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‘Cross-identification’: identity games and the performance of South Africanness by Ndebele-speaking migrants in Johannesburg

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Language’s centrality in how ‘amakwerekwere’ – those who babble – are constructed in South Africa, raises fascinating questions when attention is cast on Zimbabwean Ndebele-speaking migrants whose language is mutually intelligible with South Africa’s Nguni cluster. This article draws from the narratives of Ndebele-speaking migrants in three neighbourhoods of Johannesburg and discusses how they negotiate their ‘outsiderness’ through a process I term ‘cross-identification.’ Cross-identification refers to the appropriation of ‘Zuluness’ by Ndebele-speaking migrants when they are among interlocutors without the symbolic competence to distinguish the distinctions between ‘Ndebele’ and ‘Zulu’ varieties. On the other hand, they deploy linguistic and social absence when in the presence of interlocutors endowed with such a capacity and who can call their bluff. To conclude, I evaluate how migrants’ performativity – cross-identification – is potentially also imagined. I raise the question, if this is the case, of what this affords both the performers and audience who are complicit in this dramaturgy.

Keywords: Zimbabwe; Ndebele; migrant; cross-identification; performativity

Introduction

An opportune point of departure for this article is asking two broad questions: if the Ndebele language is mutually intelligible with the Nguni cluster (Mesthrie, 2000, p. 10), are those who possess it ‘amakwerekwere’? The second question is: how do Ndebele-speaking migrants fare in the politics of identity in South Africa? In this article, I focus on these questions drawing from the narratives of Ndebele-speaking working-class (semi-skilled and skilled) migrants in Johannesburg’s neighbourhoods of Hillbrow, Berea and Diepsloot. The major argument I advance is that Ndebele-speaking migrants’ language variety is a form of capital that produces dialectic meanings of insidership and outsidership depending on the ethnolinguistic and symbolic competence of their interlocutors, situation and context of interaction. Building on the similarity between the Ndebele and Zulu language varieties, migrants strategically alter the meanings that can be attached to their bodies, what Goffman (1959) calls ‘sign vehicles’, and oppose the frames of identification of their interlocutors, a practice I term ‘cross-identification’. Cross-identification reveals self-(re)presentations that follow an ‘economy of practice’ (Bourdieu, 1991), that hierarchizes South African ethnolinguistic groups according to their ‘symbolic authority’ (Bourdieu, 1991), and informs the subsequent performative identity (re)presentations.

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Zulus and the Zulu language variety emerge as critical reference points. On the one hand, through encounters in which the Ndebele language variety has been misrecognized as Zulu with the outcome being migrants' unwitting 'passing' as South African (Goffman, 1963), migrants have learnt the potentialities of their language and its connections with Zulu. On the other hand, Zulus are seen as the legitimate owners of the language who are endowed with the 'symbolic authority' (competence) to expose migrants' identity games. While the 'marginal' ethnolinguistic groups such as Pedi, Venda, Shangaan and Sotho (cf. Hassim, Kupe, & Worby, 2008) are derided as passive, Zulus are constructed as the most aggressive and xenophobic group in South Africa. In discussing these appropriations of 'South Africanness' – strategic crossing of ethnolinguistic boundaries – I focus on a number of interactional domains that research participants allude to as important sites in their everyday lives.

Conceptually, I take Ndebele-speaking migrants as endowed with certain ways of doing things, walking, talking and expressive styles, accents as well as bodily deportment. These can broadly be thought of as specific Zimbabwean 'habitus' and 'bodily hexis' (Bourdieu, 1991) that both stem from, and reveal the social conditions from which they emerge. This 'incorporated history' (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 13), not only informs how they strategically negotiate 'face-to-face' encounters (Goffman, 1983) but is dialectically a source of 'stigma' (Goffman, 1963) and 'capital' (Bourdieu, 1991). It differentiates them from South Africans, yet also enables them to negotiate these differences.

Some studies have shown how the maintenance and crossing of ethnic boundaries depends not on the content of ethnicity but on how qualification into another identity is defined. Haaland's (1969) discussion of ethnic relations among the Fur and the Baggara of Western Sudan reveals that it is not the 'essential' content that informs their identity formation, or crossing into other identities. There are other underlying logics such as economic determinants which forge interdependence and make their ethnic boundaries permeable. Rampton (1995, p. 486) speaks of the sociolinguistic practice of 'language crossing' which describes 'code alternation by people who are not accepted members of the group associated with the second language that they are using (code switching into varieties that are not generally thought to belong to them)'. What is notable is that these dimensions of crossing ethnic boundaries are generally conflict free. Discussing 'language crossing' Rampton shows that it is undergirded by peer group, relations and familiarity among interactants. Although there are underlying complex questions of inequality and authenticity, the context is generally supportive of difference, and does not suppress it.

'Cross-identification', as I will demonstrate, does not stem from such relatively egalitarian and collaborative endeavours in the crossing of ethnic boundaries or bounds of performing alternative identities. Neither does it mean a straight forward and simple adoption of the code of one's interlocutors.

A concise overview of the history of Ndebele migration to South Africa

There exists a comprehensive body of scholarship focusing on the cleavages of migration to South Africa by Zimbabweans from Ndebele-speaking areas (Makina, 2010; Sisulu, Moyo, & Tshuma, 2007). Among other things, migration from these areas has been read as stemming from long-standing tensions in Zimbabwe in a situation where Ndebele people who are culturally and linguistically distinct from the majority Shona

have been subjected to diverse forms of socio-economic, cultural and political dominations (marginalization) (cf. Ndhlovu, 2008; Ndlovu, 2010).

