

**Creating a dynamic contact zone:  
An undergraduate English course as multilingual pedagogic space**

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*ABSTRACT: This article explores how a linguistically diverse, subject English class can become a multilingual contact zone in which naturalised linguistic identities are made visible and interrogated. The research is situated in a highly diverse, educational context – Wits School of Education in Johannesburg, South Africa. This is framed by a society in which English occupies a hegemonic position despite there being eleven official languages. Our students come from a variety of linguistic, cultural and social contexts and are currently compelled to do a compulsory year of subject English as part of an undergraduate degree in an institution where the medium of instruction is English. Within these constraints, we attempt to construct a pedagogic environment in which students’ various language histories and practices are invited into the discursive space – not as medium of communication but as valued subject matter. Drawing on Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck’s spatial theorisation of multilingualism (2005), we argue that the pedagogy of the course in question constitutes the classroom as a discursive space which enables students to negotiate their linguistic identities in various ways. While presented as an English course, it seeks to construct multilingualism as a resource and prioritises students’ own language experiences by having them write personal language biographies in which they reflect on their linguistic identities. We use a selection of the students’ language biographies to explore how these speak to the ways in which students position themselves in relation to the regimes of language constituted by the course.*

*KEYWORDS: discourse, English teaching, identity, language biographies, linguistic contact zone, multilingualism, monolingualism, narrative, pedagogic space.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In this article we discuss a three-week, first-year Sociolinguistics course<sup>1</sup>, entitled Language and Identity, in which the formal and informal elements of the course operated as a contact zone for various linguistic identities. This research is located at the Wits School of Education, a highly diverse educational context in Johannesburg, South Africa. This is in turn framed by a society in which English occupies a hegemonic position despite there being eleven official languages.

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<sup>1</sup> In 2005-2006, this course was part of a bigger 6-week sociolinguistics course. Since 2007, the “Language and Identity” course runs as a separate three-week course at the start of the academic year.

We explore how the course materials, the course assignment and the diversity of the students are mobilised to create a pedagogic space in which linguistic diversity is valued. Students' multilingual resources are frequently sidelined in educational settings, and when they do receive attention it is frequently the wrong kind of attention, constructed as a problem for the educator and the student with the focus being on absence rather than presence. In a South African context, referring to someone as a "second language English speaker" is frequently employed as code for labelling students as having somewhat deficient English language proficiency. Students frequently internalise this positioning.

We seek to challenge this positioning through our course on language and identity. Drawing on Blommaert, Collins and Slembrouck's spatial theory of multilingualism (2005), we argue that the pedagogy of the course in question constitutes the classroom as a discursive space which enables students to renegotiate their linguistic identities in various ways. As Blommaert *et al.* point out, multilingualism is not always valued and is frequently not visible. We outline pedagogic strategies used to create a dynamic multilingual contact zone within this broader discursive space. Reading and reflective narrative writing are key pedagogic strategies, each constituting spaces through which the students "travel" in their journey through the course, negotiating ideas, thoughts and feelings in their different ways. These different moves are captured in the language biographies that students wrote, where they were required to reflect on their linguistic identities.

In the first part of the paper we provide an overview of our theoretical framework and outline our pedagogic strategies. However, the bulk of the article is comprised of a detailed analysis of three, student language biographies. We use the textual space of these three biographies to deepen our understanding of the ways in which students write themselves into the regimes of language constituted by the course.

## CONTEXT AND CURRICULUM

Since 2005, we have presented a sociolinguistics course to a large group of first-year, Bachelor of Education students at the University of the Witwatersrand. Students who do this course tend to come from diverse backgrounds in terms of language, culture, geographical location, class, race and level of preparedness. In addition, differences in levels of proficiency in English, currently the sole medium of instruction at our university, are also particularly salient in the first-year student body. To gain access to the university, students need to have matriculated with English as either a first (or home) language, or as a second (or first additional) language. The vast majority of students in South Africa do not have English as a home language (or mother tongue) and are therefore positioned as "second language speakers" from the start.

