikaans pronunciation norms, but doing so in the effort to show faithfulness to the principle of strictly separated languages.

In these lessons, students were corrected and encouraged to rephrase their answers in several different situations: a) when they did not put a vocabulary item in a full sentence; b) if

they responded in Afrikaans during an English lesson; or, c) if they responded in English during an Afrikaans lesson. In brief, they were encouraged to *use only the standard registers of English and Afrikaans*, and to *use the two languages only in the appropriate classroom activities*. This pattern of maintaining strict boundaries between languages and teaching only the standard registers of languages is typical of schools throughout the world (e.g. Dong & Blommaert 2009; Hornberger & Vaish 2008; Murphy 2002).

It is worth noting that in this community not only were there many languages spoken, but there were many bilingual Afrikaans and English speakers, among both teachers, students, and students' families. Although Ms. M was quick to discourage any cross-linguistic mixing of resources, it was a common enough occurrence in many of the homes from which the students came. Similar to practices that are found in settled, multi-generational bilingual communities elsewhere in the world (Gumperz 1982; Heller 1988), the coloured Afrikaans speaking families whose students attended South City spoke both Afrikaans and English and, at least on informal occasions, moved easily and quickly between the two languages. During a parent education workshop at South City, for example, many of the parents attending the event engaged staff members in quick exchanges in Afrikaans and English in the informal conversation that preceded the program. Once the formal program began, however, it was conducted only in English, with the exception of side-comments among participants. One woman, for instance, playfully teased another in Afrikaans, *jou man...* 'your man...', shortly after a student's father – known to both – had left the room. During the tea break, both languages were used among parents and between parents and staff, but when formal program resumed, only English was used to conduct the workshop.

When we turn from classroom interaction to interviews exploring how teaching and administrative staff at South City perceived the language diversity of students, we encounter commentary that evokes contrasting registers and intertwined class and racial categories.

**Staff perspectives on language diversity:** Interviews with other teachers at the school about language diversity in their classrooms provided a range of perceptions and responses, some departing from Ms. M's practices, others aligning with them. One teacher described classroom and curriculum innovations that could help refugee students, for whom English might be a third or fourth language; another described using 'a little Xhosa' as well as using digital resources to find Xhosa phrases to help scaffold the learning activities of her Xhosa speaking students; a third teacher, who spoke Shona as well as English, preferred not to offer any bilingual instructional support. When I asked the school principal about his views of language diversity, commenting on the presence of many Afrikaans speakers in the school and surrounding neighborhood, he said that he would be concerned about the use of English and Afrikaans in a classroom activity. He felt that this could lead a mixed language, the mingling of English and Afrikaans, or as he put it '*kombuis Engels*' ['kitchen English'], which he did not see as a good thing:

I always fear that we are going to be marrying the two.. uh.. and you are going to get another language.. that is not purely English and that is not purely Afrikaans. We- we call it kombuis Engels where you have a mixture of English and Afrikaans ... at the end of the day the curriculum is clear.. spoken English- we speak grammatically correct. (Principal interview 9 May 2014)

What we should note at this point is the concern that if languages are not kept separate, a 'marrying' or miscegenation of languages will occur, and *Kombuis Engels* will be the result. This

‘kitchen English’ will violate the curriculum, which prescribes that spoken English is to be ‘grammatically correct.’

Most of the teachers interviewed suggested links between the social circumstances of students and their linguistic repertoires. They were aware, as noted in the discussion above, that many children spoke multiple languages, of which English was a second, third or fourth language and this posed challenges for their learning in an English-medium curriculum . All also discussed the challenges posed by social and economic stresses faced by refugee households, by households in which male migration for work was common, and in which female-headed households with working mothers might not be able to ‘help with school.’ One teacher suggested a link between the social circumstances of students and their families and the value placed on different varieties of Afrikaans and English.