It suffices to note that the category – ‘Ndebele’ – is a theoretical construct and has many meanings. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009, pp. 11–12) notes that, ‘Ndebeleness was a form of constructed citizenship that never stopped to be reconstructed across historical time. This is why there are numerous misunderstandings around who is a Ndebele’. Some claims of Ndebeleness have seen the term equated with the Nguni identity, while others focus on language as the identity marker. Still others evoke the regional and geographical location and restrict the definition to Matabeleland and Midlands. A salient influence in the processes of identity formation and identification has been the physical and symbolic violence experienced in the post-independence context (cf. Alexander, McGregor, & Ranger, 2000).

Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009, p. 13) asserts that despite these formulations, ‘the Ndebele are neither a clan nor a tribe’. Rather, the ‘Ndebele are a nation which comprises all those ancestors were incorporated into the Ndebele state in the nineteenth century. These include those of the Nguni, Sotho, Shona, Kalanga, Tswana, Venda, Tonga and Rozvi extraction’. Ndlovu-Gatsheni reckons that:

This is a historical-pluralistic and inclusive definition of being Ndebele. IsiNdebele is the common language spoken by Ndebele although such other languages as Kalanga, Venda and Sotho were spoken too and are still spoken alongside isiNdebele.

I assert that Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s observation is very productive, yet these various distinctions and formulations are all significant markers of Ndebeleness and being Ndebele. As Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009, p. 14) rightly points out ‘Ndebele-ness’ like all identities and processes of identification ‘remains prone to fluidity, malleability, reinforcement, contestations, acceptance and rejections’. In this paper, I privilege language because of its indexical capacity and its salience in migrants’ interface with the in-groups in South Africa. This is not to say that this theoretical category is not imbued with other meanings outside of language and indexicality. Much in the same way the category ‘Shona’ is also a construct subsuming diverse fragmentations and differences. Yet, at a political level, as scholars note, Zimbabwe is fractured along a fault line of ethnicity which pits the hegemonic Shona majority against the Ndebele who are a minority (Masunungure, 2005).

Various constructions of Ndebeles as enemies and outsiders litter Zimbabwe’s national narratives. Just after independence, Robert Mugabe argued that ‘ZAPU and its leader, Dr. Joshua Nkomo, are like a cobra in a house. The only way to deal effectively with a snake is to strike and destroy its head’ (Meredith, 2011, p. 623). PF ZAPU, a pioneering nationalist party is used as a synonym for Ndebeles and in Zimbabwe’s fragmentary politics; it is constructed as subversive. These derogatory constructions of Ndebele people as ‘outsiders’ in Zimbabwean have been recounted by other politicians. For instance, Sekai Holland, then Zimbabwean Minister of State for National Healing, Reconciliation and Integration in Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai’s office, speaking about state violence in Zimbabwe equated it to the coming of Ndebeles from Zululand to Zimbabwe. She states that, ‘By the time that Mzilikazi’s mob (Ndebele people) came after stealing cattle (from Zululand), there was just nothing they knew how to do that had not been done before’ (Sifile, 2009).

Perhaps the strategy of dealing with Mugabe’s ‘Cobra in the house’ besides the contemporary sociocultural and political marginalization is best typified by Gukurahundi which was orchestrated by Mugabe in the years between 1982 and 1987,

in the name of dealing with dissidents, but in which an estimated twenty thousand civilians were killed in the Ndebele-speaking regions of the country (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012). Mugabe has also attacked Ndebele people's pride, as well as symbolic and cultural artefacts. In recent times he derided Joshua Nkomo attributing his death to his love of meat 'Ndebele style' (*New Zimbabwe*, 2012). This political, economic and cultural marginalization has given rise to some voices calling for cessation and the restoration of the Ndebele kingdom (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2012).

It is within such a context of marginalization, implicit and explicit construction and subjectivation as 'outsiders' that Ndebele-speaking people's migration to South Africa has occurred. Under such circumstances of socio-political orphan-hood other imaginaries and fantasies of home have emerged (cf. Ndlovu, 2010). South Africa by virtue of historical ties and proximity has been seen as a home. As Ndlovu (2010) work demonstrates, migration to South Africa is seen by migrants as reclamation of Ndebele heritage, notable in the statement among Ndebele speakers that 'Ushaka ubiza abantwabakhe' (Shaka is calling his children).

This rekindling of historical ties and affinity, and the notion that Zulu and Ndebele people are one have found expression in various events that have brought together Ndebeles and their Zulu counterparts. One such occasion was the marriage of Jacob Zuma's daughter to Welshman Ncube's son. Zuma is the current South African President and is Zulu, while Welshman is leader of an opposition party, the movement for democratic change and is Ndebele. One newspaper's headline speaks volumes about the mood in Bulawayo at the time of the wedding: 'Bulawayo awakes for Ncube, Zuma wedding' (Moyo & Tshuma, 2008). Without a doubt, notions of Zulu and Ndebele oneness were high on the imagination of the people of Bulawayo. Welshman Ncube and Jacob Zuma feed into and share in this imagination as notable in the manner they deployed notions of 'home', belonging and affinity in their celebratory speeches. Ncube stated that 'I am happy that my son has found a beautiful wife. When they are in Zimbabwe they are at home. When they are in South Africa, they are also at home.' Zuma, for his part jokingly stated that, 'I am here to reclaim the cattle that Mzilikazi looted when he left Zululand' (Moyo & Tshuma, 2008). Another important symbolic occasion was when Albert Zwelibanzi Gumede was installed as paramount (Mthwakazi) Ndebele chief in Yeoville on 22 March 2014. According to Nkala (2014), at least 10 South African chiefs are reported to have been part of the occasion which 'received the blessings of Zulu monarch King Goodwill Zwelithini'. Some commentaries assert that the installation was necessitated by the desire to keep the Ndebele ethnic group and its culture alive. The Inauguration Publicity Team (2014) asserts that:

He will work under the South African constitution, he will be sworn in by the head of South African Council of Chiefs. Being an organised ethnic group, we need a leader who will assist in addressing all our concerns as he will work hand in hand with the Chiefs in Matabeleland and the Zimbabwean Embassy in South Africa. As we are orphans without a king, it is our obligation to preserve our existence as a community in diaspora, binded by culture, arts etc. Appointing a cultural leader (Induna) was driven by our zeal to cherish and hold on to our way of living.