The course has been developed as a response to the diversity of the student body and as a means to facilitate student engagement with key sociolinguistic issues and one another's diverse linguistic identities. We want to challenge discourses of deficit by capitalising on this diversity and placing students' linguistic identities at the centre of the curriculum, making this the entry point into a discussion of languages and identities. Students are exposed to the language narratives of published writers who

write about their language histories and identities in various social contexts, providing terrain for the analysis of a range of discourses around language, identity and power.

From the inception of the course, the students have been required to produce a personal language biography where they reflect on their linguistic identities, entering into conversation with other narratives they have been provided with as reading materials. Over the years, this student language biography has gained more prominence as we have come to realise how generative it is as a tool for consolidating student learning, thinking and reflection. We have therefore included previous students' language narratives in the course material, thereby bringing students into contact with the voices of their peers. In a similar vein, recent research undertaken by PRAESA<sup>2</sup> highlights the value of biographical approaches to multilingual teacher education, particularly with regard to "rais[ing] participants' awareness of their own resources and potential" (Busch, Jardine & Tjoutuku, 2006, p. 5).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **What is our linguistic contact zone?**

The discourses of the pedagogic space could be said to be predominantly constituted by the formal elements of the course design: the selected topic (the relationship between language and identity); the course reading materials (including various published and student narratives, and both relevant articles from the popular press as well as academic material on key sociolinguistic concepts); and the assessment task (the personal reflective language narrative). However, at a broader level these formal elements are used to frame a pedagogic space which invite students' linguistic identities to form, to a significant degree, the substance of the course content. Given that the students' linguistic resources are varied and, in many cases, students themselves are multilingual, opening up the classroom in this way creates a linguistic contact zone.

Within this contact zone, the pedagogy consists of scaffolding students' interactions with various narratives, both in the oral and written mode. They engage with one another through sharing stories of language experiences as part of large-group discussions or through structured pair or small-group activities; or they read and respond to language narratives (and other relevant texts) that are part of the course reading; and, ultimately, they produce a reflective language biography where they (re)write their personal linguistic identities. In an earlier article (Mendelowitz and Ferreira, 2007), we discuss these narrative pedagogic strategies, looking closely at the role of narrative in engaging students with issues of linguistic diversity. The linguistic contact points of the pedagogic space are between self and other, where students are invited to shift between their own perspective and that of others, moving between their own and others' narratives, moving across different spaces, shifting between past and present experiences as well as across different social and educational contexts. Throughout, they are negotiating their own linguistic identities, reflecting on language experiences from the multiple vantage-points offered within this narrative linguistic

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<sup>2</sup> Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa.

contact zone. It is precisely this multilingual contact zone that enables the students to write their reflective language narratives.

### **Pedagogic strategies to open up the contact zone**

Bringing all these various linguistic experiences, perspectives, identities and discourses into the pedagogic space is the first step. But in order to fully activate the potential constituted by this linguistic contact zone, we harness the process of reflective narrative inquiry as a metacognitive and affective tool. Students are encouraged to re-think their own language experiences and re-examine their own linguistic identities, using the narrative framework of the course. In this way, reflective inquiry is used as a powerful tool for understanding the relationship between “word, world and self” and other (Qualley, 1997, p. 5).

Citing Phelps (1991, p. 887), Qualley defines reflexive inquiry as follows:

By reflexive, I mean the act of turning back to discover, examine and critique one’s claims and assumptions in response to an encounter with another idea, text, person or culture. By inquiry, I mean “the self sustained work” of coming to understand “through a systematic, self-critical process of discovery” (p. 3).

