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"They talk to us like children": Language and Intergenerational Discourse in First-time Encounters in an African Township

Introduction

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

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

older persons by analysing typical discursive practices which include forms of address, self-identification and complaints.

Forms of address

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

Kinship, and generational identities.

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

Changes in identity can also occur within a single interaction. The variability is permissible within the constraints that are negotiable

within an international event. In urban settings individuals may appropriate different types of discourse (cf. Rampton, 1995): for example, older persons may appropriate ways of talking associated with younger persons, or with persons having a particular profession or belonging to a particular religion.

However, there are two major problems inherent in this approach to self-identification. First, the approach implies that the identity which an individual ascribes to himself/herself, or has ascribed to an interaction, remains constant. This paper therefore seeks to examine some of the changes which occur within an interactional event, which suggest that an individual's identity is continually changing. Second, the approach claims that the main engineering principle is the notion of the self as the basis on which identity is constructed. An emphasis on individual identity downplays the extent to which "relations are structured by group identities" (De Kadt, 1994: 105).

Intergenerational discourse

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

Studies on intergenerational discourse, particularly those concluded in Europe and America, may not be directly appropriate to a cultural context in which the notion of a collective is extremely powerful. The research conducted by Coupland and his associates into the role of "painful self-disclosure" in intergenerational discourse because of the impact of ontological individualism on their thinking,

fails to realise that in some cases "the person giving voice to the words may not be the author of the words. In such a case the source is a composite of [at least] two persons" (Coupland et al. 1992: 47). What is required is a more complex interaction which goes beyond the "straight-jacket of first and second person" (Levinson, quoted in Scollon and Scollon, 1992: 233). To avoid some of the pitfalls of the American and European studies of communication, it is necessary to draw a distinction between individualistic and collectivistic conceptualisation of the self (Tracy, 1990). For example, there is a subtle but important distinction between giving voice to somebody's words and quoting: in the latter instance the person giving voice to the words is aware that the words are not his/hers and publicly acknowledges this, but in the former case the individual is giving voice to a collective experience which he/she feels part of, and to which he/she has a legitimate claim.

Complaints

The discourse of old people tends to be characterised by complaints, particularly when it is about young people, or directed at them. Cattell (forthcoming) defines complaints as "multivocal or multidimensional, simultaneously holding several meanings, fulfilling several needs, and/or having one or more intended results." Complaints can be expressions of person environment dissonance, or the sense of unease that follows from being in an environment in which one feels more or less like a stranger. "The person/environment dissonance creates an environment conducive to complaints. In South Africa this dissonance may arise from the social and political changes that are taking place, whereby the black African youth have become empowered through the significant role which they played in the politics of the country since the 1960s, particularly their political agitation towards the end of the apartheid era; however, older Africans were not empowered to a comparable degree. Since the April 1994 first democratic elections the youth have become yet further empowered; again, this has not been the case with older Africans.

An analysis of forms of address, self-identification and complaints in first time encounters between old and young African women is

made within the context of these rapid social and political changes in the country.

The Study

Aims

The aims of the study were to investigate the nature and type of language used in first time encounters between old and young African women. An effect of modernisation has been changes in the traditional roles played by old women; for example, old women are no longer as responsible for the socialisation of young women as they were in the past — a role which previously accorded them considerable influence. Some old women may indeed feel that they are unable to exercise as much influence as they were able to in the past. If this is true, Cattell's argument is valid that complaints arise in situations or person-environment dissonance; in such cases it would be natural to expect complaints to arise in intergenerational discourse because of a discrepancy between the power which old women would expect to wield and that which they will wield. Hence the study aimed to analyse what older people complain about, as well as a relationship between complaints and other types of speech acts such as bragging. In some cases the acts of complaining and bragging may fulfil multiple functions, *e.g.* they may function as a complaint and be an exercise in "complaint administration." The study was conducted in late 1994 and early 1995 — a time of radical change in South Africa, when a division between the young and the old was becoming more marked.

Method

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

where they are provided a meal, recreation and health support. The old subjects were unimpaired and relatively healthy.

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

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

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

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

OW2: Ndakheiha eyona engcomo. (*I chose the best one* [a dress].)
YW2: *For her.*
OW2: Ndayeka ukumnxibisa. (*And the woman stepped* [stood up] *and I dressed her.*)
OW2: Ndamjonga. (*I look at her ... don't think that the strength is coming from you. We get strength from God.*)

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

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

The first part of the story is a fairly common experience. A woman looks after children on her own after the death of her husband. The second part of the account describes a set of details specific and perhaps only true to her — the age of her son and her wishes that the son does not succumb to new influences. However, old women do try to find ways to resist change. Attempts are manifested in women's repeated efforts and approach to Christianity. As OW3 put it "The first thing we do as old people is to keep quiet. These children do not choose a correct way of talking. There is a verse in the Bible which says respect your father and your mother and you will live long. Do you know it?"

Complaints

The old women constantly compared the present with what they frequently regarded as a golden age in terms of moral behaviour. For example, an interaction frequently began: *Kwimihla yakudala, msithi*

umzekzlo, xa ithe intombi yanzima abazali bayo babexelelana. (In our days, let us say for example when a girl became pregnant, parents used to tell each other about it...). The older women were aware that the golden moral past which they constructed was fiction, albeit useful fiction. It was useful because it enabled them to compare the moral behaviour of the present young generation with their own behaviour when they were young. The complaints do not necessarily reflect the present behaviour of the youth but are characteristic of the manner in which the elderly have been socialised into mastering the art of complaint. As one old subject put it: "Every mother of my age complains."

Complaints serve a number of different purposes. On the one hand complaints reveal that the older persons think that some changes which they regard as undesirable have occurred. At the same time, paradoxically, some complaints, particularly about the so-called low morality of the youth, are meant to demonstrate the extent to which the elderly are still in control. For example, one of the most vociferous critics of the young generation's lack of discipline was quick to describe how she handled her household with an iron hand. *Andiwomaneli amantombazana alale ehlwini yamngaphandle ngokulandela inkqubo efanelekileyo Andifuni kumbona. Andifuni mntu uzaa kuza izinto ezzimhti endliwini yam* (I don't allow girls to come and sleep in my house without following the right procedure. I don't want to see her. I don't want a person who will come and do bad things in my house). This type of complaint may also be construed as bragging. By complaining about how the youth no longer obey the instructions of older persons, the old woman is able to boast how she is an exception in this case as she is in firm control of her household. Complaint discourse is not restricted to elderly talks; the young in turn complain that the elderly talk too much — hence the term "radio gogo." The two generations are also in some cases united in their complaints, *e.g.* against what they perceive as incompetent and corrupt government officials. President Mandela is however immune from complaints as he is "above Jesus and on the same side with God."

Conclusions

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

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