This Zulu-Ndebele connection and yearning for oneness has also found traction in the area of arts and culture in South Africa. A popular maskandi music group in South Africa known as Izingane Zoma have a song entitled 'Mzilikazi kaMashobane' (Mzilikazi son of Mashobane) which speaks of this oneness and calls on the Ndebele people to come back 'home'. Parts of the lyrics go,

These are our people who left with Mzilikazi kaMatshobana how will they come back?
 They are suffering in Zimbabwe Shonas are discriminating against them. Stop discriminating against them, we remember them, they are our brothers, how will they come back?
 (My own translation)

The song goes on to say, 'You should come back home and pay homage to the lion. The dispute over Shaka's cows can be settled because it's a family issue.' In spite of these gestures of family-hood that play on the historical connections between the Zulu and the Ndebele and by extension Matabeleland and South Africa, entry into South Africa has not been a celebratory home coming for most of the Ndebele-speaking migrants. Sisulu et al. (2007, p. 562) document a song by Nxumalo, a Ndebele-speaking migrant, which possibly captures the tribulations of being in Johannesburg. The migrant laments:

Sibalekel' omnyama, sibalekela komnyama; South Africa usihlangabeza ngenduku, basithata basifaka eLindela, Thabo Mbeki ngabe sikwenzeni na? (Ndebele song meaning, 'We are running away from a repressive black government to a well-governed black one; hoping to be assisted/accepted. However on our arrival, we are sent straight into a frying pan. Thabo Mbeki, what wrong have we done?') (Nxumalo, interview 02.06.06 in Sisulu et al., 2007, p. 562).

These lamentations point to the complex questions of what it means to be Ndebele speaking in South Africa. They also fundamentally raise questions about the assumed automatic insertion of Ndebele speakers into South Africa, a position that animates much commentary on the subject. It also calls for a step towards a more nuanced appreciation of the sociolinguistic experiences of Ndebele-speaking migrants in South Africa and the attendant identity repertoires. This article is a step in this direction.

Data collection

I collected data through ethnographic interviews and observation, striving for a gender balanced group of participants. My research participants were mostly working-class migrants in the neighbourhoods of Hillbrow, Yeoville and Diepsloot in Johannesburg, and I interacted with them for 12 months between January 2011 and December 2012. I decided to employ multisided ethnography due to the fact that language cannot be bounded to one context, as is also the case with processes of identity and identification. Furthermore, Zimbabwean migrants are dispersed across various spaces of Johannesburg. As such I constructed my 'field' to access different spaces where Zimbabweans can be found. It is worth noting that the majority of the research participants came to South Africa from the year 2000 and after, although a third in the sample came much earlier in the 1990s. The occupations of the migrants ranged from university students, teachers, security guards, waiters and waitresses, and the informal sector. The research participants generally fell within the economically active age group with the average age being 35 years.

Being a Zimbabwean migrant studying other migrants, and entangled in the phenomenon being studied confronted me with 'sticky situations' (Riach, 2009) that necessitated reflexivity on my part. Research participants viewed me as one of them, and as such in the know about the issues at hand. As one responded noted, 'You know how it is in South Africa. You are a Zimbabwean are you not?' For them, my being a Zimbabwean meant that I was in possession of the knowledge that I was looking for. As such, some were initially very general in their responses assuming that I would tap

into my own knowledge and experiences to connect the dots. Such responses reveal this perspective, ‘The police, ah you know them. You know how they are’. There was constant reference to my knowledge as a ‘Zimbabwean.’ Narayan (1993) notes how ‘familiarity’ or being a ‘native anthropologist’ because people’s similarities and differences are complex and cannot be simply reduced to ethnicity or race. As such, I had to be vigilant and draw out migrants’ stories and not allow how I was constructed blur my vision and introduce blind spots.

These constructions were not limited to my research participants but also took on other contours vis-a vis – my ‘Self’ as imagined by the in-group. I was in contact and experienced the meanings of being the ‘Other’ in relation to South Africans of different race and ethnic groups imagined and constructed my identity on the basis of my language and name in diverse ways. For instance, in 2010, in Johannesburg while contracted to a certain migration unit I interacted and came to work with a Sotho-speaking South African. Having spoken a number of times among others in our working group which consisted of both black and white people, as well as alone, we started chatting about home. When I said I was from Zimbabwe my colleague was initially puzzled and noted, ‘I thought you were South African. You speak Zulu ...’ In 2012, I attended a workshop that was attended by people from the USA, the UK, as well as different African countries. I was to discover that our designated driver was a Zulu-speaking man. We spoke a couple of times. On one occasion, I sat in the bus and we spoke while we waited for other delegates. Our driver remarked to me, ‘You’re from Bulawayo?’ When I replied in the affirmative, he went on, ‘The Zulu that you speak is from Bulawayo. Some of your people are in Hillbrow’. These two scenarios replayed themselves in other different places where I was either mistaken for a South African or identified as a Zimbabwean by South Africans. In Stellenbosch, I became familiar with Xhosa ladies at a phone shop where I regularly purchased airtime. One day when I wanted to buy a phone, they asked for my ‘ID’ and I produced my Zimbabwean passport. ‘Ah xxx¹, you’re Zimbabwean?’ Thereafter, I had to give a truncated history lesson because, they insisted, ‘You need to check your background carefully, there is someone in your family who is South African because XXXX² is Zulu, and we also have that name in Xhosa’. In a conference, a Zulu Professor told me, ‘You see Ndebele is very close to Zulu it’s almost one thing, but the pronunciation is what sells you out. We have a number of Ndebele speaking and we can tell from how they speak’. I could list numerous other examples of my fieldwork experiences which, but what is important is how I was constructed and identified by ‘Zulus’ and ‘non-Zulus’ on the basis of my language. These experiences in various ways, as will be demonstrated in the paper, resonated with the experiences of the research participants.