Qualley’s approach resonates with our work, as we share her interest in self-discovery, critical thinking and moving beyond the self through dynamic encounters with multiple resources and spaces. However, in our conceptualisation, we also foreground affect as a significant aspect of reflection, especially given the personal narrative dimension of the task. Turning back to retrieve a memory, and then making sense of it in narrative form, entails both affective and metacognitive processes. Busch and colleagues note the importance of “emotional experiences attached to particular moments” (2006, p. 15) in memory work, and comments that this dimension of memory is frequently underestimated. Reflection on affective aspects of experience is an essential step in the movement towards analysis in this assignment. However, although frequently it is students’ strong affective engagement that makes the narratives powerful, the challenge is helping students to draw on the metalanguage of the course to enable them to make sense of their experiences and not to remain overwhelmed by emotion. We therefore underline the importance of facilitating students’ engagement with both affect and cognition in fluid, interrelated ways.

In the pedagogic spaces we construct, we conceive of reading and writing as separate and interwoven spaces with particular affordances tied to reflexivity and linguistic contact. Michel de Certeau (1984) describes the process of reading as follows:

He [the reader] insinuates into another person’s text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation; ...A different world (the reader’s) slips into the author’s place. This mutation makes the text habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person’s property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient (p. xxi).

Hence, de Certeau conceptualises the act of reading as entering a space that is mobilised and changed by the act of reading. Like Blommaert *et al.* (2005), de Certeau views space as being about dynamic interactions historically, temporally,

vertically and horizontally. Reflexive reading is thus a dialogic process that can mobilise interactions between the reader's ideas and the ideas found in the text. In the context of the course, students' interaction with readings provide opportunities for re-positioning themselves and enable them to re-appropriate ideas for the writing of their own narratives.

In this article, our attention is on writing as a space for reflexive narrative enquiry that enables the articulation of particular identity positions. By identity, we do not mean a unified, stable and autonomous sense of self but rather we conceive of identity as socially located and shaped by discourse. Identity is therefore about an ongoing process of becoming (Hall 1996), where one is actively engaged in negotiating the multiple and often contradictory subject positions made available by the discourses, or ways of being, thinking and producing meaning, that operate in particular spaces (Gee, 1996; Weedon, 1987). Thus we are working with a poststructuralist conception of identity and discourse, where students are invited to use writing in the construction of a "textual identity" (Coullie, 1993, p. 3).

### **Multilingual spaces**

Blommaert *et al.* (2005), in their spatial theorisation of multilingualism, speak of how spatial environments organise particular regimes of language which can enable or disable particular linguistic identities. Spaces, they contend, are agentive in determining the "norms and expectations" of the communicative behaviour that takes place in them. While commonly used terms such as "contextual" or "situated" seem to prioritise the interaction of participants and to cohere around this interaction, Blommaert *et al.* understand "spaces" to pre-exist interactions and to influence "what people can do and become in them" (2005, p. 203).

What Blommaert *et al.* (2005) offer us is therefore an understanding of communicative interaction as being determined by the norms of the spatial environment rather than by the linguistic competencies of the individual actors. Whether and which linguistic resources are able to be deployed in a particular environment depends on the regime of language which structures that environment. We understand regimes of language to refer to the way in which various languages (or linguistic resources) are hierarchically organised in particular spaces according to the symbolic value which is ascribed to them in those spaces. A regime of language structures the power relations operating among the different languages and an individual entering a particular space would therefore be actively positioned by the regime of language operating in that space. It is in the dynamic interplay of the social processes that the individual may take up opportunities to negotiate his/her own identity. Thus, in Blommaert *et al.*'s terms,

agency results from the interplay between people's situated intentions and the way the environment imposes particular regimes of language (Urciuoli, 1996). We assume that people have varying language abilities – repertoires and skills with languages – but that *the function and value of those repertoires and skills can change as the space of the language contact changes* (2005, p. 211) [original italics].

We are interested in looking at how our course organises a particular regime of language within the pedagogic space and in exploring how students position themselves in relation to this regime or ideology. It is this pedagogic space that enables the production of the students' language biographies. We therefore use a small selection of students' language biographies to illustrate how these particular students construct particular linguistic identities which are shaped in interesting ways by the pedagogic space. In doing so, we also pay attention to Blommaert *et al.*'s notion of scale, so that the pedagogic space is understood as interlocking with and being influenced by the regimes of language of various other spaces, such as, the broader institutional context of the university, which although linguistically diverse is structured by English as the official medium of instruction; the regional regime constructed by the centre-periphery relations between Johannesburg and outlying areas from which students often come to university; and transnational regimes of English as a global language which permeate higher education.