When I said during an interview that many parents at workshops seemed to speak Afrikaans and English, and asked if that were correct, she qualified my understanding by suggesting that the claim to English might be more hope than actuality. She used a term that linked imperfect English to stigmatized varieties of Afrikaans:

The thing is you know often the parents say- when they’re writing when they fill in the form they say English speaking .. but very often you find they have Afrikaans backgrounds or it’s through a mixture a kind of a slang between English and Afrikaans .. because that’s what the community’s like, you see?

(Teacher interview, 9 May 2014)

The teacher’s words deserve close attention, for they suggest a mind grappling with an image of the community served by the school and widespread language ideologies that equate language mixture with defective persons and populations (Irvine & Gal 2000;

Urciouli 1996). Two issues are alluded to in the phrase ‘a mixture .. a kind of a slang between English and Afrikaans because that’s what the community’s like you see?’. One is linguistic – a ‘mixture .. a kind of a slang between English and Afrikaans’; the second is social and seen as causing the first – ‘because that’s what the community’s like, you see?’

### **Discussion:**

A lesson we can draw from the classroom interaction and interview data presented is that schools regulate language, attempting to maintain sharp boundaries between languages or language registers. Like many other teachers, Ms. M sought to maintain institutional norms at South City by drawing boundaries between what are seen as distinct and separate languages, despite home and neighborhood contexts in which frequent switching blurred such boundaries. At South City, as in many other schools in the Western Cape, teachers attempt to reinforce the domains of use of standard English or Afrikaans, despite student bodies who operate with varieties of both languages (Dyers 2004; Kerfoot 2014) and to maintain the less-acknowledged distinction between conversational and school registers of English or Afrikaans. Ms. M’s oft-repeated classroom injunction to ‘speak in sentences’ is call to speak in the forms of written registers. It is in written prose that we expect all utterances to be sentences. Participants in spoken interaction are constantly making inferences about each other’s communicative intentions, and adapting their contributions in an exchange based on implicit contextual and co-textual cues. We take endless shortcuts in our talk, which is in part why transcripts of conversation do not usually resemble the literary representations of talk found in plays and novels.

The difference between written and spoken registers of language are nonetheless an important boundary, for writing is a means of regulating legitimate language (Bourdieu 1991; Guillory 1993), marking off a racialized standard vis a vis other registers of a language, especially in schooling (Perry & Delpit 1998). Dyers (2004: 30) reports in a study of Afrikaans speaking students in Cape Flats high school that the vast majority did not use ‘reasonably good standard Afrikaans,’ and then quotes other researchers on the general consequences of the register conflict:

Webb and Kembo-Sure (1999:17) comment on the alienation between formal standard Afrikaans and colloquial Afrikaans, which has ‘... had serious educational consequences for children who grew up in ‘Coloured’ working-class families, as the language they grew up with in the intimacy of their homes and friendships is not the same as the rigidly standardized ‘white’ language insisted upon in schools.’

In the meta-commentary about language provided by the teachers and principal at South City, we find a register process that also marks boundaries. Commentary that links social imagery ‘what the community’s like’ to problematic language origin – ‘a mixture.. a kind of a slang between English and Afrikaans’ is an enregistering discourse. It names or recognizes that there are *repertoires of forms* that are stereotypically *associated with kinds of speakers and activities*, as perceived by *historically specific groups* (Agha 2005, 2007). For many educated, middle-class speakers of English and Afrikaans, as the principal, the teacher and most other staff at South City are, the register(s) of Afrikaans and English spoken by kinds of speakers like South City parents are problematic because they are suggestive of ‘slang’ or ‘mixture.’ *De slang* is one of many derogatory terms for Cape Afrikaans, notwithstanding that Cape Afrikaans as a vernacular serving the Cape Colony, long preceded the standardization of Afrikaans

(McCormick 2006). *Kombuis Afrikaans*, literally ‘kitchen Afrikaans’ is another derogatory term, often described as ‘a mixture of Afrikaans and English.’ Similarly, *Kombuis Engels* refers to a variety of language that is perceived as mixed. Both terms refer to polyglot language use that involves English and Afrikaans resources, along with other linguistic influences.