‘Zulu of the flats’, ‘Zulu of the township’: Johannesburg’s various expressive styles (codes) and body talk

Before tracing the cleavages and contouring of identity of Ndebele-speaking migrants within specific interactional spaces, it is worthwhile to discuss migrants’ conceptions of their language variety, their bodies and their values as ‘entry fees’ (Siziba, 2014) in Johannesburg. Ndebele migrants generally rank themselves against ‘Zulus’ whom they present as the most symbolically dominant ethnic group in South Africa. This is akin to Hassim et al. (2008) ranking of race and ethnic groups in South Africa where some South Africans are seen as more South African than others. In both the areas dominated by Zimbabweans, which they term ‘Zimbabwean colonies’ (Siziba, 2014) and the

townships, research participants reveal that the Ndebele and Zulu language varieties are very similar yet there are also some fundamental differences. In the Zimbabwean colonies, migrants speak of ‘Zulu of the flats’ which is built around the omission of certain ‘pure’ Ndebele (sounding) words which are then replaced with Zulu ones. Within the Zimbabwean colonies, migrants see this ‘sociolect’ (Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert, & Leap, 2000), as indexing them as Zimbabwean people who stay in this area which is mostly composed of flats. Themba for instance, states this of Hillbrow:

Local (black South African) languages are in the minority. Zulu is there but the most widely spoken language is ‘Ndebele.’ If you want to call that Zulu ... Zulu from home but it’s not the same as South African Zulu. It’s very difficult. The tone and everything is different.

The differences in Zulu and Ndebele and how they are spoken by their ‘legitimate’ owners are seen as rooted in accent, intonation and varying competence. Ndebeles are constructed by research participants as endowed with a restricted knowledge of Zulu while Zulu are seen as in possession of a deeper linguistic knowledge. Sikhumbuzo who lives in Yeoville reckons that ‘Ndebeles’-speaking Zulu can be compared to how Zimbabweans speak English. He argues that despite the fact that ‘we’ have been taught British English in Zimbabwe we do not speak it as the British do. Lillian also takes a comparative approach in her narrative. She states that:

Zulu is different because there are those who speak that very deep, deep Zulu. How can I put it? It’s different from the Zulu we (Zimbabweans) speak here (Yeoville) because ... it’s different from other places like the township where there are lots of South Africans. It’s different from the way they (South Africans) speak it. If I take a South African and a Zimbabwean and put them here you can see (grasp) the difference from the tone.

Migrants portray the township as peculiar and different from the ‘Zimbabwe colonies’. These narratives resonate with Richardson and Skott-Myhre’s (2012) work on the ‘habitus of the hood’ and how, as both a concept and material entity the hood (equivalent of a ghetto) embodies certain particularities; both material and subjective that shape people’s lived experiences differently from other places. In Diepsloot, this peculiarity is noted to extend to the township’s linguistic market, notably; English is seen as ‘marking’ and ‘marked’ when spoken by a black African. Nomalanga points out that:

Most black South Africans in Diepsloot hate speaking English. They do not like being made to speak English.

In light of this, research participants are pensive about communicating with black South Africans in Diepsloot residents in English. Research participants point out that Pedi (Northern Sotho) is the most dominant language in the area. Interestingly, although there is no concerted effort to classify Pedi beyond its presentation as a flat and coherent language, migrants stress that the Zulu spoken in the township is different from that which is spoken in the Zimbabwe colonies. Mafana states that:

The Zulu spoken here (Diepsloot) is different from what is spoken in other places like Berea or Hillbrow. Here there are many South Africans and the Zulu they speak is different.

In both the colonies and the townships, migrants disclose that ‘Zulus’ speak ‘Zulu’ that is different from how ‘we’ speak it. The sense of Ndebele speakers being in possession of marked ‘Zulu’ code(s) is general. However, this ‘markedness’ is not presented in a unilinear, coherent and simplistic manner. Instead, it is seen as greatly shaped by the

symbolic authority of their interlocutors, their location and the domain of interaction. I will demonstrate in the next section how this markedness shifts across different spaces and interactional domains. However, for now it suffices to note that migrants view the 'Zimbabwean body' as also marked and thus in need of reconstruction in navigating identity politics

Being in the colonies implies being 'in habitus' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) and concerns about the body and what it indexes are minimal. In the township, one has to dress like a South African or else they clearly appear 'out of habitus' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). At a broad level, ways of dressing of Ndebele township dwellers, much like the Zulu they speak, are discernibly different from those in the three neighbourhoods. In describing how Ndebele-speaking migrants appropriate South Africanness through dress-code and bodily deportment, some research participants touch on the state of the Ndebele-speaking parts being the 'outsider or marginal spaces' in Zimbabwe and thus culturally connected to South Africa. Xolani asserts that:

Ya when we are here (Johannesburg) we are forced by the situation to hide ourselves. We change how we dress. You know us Ndebele people ... we are influenced by *totsitaal* and *kasiculture*. How we dress is quite similar to Zulu people. You know even back home Ndebele people like that Kasi (hood) style. You can see a Ndebele person from the 'Ally bantwana (Converse All-Stars) and idobisi (a certain type of hats).