Given this pedagogic scenario, where the students themselves and the resources they bring with them are invited to take up a central position in the course, the course itself becomes fluid and open to both shaping and being shaped by students' own experiences. In light of this, an analysis of the language biographies is a particularly interesting exercise for it can throw into relief the different ways in which students exercise some agency over the construction of their linguistic identities.

## **METHODOLOGY**

For the purposes of this article, it is specifically the students' biographies that are treated as data, although these can only be understood within the pedagogic frame which we have outlined above. Our current data set comprises the language biographies written by students in response to the "Language and identity" course offered in 2009.

The assignment brief is phrased as follows:

Write a detailed account of your language biography focusing on the relationship between your language(s) and your identity. Your language biography must include analysis of your language experiences, as well as thoughtful reflection on the feelings and attitudes associated with your language practices and experiences.

Students are also told to draw on the language narratives in the course materials and encouraged to enter into a dialogue with both the published narratives and those by previous students. These biographies speak to the various ways in which students insert themselves into the regimes of language of the course as they perceive them.

We have been collecting samples of students' language biographies over the past five years and categorising them according to emerging patterns and key sociolinguistic themes. These include themes such as linguistic persecution, language loss and migration, language and group membership, inclusion and exclusion. The three language biographies focused on in this article represent the theme of movement, and show how these students' linguistic identities have been inflected by movements across and between different spaces. Depending on the biography, this movement may

be physical, temporal or textual, often a combination of these. By drawing on some of the pedagogic resources of the course, these students explore and reflect on the tensions produced by these movements.

In the first biography, Zodwa's movement between textual and social spaces is dominant. In the next biography, Candace describes her physical movement between two different "home" communities. The final biography, Michelle's reflective movements between past and present are foregrounded. Our analyses consider how each student negotiates the movements across these different spaces, paying close attention to how, in the process, she renegotiates her linguistic identity. We also consider how these identity constructions suggest the ways in which students have made sense of the course and positioned themselves in relation to its language ideology.

## DATA ANALYSIS

### Zodwa: Moving between textual and social spaces

Zodwa uses the space of the narrative to assert her identity as "urban black" and, more specifically, as Sowetan<sup>3</sup>, and as a speaker of *kasitaal* – a young, urban "black" lingo spoken primarily in South African urban townships. [See APPENDIX A for full biography.] She asserts her identity as "urban black" in response to a newspaper article included in the course material by Fikile Moya entitled "Ekasi is my roots" (2006). The student uses the key argument from this text to reframe and validate her textual identity, re-reading recent and distant memories against this frame. Hence, the article is clearly the central element of the course that served as a contact zone between Zodwa's history, experience and identity and Moya's. However, her voyage of discovery began prior to reading the Moya article, on the first day of the language and identity course as illustrated in the second paragraph of her assignment below:

February the eleventh two thousand and nine, the day I found out who I really am. Earlier that day I was questioned about my language, my roots and my identity. Guess what? *Bengacavi fokol*<sup>4</sup> about that. *Jampasi*<sup>5</sup> I tried so hard *ukuthi ngi-gidle*<sup>6</sup> but my mind wouldn't let me. The question of my roots, language and identity kept ringing in my head. That's when I woke up and did an introspection of who I am. These are the following amazing results I got.

In this extract, Zodwa describes her response to an activity in which students are asked to explore the relationship between their languages and their identities. It is at this moment that she realises that she knows "fokol" about that. The question and the issues it raises clearly disturbs her as it keeps "ringing" in her head and interferes with her sleep. And so begins a process of reflection and "introspection", re-examining her history, identity, and recent oppressive language encounters through the lens of Moya's ideas.