In the Principal’s expressed ‘fear of ...marrying the two’ and the teacher’s reference to ‘a mixture, a kind of slang’ we see sociohistorical process of enregisterment occurring in real-time. Their comments name ensembles combining language forms, cultural models and social domains. The Principal’s and teacher’s remarks are each characterizing and thus helping to identify *in the current moment* a register that comprises three parts. First, there are forms of language, here termed ‘mixed’ or ‘slang’ Afrikaans or English. Second, there is a cultural model of incorrect or impure English or Afrikaans, stereotypically used by speakers from communities like the South City neighborhood, for activities such as improperly filling out forms and inflating claims about one’s linguistic abilities. Third, there is a social domain, encompassing the imputed users but extending to others who recognize the variety, including educated speakers of standard English and Afrikaans.

What are at issue are register processes and scale relations implicating and implicated by class and race identities. The processes include efforts to stabilize standard registers versus other varieties of English or Afrikaans, for example, varieties of English influenced by Afrikaans. The scale relations are indicated by contrasts between national-scale ‘official’ languages and regional or local registers of the same language. Thus standard Afrikaans, which is presumed by most to be the language of ethnic Afrikaners, and White South African English (Anthonissen 2013; Mesthrie 2014), are contrasted with Kaaps, a variety of Afrikaans associated with mixed-race or Coloured speakers in the Western Cape (McCormick 2006), or Cape Flats English, a register of

English associated with the same populations (Laas 2002). Common stereotypes about repertoires of forms and categories of person are reported in the South African literature: Standards are spoken by educated middle and upper class persons, while vernaculars are associated with ‘uneducated’ working-class persons. As is often the case, this class contrast is also racialized, and ‘slang’ ways of speaking are attributed to non-whites (e.g. Athenissen *ibid.*; Stone 2002 on Afrikaans in the Western Cape. )

Enregistering commentary about language and language users, as provided by the teacher and principal, attempts to stabilize a register by evoking normative repertoires of forms and social arena of users and uses. The principal’s remarks, in particular, remind us that school systems have formalized expectations about language varieties or registers which are supposed to occur in *all* educational settings. As he says in rejecting mixed languages: ‘the curriculum is clear... Spoken English- we speak grammatically correct.’ In other words, we speak ‘grammatically correct’ or standard English, a register understood as national, if not ‘global,’ in its scope. Invoking ‘curriculum’ as a bulwark against what is seen as an omnipresent local danger of mixing languages, the principal is simultaneously evoking the national authority of official education policy. The teacher’s remark ‘because that’s what the community’s like’ assigns ‘slang’ to the community served by South City Primary, a particular place and local scale. Vernacular Cape Afrikaans is, however, widely spoken throughout the Cape Town metropolitan region, and the Western Cape province more generally; *de slang* is a urban register, especially among younger speakers, that appears as widely distributed (Stone 2002). Whatever the actual extent of the speech community, we must see the talk of ‘the neighborhood’ as a practice of ‘producing the local’ (Appadurai 1996; Blommaert, Collins & Slembrouck 2005) in relation to the imputed generality of officially approved languages.

Returning to the principal's remarks, correct speaking is rarely an isolated issue. As the principal and teaching staff were vividly aware, and commented upon often, an education challenge facing the the linguistically diverse students at South City was that they were frequently assessed through written exams in standard English. This is true throughout South Africa, from year four onward till secondary matriculation and university, and there are strong statistical associations between not speaking English as a home language and poor performance on standardized tests (Posel & Casal 2008; Taylor 2014). On such exams, any multilingual proficiencies shown through code-switching in writing are likely to count against those assessed because the exams presume specific registers of educated English (Kapp & Arend 2011; Prinsloo 2011).

### **Conclusion:**

The quandaries of South City Primary are indicative of those confronting many South African schools, not because South City is statistically or demographically representative – that is debatable – but because of the lesson it provides in how a system of education typically offers a stratified set of linguistic choices, choices which strongly correlate with social inequality. The teachers and principal at South City were all thoughtful, hardworking professionals. They were aware and compassionate about the social and economic challenges faced by learners at the primary school. Many sought creative tactics for lessening the gap learners faced between their first languages and English. But the way of talking about and categorizing languages, as well as the system of assessment in standard English, made it tremendously difficult to view language diversity as anything other than ‘a barrier.’ That is why the concept of register is important: It

enables us to re-connect social value and linguistic value, and in so doing to ask new questions about language in education.