Xolani's statement resonates with other migrants' narratives who note that the manner in which one dresses and walks tells an identity story in the streets of Johannesburg. Ndumiso reveals that:

We have to dress in ways that do not draw eyes upon ourselves. The situation here is tricky so you have to hide yourself through how you dress.

Speaking about the police, Danisa from Yeoville for instance, states that:

They can tell from how you talk. The police here (Johannesburg) are clever. Even from just the dressing they can tell you, 'This one is a South African and this one is Zimbabwean'.

Presenting and performing the authentic body talk is seen as resting on altering 'Zimbabwean' dressing and bodily hexis (Bourdieu, 1991) and espousing the South African body and its associated aspects of deportment and style. Pholani cynically states:

You see a person dressed in a very long skirt and white tennis shoes from the flea market. You don't need anyone to tell you that ah that one is from home. South African women don't put on these very big skirts. They dress in izigcebhezane (very short skirts). If it's a jean, it's very tight. And you see, yah, that one is a South African.

Xolani also states:

With Ndebeles you can identify us (that we are not South African) by *amadobisi* (certain peculiar hat common in the kasi/hood) and fake *Ally bantwana* (Converse All-star shoes). We dress almost like Zulus but you can see that this is not a Zulu because of the dressing. South Africans ... Zulus don't care how much they spend on clothing. A Zulu will buy sneakers for three thousand rands when he earns one thousand. So they wear labels, from head to toe. They don't pay rent so they spend their money like that.

Being a 'legitimate' (some) body in Johannesburg as evident from research participants' narratives stems from knowledge of the rules of engagement and regimes of recognition inscribed in the city.

Cross-identification: Ndebele-speaking migrants as ‘Zulus’ among non-Zulus?

By way of locating ‘cross-identification’ in migrants’ practical experiences it suffices to bring Ntando’s narrative to the fore. Ntando is a 38-year-old migrant in Yeoville. He is one of the migrants who migrated to South Africa in the 1990’s. Ntando’s narrative aptly captures what is at stake in sociolinguistic interaction in South Africa. Ntando states that:

You see South Africa is good because it has many languages – eleven official languages. But you see South Africans are ignorant when it comes to a language that is not theirs. Zulus in particular do not want to learn another person language. So South Africans are good in their own languages. For a Zulu it’s Zulu, for a Pedi its Pedi, and so forth. But, you find that Pedis can learn Zulu. They have no problem with that but Zulus hate learning other people’s languages. They believe that South Africa belongs to them and they are the true South Africans.

Ntando reveals that:

When I came to South Africa the situation was very difficult because the police would always hunt for foreigners. Every corner you turned you would see a police van and they were arresting and not playing. So you had to learn different languages to survive. If you are confronted by a policeman and he spoke to you in Zulu then you would respond in Pedi. If he spoke in Pedi you would respond in Zulu. So this would force you to learn many languages. Even if you were not very good you would learn enough to speak your way out.

Ntando’s position that his deliberate divergence from police officers’ identities would confuse their attempts to ascertain his true identity finds expression in several research participants’ narratives. For Ntando, criss-crossing between police officers’ languages and identities allowed him to drag them into unfamiliar terrain. Playing by their rules, in this case their languages was risky because:

You stood a better chance that way. If you spoke to a Zulu police officer in Zulu he was likely to quiz you and chances of you being exposed were high.

This conceptualization and construction of black South Africans, as will become apparent still plays a big role in how migrants organize their interactions with black South Africans. Although this is the general position, there are situations which undermine this neat binary of ‘those who can and those who can’t see us’ such as the time when Zodwa who stays in Diepsloot is called a kwerekwere by a Pedi-speaking South African in a taxi because they discovered she was not South African. Nomhle who also stays with Pedi speakers in Diepsloot reveals how her Pedi friends have warned her:

They say I should try to change my tone and accent because it is what exposes that I am not South African.

Despite these issues that point to the limits of ‘cross-identification’ migrants largely construct South Africans along Ntando’s narrative. This raises questions about ‘cross-identification’ as something that is also potentially imagined. I attempt to address these aspects in my discussion section.

Performance of South Africanness in the fleeting moments of interaction in the streets, shops and taxis

The streets are generally constructed by Ndebele-speaking migrants as ‘secure’ because they are social arenas in which sociolinguistic interaction is fleeting. Furthermore,

through recursive experiences they have learnt the ‘powers’ of such spaces (Munn, 2003) and have developed varying strategies of negotiating identity politics. However, there are variations and the ‘powers of the streets’ are not felt the same way throughout the city. In the ‘Zimbabwean colonies’ the streets are seen as owned by Zimbabweans and other Others. As such people dress and openly speak their Zimbabwean language (Siziba, 2014). In the township research, participants construct the streets as insecure. Mafana of Diepsloot, for example states that:

In Diepsloot you are safe and you are also not safe. People here are very unpredictable and anything can start and in most cases when something bad happens the police are nowhere to be seen. They come to collect someone who is unconscious or dead. Be it a thief, who has stolen or what, the first court is the people.

In navigating the streets of Diepsloot Mafana reveals that he speaks Zulu and projects a ‘Zulu’ identity. However, his ‘Zulu’ language and projected Zulu identity receives varying values from different black South African interlocutors. Mafana cautiously reveals that there are limitations in his self-(re)presentation as a Zulu. He reveals that:

A Zulu speaking person can tell that I am not Zulu but if I speak to a Pedi or Venda speaking person he is likely not to know the difference.