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<sup>3</sup> Someone who lives in Soweto, the largest of South Africa's urban townships.

<sup>4</sup> (*kasitaal*) I didn't know anything

<sup>5</sup> (*kasitaal*) at night

<sup>6</sup> (*kasitaal*) to sleep

A very important aspect of the above paragraph and the rest of the narrative is the student's frequent use of codeswitching words and phrases between English and *kasitaal*. Students were invited to codeswitch in the assignment brief. Zodwa takes up this invitation enthusiastically, frequently codeswitching to *kasitaal* at key moments to express intense emotion. This linguistic choice reinforces the main point of her narrative – that her identity is primarily that of an urban “black”<sup>7</sup> young woman. What would usually be regarded as an “oppositional strategy” on the part of a multilingual writer (Canagarajah, 2004, p. 280), is in this instance evidence of compliance with the dominant discourse of the course.

De Certeau's (1984) conceptualisation of reading as entering a space that is mobilised and changed by the act of reading resonates with Zodwa's use of Moya's text to frame her narrative. Space, according to de Certeau is about dynamic interactions historically, temporally, vertically and horizontally, while place is static. Interestingly, Zodwa identifies with both the place and the space that Moya refers to (that is, Ekasi and Sowetan identity), and this intersection intensifies her identification. She appropriates Moya's ideas so strongly, that at times this borders on plagiarism, but ultimately it is clear that she has made the text her own.

On reading Moya's text, Zodwa is suddenly made aware that there is a label, a name, an argument that defines who she is linguistically and culturally – and who she is not. This is a powerful emotional and intellectual moment for her, and she holds onto it, consolidating these ideas as she writes her narrative.

In paragraph three, Zodwa provides the reader with brief background information, the standard information that forms part of the personal narrative genre – her name, place of birth and where she grew up. She informs the reader that she has an isiZulu name but immediately undercuts any assumptions the reader makes about her cultural identity, citing Moya's argument that one's name or language (isiZulu, in her case) does not necessarily define one's identity. She thus creates a distance between her lineage and her cultural identity.

The structure of Zodwa's narrative mirrors her internal and emotional journey of writing the narrative. In paragraphs three to five, Zodwa asserts her identity as a member of “the new breed”, framed by Moya's ideas. Hence the ideas from Moya's article become almost like the refrain of a song, though each reference has a slightly different emphasis. However, in paragraphs six to ten, she describes experiences and ideas that undermine her identity and her language. During these five paragraphs, Moya's frame disappears, finally reappearing in the last paragraph of the narrative and the acknowledgement.

In the fifth paragraph, Zodwa spells out who she is, and describes the affordances of the cultural group that she belongs to. She foregrounds the freedom and the openness of urban “black” culture, contrasting it with the regimentation and rule-bound nature of other cultural groups. Her membership of this group is underlined by the use of “we”, “my culture”, “my language”, appropriating the discourse of group membership

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<sup>7</sup> We place race labels in inverted commas to indicate our understanding of race as a social construct.



from Moya's article. She seems to be suggesting that "black" urban culture offers an open, secular and modern space without any limits or prescriptions.

The rest of Zodwa's biography is dominated by two detailed descriptions of her experiences of linguistic persecution, specifically about being othered on the basis of her "inadequate" use of English. We focus on only one of these two encounters, Zodwa's encounter with three young "black" women whom she refers to as "coconut<sup>8</sup> girls" on her first day at Wits University. Zodwa tries to "make friends" with three girls, assuming that they will at least share a common language (isiZulu) on the basis of their race. However, she soon realises that the girls are "coconuts" and that, if she wants to participate in the interaction, she will have to speak English. She described the interaction as follows:

While I was talking to them in English *bengibanjwa i-load shedding*<sup>9</sup> and my tongue just knotted itself. *Benginesikam*<sup>10</sup> as I couldn't pronounce the words properly and my word order was terrible.... They kept correcting me and saying that I was a product of a township school. At that moment I was so devastated, angry, sad and felt very insecure about my language. I felt as if my language was trapping me in the closet.