Given the symbolic status of English as the ‘language of global business’ and ‘educational opportunity’ most South Africans want their children educated in English. There are many reasons why a robustly multilingual country wants English-medium education for its children. There are many associations between language education and the history of apartheid, including suspicion of mother-tongue education in African languages because of the legacy of Bantu education, a negative association of Afrikaans with apartheid oppression, and a positive association of English with the anti-apartheid liberation struggle (Heugh 2002). A practical basis is also discussed in research on language and labor market participation in South Africa. Analyzing national data sets on reported language proficiencies and labor market participation, Posel & Casals’ (2008) show that those who report have ‘good English’ skills have significantly better incomes and occupations, whether they ethnically ‘White’ or ‘African.’ Deumert & Mabandla (2009) show similar statistical associations between English or Afrikaans and improvements for working-class Africans in the Cape Town labor market ). These findings should not surprise, Afrikaans regionally and English nationally are the languages of the economically and politically dominant. There is a qualification to the findings, however, in that those who report good skills in English as an additional language also report good reading and writing skills in their home languages (Posel & Casal, *ibid*, pp. 455, table 7). The question becomes how to insure that South Africans, 90% of whom do not have English as a ‘home language,’ (p. 450, table 2), develop competencies in their first languages, including competencies in school registers for reading and writing, before taking up the task of acquiring ‘good English.’ Given what we discussed above regarding registers of ‘school’ and ‘urban

vernaculars' in African languages, or the division reported between many coloured Afrikaans speakers and standard Afrikaans, it is clear that grappling with questions of registers of language is important for understanding both school learning and language learning more generally in South Africa.

Although they are widespread, discourses equating 'good English' and economic progress are selective ideologies of language. Among other things, they ignore the differentiated, stratified nature of the massive, transnational English speech community (Blommaert 2010; LaDousa 2005; Friedman 2003; Hornberger & Vaish 2008; Mesthrie 2002a; Urciuoli 1996). A primary axis of stratification is economic, and family wealth is a powerful predictor of has access to 'good English' and success in formal schooling in South Africa (Spaull 2013) as in the United States (Mischel & Rothstein 2007; Rothstein 2004). Economic inequality does not mean that school curricula and policies are futile – they are vital to the struggle for a more equitable, egalitarian future. We must, however, remain aware that schooling is more a barometer than driver of social change. More to the point, we need to better understand how economic and educational inequality map onto varieties of language, reproducing language hierarchies in which a few varieties are valued and the majority devalued, for these language hierarchies are typically reinforced by education policies.

It was a sense of the differentiated, stratified nature of English that teachers at South City were implicating when they commented on English language students as having basic conversational skills but struggling more with academic instructions and tasks. The English language students at the school posed problems of 'language barriers' because their struggles and achievements in education were going to be framed by a national education discourse and assessment system in which 'good' or 'proper English' is the narrow gate which rations who has

success in the competition for education and, by extension, in the the competition for jobs, income, and wealth. This process of channeling the relative few who will attain ‘good English’ is not the only pathway through school, however. Many South African students have robust multilingual resources. The Afrikaans-English bilingual students at South City – like those operating with English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa in Kerfoot’s (2014) recent study of a Cape Flats school, Mckinney’s studies of isi-Zulu speaking youth in English-medium schools (2010), or the Xhosa-English speaking majorities described by Kraus (2014) – are attempting a register process. They are attempting to widen the domain of ‘school language,’ by establishing spaces for bilingual and multilingual repertoires as part of their student lives. We may wish this youth-driven linguistic ferment thoughtful allies. It is a sign of creative response to linguistic alienation, but allies will be necessary in the struggle for schools that allow such young people to acquire skills in the dominant language registers of market and politics while also building upon language proficiencies developed “in the intimacy of their homes and friendships.”

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