Mafana notes that he is comfortably Zulu among non-Zulus but he prefers to maintain linguistic and social distance from Zulus. This maintenance of social distance and linguistic absence is possible in certain spaces such as taxis and shops but is more problematic at home and the workspace. Migrants partition their life worlds and ‘Zulus’ according to the interests at play. For instance in townships, ‘landlords’ are said to appreciate Zimbabwean migrants because they pay their rentals on time and can hold down jobs. While landlords are presented in ways akin to Goffman, (1963) ‘wise’ who are aware of migrants’ stigma, outside of this circle, migrants maintain social and linguistic distance from ‘Zulus.’ So while ‘Zulu’-speaking South Africans are presented as the problem group with regard to Ndebele-speaking migrants’ identity games and other black South African ethnolinguistic groups are conceptualized as lacking symbolic authority to discern Ndebeles’ distinction from Zulus, certain Zulus by virtue of unavoidable circumstances are given entry into the lives of migrants. This construction of ‘Zulus’ and South Africa’s marginal ethnolinguistic groups borders on the construction of ‘Ndebeles’ as ranking second to Zulus in terms of symbolic authority, hence dominant compared to South Africa’s own outsiders. Phathisa’s statement captures this:

Ah Zulus can tell that you are not one of them if you speak Zulu to them. And they don’t like us. I work with some of them and they told me that you guys are cowards. You ran away from Shaka now you are running away from Mugabe. Go back (to Zimbabwe) and sort out your mess. If you want to be a Zulu you can’t do it with Zulus. People who can’t distinguish Zulus and Ndebeles are Sothos or Tswanas, and Pedis.

Phathisa goes on:

Man! Pedis, Vendas and all these other ones are nothing. They can’t do anything to us. They are the real kwerekweres. You know if you go to KwaNdebele they will tell you that you Ndebeles are part of us. We once met some old men from KwaNdebele and they said you people (Ndebele) are our people.

The notion of non-Zulus being ‘nothing’ and the evocation of historical ties reflects a belief that Ndebeles are legitimate insiders and deserve some space in Johannesburg and South Africa in general. While Zulus are derided for violence, other ethnolinguistic

groups are also demeaned. Mafana depicts the density of Pedi-speaking South Africans in Diepsloot in this manner:

Diepsloot is full of Pedis. You would think that they are the only ones there. They breed like rats. They reproduce quite fast.

Although the 'Zulu' identity appears to be the identity and the form of capital aspired for, while South Africa's 'others' are seen as symbolically weaker than Ndebeles; there is a dialectical converse construction of 'Zulus' as lazy, violent, uneducated and problematic in that they do not pay rent and love free things. They are presented as spoilt and also the most xenophobic of South Africans. A number of migrants also question how 'Zulus' can exhibit hatred to 'Ndebeles' when they are 'one with them.' Ntombi's narrative perhaps reveals this. She muses:

I wonder why Zulus hate us. We are one and the same. We (Ndebeles) are from here. Of course we left with Mzilikazi. But we are just the same. It's surprising that even when you speak the same language they look at you like you are dirt. But we just the same people.

Equipped with the different expressive styles of 'Zulu' research participants reveal that these are sufficient for fleeting situations such as taxis. Research participants reveal that they are able to, express themselves through the most common ways of indicating where one intends to drop off and the occasional courtesy greetings should they be necessary. Despite this, migrants note that the best way of managing identity is linguistic absence and maintaining linguistic distance (Goffman, 1963). Menzi states that:

You get to know ... you learn to mind your own business. Wherever you are, you avoid just being all over the place. Do what you are doing and mind your own business then you will have no problem. Even in a taxi, you don't just start talking to people you do not know. Mind your own business!

Menzi's narrative underlines how being in the presence of people one does not know informs the subsequent self (re)presentation, which is a withdrawal into the backstage (Goffman, 1963) which helps avoid unpredictable situations. Migrants' narratives reveal that in most situations by acknowledging the 'powers of spaces' and accepting that some are 'taboo spaces' taxi rides are usually uneventful. Xolani however, recounts how his 'strategic silence' in a taxi was once disrupted when a drunken Nigerian drew the ire of other passengers. He reveals that:

This drunken Nigerian was causing trouble in the taxi shouting at people. You know Nigerians are loud. Now imagine when they are drunk. I was very upset about the incident.

He goes on noting how anxious he was when people started to say things to the Nigerian. He states that:

I was just thinking to myself that this guy will get us in trouble. I was also feeling quite bad when people were calling him a problem kwerekwere. But I just also pretended to be upset and echoed what was being said, 'Hey you kwerekwere don't take us for granted!' I was very relieved to get off that taxi.

The unanticipated 'drunken Nigerian' who drew the attention of the passengers to the 'ill-behaviour' of 'amakwerekwere' resulted in Xolani experiencing discomfort that he does not ordinarily associate with taxis. However, it fits into the broad conceptualization of life in Johannesburg as unpredictable and insecure when one is a foreigner in Johannesburg. In the section that follows I focus on how the workspace is navigated.

The workspace as an intimate site of interaction

Sociolinguistic interaction within the workspace follows the cleavages of power, type of interaction and work relationship that migrants and co-workers have and engage in as well as the degree of social intimacy. Choices of language use and the consequent self (re)presentations are defined by the structure of the workspace and the race and ethnolinguistic constitution of the specific workspaces' labour force. Migrants' narratives reveal that race and ethnicity are intimately related to power within the workspace. To this end, power is presented in relation to two issues. On the one hand, it is related to the organizational hierarchy and one's language choices with regard to those who are higher up, lower or within one's position in the hierarchy. On the other hand, power is related to the competence of the other interactants to ascertain one's 'Zulu'/'Ndebele' identity. In understanding how migrants navigate their workspaces, we have to note that workspaces are differently structured in terms of their racial and ethnolinguistic composition, the type of work done there, the positions and authority of the migrants as well as their workmates and subsequently the roles and forms of associations that emerge.

Migrants' reveal that their jobs that are seen as 'low' paying and 'dirty' remain dominated by foreigners, such as Zimbabwean and Congolese people. Some migrants allude to South Africans getting employed but leaving after they get their first pay cheque and never coming back, while others are reported to quit before completing their training because of 'minor' work related problems. Xolani's narrative speaks to this. He states that:

You see these jobs that we do were not wanted by South Africans. They were jobs for foreigners. It's only now that you find them coming in. But still foreigners are dominating there. Like where I work it's mainly Zimbabweans, and other foreigners like the Congolese. It's only now that South Africans are coming because things are now hard. But they don't like doing this work. Security guards, waiters, shops ... it's all foreigners. We dominate.

Although migrants allude to these jobs as those of the 'Other,' they argue that there are South Africans also employed there. However, they assert that 'Zulus' are arrogant and hyper masculine and thus (culturally) averse to 'marginal' jobs which they view as effeminate and feminizing. In light of this, research participants reveal that they mostly encounter non-Zulu-speaking South Africans in these spaces. Zulus are described as dominant in the taxi industry and migrants point to incessant violence and cases of armed conflicts as reflective of 'Zulu' hyper masculinity. Pholani states that:

Zulus are the worst. Zuma has spoiled them. They love free things. They hate work and they have become very spoiled because they get grants and other things. So you won't find them at work. They love violence and fighting for free things. You only find them in taxis but not these jobs we do. They say those are not jobs for real men. They are for women.

This scenario of Zulu absence in the other Others' workspaces offers Ndebele-speaking migrants potentialities for their self (re)presentations as 'Zulus'. They capitalize on how they are misrecognized as 'Zulu' by non-Zulus and use these blind spots to carry out their drama and identity games. Samukile a security guard takes a radical departure from her 'Ndebele' identity in Hillbrow which she classifies as 'Bulawayo.' She reveals that:

When I am at work I become a proper (pure) Zulu. I make sure I do not slip up and reveal my identity.

When I ask Samukile how she manages to pull this off in light of her ‘marked’ Zulu she states that:

I take chances and take advantage of the fact that most of my workmates are Pedis so they think that I am Zulu.

Mongameli who is also a security guard gives a similar story of how Ndebeles are viewed as ‘Zulus’ by non-Zulu-speaking South Africans. He rationalizes his successful self-(re)presentation at work as a ‘Zulu’ on the fact that:

For Pedis, Shangaanis, Vendas, and Tswanas, Zulu and Ndebele is one thing. I can say for people who do not speak Zulu, to them Ndebele and Zulu, it’s just one thing.

With regard to communication, ‘codes-switching’ and ‘code-mixing’ (Mesthrie et al., 2000) are prevalent in the workspaces. They mostly follow the contouring of power within the workspaces. With management often presented as synonymous with whiteness, communication is said to be easy because Zimbabweans are *good* in English. Whites are also reported to appreciate Zimbabwean English and the associated work ethic. They are presented as complicit, and turn a blind eye to migrants’ identity games to the extent of bending rules to accommodate Zimbabweans. Research participants reveal that their English indexes them as Zimbabweans to the extent that ‘whites’ know that they are not South Africans. Pholani, for instance, states that:

You see I worked in a white man’s company. There were other black South Africans there. Eventually, the white man approached me and said, ‘this is neither the behavior nor the English of a Zulu speaker. Tell me the truth where are you from?’ I then told him that I am Zimbabwean and he said he knew it (that it was true).

Even in relation to clients, Ndebele-speaking migrants, reveal that their Zimbabwean ‘habitus’ becomes apparent. This makes them top favourites for ‘whites’ who appreciate their work ethic. Menzi who works as a waiter asserts that whites prefer being served by foreigners. When I ask how they know if one is foreign he states that:

You get to talk. They can start conversation. Like one man asked me: where are you from? I said Zimbabwe, and he said he suspected that. I could tell from the way that you act.

Menzi goes on:

South Africans don’t mind how they behave or even dress at work. Someone can wear a sneaker to work. But with Zimbabweans, we care about presentation so I make sure I wear my uniform properly. Even the way they approach a client. It’s different. See, those little things. You can tell, this one is South African and this one is not.

In light of ‘whites’ being on their side by virtue of the intersection of interests, migrants are more concerned about black South Africans in the workspace. As already stated, among non-Zulus they present themselves as Zulu, and the major problem group remains Zulus. As such I press respondents to reveal how they negotiate encounters with Zulu speakers. Migrants note that they find ways of avoiding intimate interaction with their Zulu workmates. Menzi for example, states that:

You find ways of avoiding extended conversations with Zulu speakers. You avoid being all over the place and focus on your own business. You don’t volunteer information even when you know the answer.

Migrants allude to detachment, linguistic absence and divergence as embodied practices. As Menzi asserts, one can show disinterest in interaction in ways that are –

gestural – observable yet not very easy to put in words. This suggests exhibition of a certain bodily disposition to one's interlocutor.

At times, this bodily setting of parameters does not work as in Mkhululi's case. Mkhululi reveals that he once worked as a 'loader' at the OR Tambo international airport. He interacted with his Sotho-, Shangaan-, Pedi- and Zulu-speaking workmates in 'Zulu'. He notes how his non-Zulu co-workers spoke rudimentary Zulu and took him for a Zulu. However, with regard to his Zulu co-workers he notes that:

We (Zulu workmates) understood each other when we spoke but they did not take me to be Zulu. In fact, there is one (among them) whom I think knew I was not Zulu. I brought him here (Yeoville) and he asked me, Why is the Zulu that you (Mkhululi and his friends in Yeoville) speak is not smooth (normal)? It is coarse. I then told him that I am not Zulu but I am Zimbabwean.

Sikhumbuzo also reveals a similar scenario of being discovered as not Zulu after extended interaction within his workspace where there are Zulu workmates. To this end, Sikhumbuzo states that:

Now [at my workplace] they are familiar with us as the guys from Zimbabwe. They know from the way we speak. The way that we speak Zulu is different from original Zulu just like the way we speak Shona is different from original Shona. Even if you learn English you can't speak it like the British. Everything is perfect, correct, but it's different because of pronunciation and tone.

There are a number of migrants who reveal that they entered the workspace as 'Zulus' but through prolonged interaction they were exposed by their 'linguistic repertoires' to be non-Zulus. This implies that managing identity becomes a transitional period, where they eventually come out of the closet. In part, this transition may have been necessitated by the Zimbabwean documentation process (ZDP) of 2010, where there was a window opened for Zimbabweans to apply for proper documentation and work permits. Interestingly, other migrants like Samukile who decided to stick to their 'identities as Zulus' at work regardless of the ZDP did not offer similar narratives.

Discussion

Migrants' narratives of their experiences and their identity negotiation strategies – 'cross-identification' – reveal a particular type of multiculturalism and multilingualism in South Africa. Notably, while languages and cultures are theoretically equal, they are in practice unequal, with the knock-on effect being a hierarchization of speakers of these languages in terms of symbolic capital. Through their experiences in different fields of practice and the attendant power exchanges, Ndebele-speaking migrants play on these inequalities to situate themselves as 'legitimate' residents of Johannesburg. In addition to this, research participants present South Africa's multilingualism as restricted largely to an enabling policy position, yet in practice the speakers of these languages are less dynamic in terms of possessing dynamic multilingual competencies; at least in terms of ascertaining the authentic and inauthentic outside of their own language varieties. This offers Ndebele-speaking migrants the potentialities to assume 'Zuluness' under certain conditions and situations of interaction. Furthermore, South Africans neither constitute a homogenous group nor do they have the similar interests. 'Whites' capitalize on the work ethic of Zimbabwean migrants, and in the process they become resources for Ndebele-speaking migrants and are complicit in their identity games. Thus, much like 'misrecognition,' of Ndebeles as Zulus, these divergences in

interests are an enabling factor in migrants' strategies of partitioning their worlds, i.e. selectively letting others in, while shutting others out.

Ndebele-speaking migrants' experiences also reveal how being 'amakwerekwere' and the speakers of indecipherable languages is a short-hand for all those who do not belong in South Africa. Even with the benefit of a language that is *decipherable* they are still marked as the strange 'Other' thus prompting the strategic passing as South African ('Zulu'). Language is an apparatus for setting the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Linguistic exchanges are therefore also simultaneously acts of power and by extension the (re)presentation and construction of the self, as either 'normal' or 'abnormal' within specified regimes of recognition. The power (value) of the Ndebele language variety does not simply lie in its mutual intelligibility with the Nguni cluster. Of course this quality has its utilities, but, its real power in sociolinguistic interactions with black South Africans lies in its being misrecognized for 'Zulu.' This misrecognition of the Ndebele variety as Zulu means that Ndebele speakers are not conceived as other 'Others' in Johannesburg with a special status because their language is decipherable. Rather, they are elevated insiders who are 'Zulus', a position that comes with the attendant and Ndebele symbolic authority. This symbolic position associated with being 'Zulu' is evident in how Zulus-seen as hyper masculine and violent – are imagined and constructed in relation to other black South African ethnolinguistic groups. Being 'Zulu' means that 'Ndebeles' are more legitimate than those thought of as allochthonous South Africans.

It is also quite apparent that negotiating how the 'Other' is constructed, partly occurs through a converse process of the other constructing South Africans in ways that contest the constitution and cleavages of power in Johannesburg. Research participants' accounts reveal how the inspiration for 'cross-identification' stems from encounters in which they have unwittingly passed for South Africans because their interlocutors assumed they were Zulu. To this end, there is a real and material dimension to 'cross-identification.' As already indicated above, 'cross-identification' endows Ndebele-speaking migrants with power which they would not otherwise enjoy as the 'Other.' It includes them and endows them with insiderness and the authority that comes with this symbolic power. The enabling aspects for passing are seen as opposing interlocutors' symbolic competency in evaluating them as authentic South Africans. Despite these practical dimensions, there are situations which reveal the fallibility of these constructions, and in a way presenting cross-identification as imagined and idealized. The major question this raises is: what does this position afford Ndebele-speaking migrants? In a way it depoliticizes a politically charged and tense existence. As an invention or imagination, 'cross-identification' allows migrants to traverse contexts which would otherwise by design be beyond their reach because of their stigma.

Conclusion

By way of concluding remarks, it is worth noting that cross-identification is both real and imagined. Migrants appear to build on how they are misrecognized to generate stereotypes and essential categories of South Africans. However, this investment in essential categories clearly plays a significant role in how migrants organize their worlds and become 'legitimate' residents of Johannesburg. It also makes Johannesburg a *liveable* place where they can recede into the cover of invisibility as legitimate residents. Migrants' narratives also importantly reveal the complexity of language and the value that is attached to it in various interactional settings. A fundamental theme that

also emerges is that at a very general-level Ndebele-speaking migrants do not appear to be assimilating into Zulu communities, but they appear to be finding their own ways of surviving which in most cases appears to be dodging social and linguistic distance from South Africans. This maintenance of distance and separate almost separate existence is hardly surprising in light of the high levels of xenophobia across much of South Africa.

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1. Author's full name removed for anonymity in review.
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