What are the elements of this oppressive linguistic contact zone, as described by Zodwa in the abovementioned extract? Read through the lens of Blommaert *et al.*'s framework (2005), Zodwa's encounter with the "coconut girls" is located within a regime of language that views "communicative competence" as a static, fixed entity rather than as a negotiation of linguistic resources "in particular situations" (2005, p. 200). Zodwa attempts to repair the situation by shifting from isiZulu to English, when she realises the girls do not understand isiZulu. However, the girls do not appreciate Zodwa's attempts to find a shared medium of communication. Instead, they humiliate her "deficient" use of English, and read this as a marker of Zodwa's low-status, class position (for example, the comment about township school). Put another way, she is positioned as inferior by the regime of language of that encounter, and ultimately she is silenced. Conversely, the three girls, position themselves as insiders who own the space and can dictate the rules.

Zodwa's vivid description and reflection on this memory remains mostly at an emotional level. Her emotions are powerfully communicated through the use of images, and increasing codeswitching into *kasitaal*. Zodwa's reflections that "my tongue just knotted itself" and that "I felt as if my language was trapping me in the closet" are closely related, both creating a sense of entrapment and loss of agency. Interestingly, language rather than the socially produced attitudes about language is seen as the source of entrapment. Zodwa also makes racialised assumptions about language, assuming that the girls speak IsiZulu. However, the encounter with the three girls (and a similar encounter later that day) quickly teaches her that this is a mistaken assumption, and that class is becoming an equally defining feature of identity as race in post-apartheid South Africa. This is never made explicit, but is implied through the reference to "coconuts" and later to "model C".

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<sup>8</sup> Generally used pejoratively to describe a "black" person who is "acting white", drawing on the fact that coconuts are dark on the outside and white on the inside.

<sup>9</sup> (*kasitaal*) I was clueless

<sup>10</sup> (*kasitaal*) I was very embarrassed

While the emotional dimension of Zodwa's experience is explored in depth, her move into other elements of reflection is limited. She uses Moya effectively to frame her experiences (as well as extracts from two student biographies from previous years) but limits herself by not drawing on other course frames. Instead, she ultimately seems to accept the judgements imposed on her about her use of English and internalises a linguistically deficit view of herself, despite her multilingual repertoire which includes IsiZulu, English, *kasitaal* and other African languages. She internalizes this view, despite the fact that she has written this assignment articulately in English. In this regard, her second last paragraph is somewhat puzzling.

Today English is the language most used to communicate in the media, schools, church and so on....When it comes to English, I feel like it's a foreigner in my country....knowing my *kasitaal* only has been a huge problem as I couldn't interact with other people who speak English.

Thus we see the emergence of interlocking scales, spaces and regimes of language, like a series of intersecting and overlapping but unequal circles. Despite her multilingualism, and her assertion of an urban "black" identity, she ultimately feels disadvantaged by her perceived limited proficiency in English. It seems that the micro spaces of her life where she can feel proud of her identity are in this moment overshadowed by the national and global power of English.

However, this paragraph is followed by an affirmation of her identity framed by Moya, and a moving and most unusual acknowledgement which leaves the reader in no doubt that writing the biography has been a powerful and mind-altering experience for her. Her acknowledgement includes a word of thanks to Moya for helping her "...to be proud and secure about my language, roots and identity."

### **Candace: Moving between different physical spaces**

This student takes up the space offered by the language biography to explore other spaces beyond the pedagogic environment. [See APPENDIX B for full biography.] She opens her narrative in the following way:

It never occurred to me that language plays a big role in my identity. Although I only speak two "common" languages, I feel as if these two "simple" languages give me multiple identities. My languages have left me with an identity crisis.

Although, unlike the writers of the other two biographies, Candace does not directly reflect on the course in her biography, her introductory sentence makes it clear that the insights she articulates are the result of her recent explorations of the relationship between language and identity, previously unexplored territory for her.

Candace identifies herself as a speaker of "two 'common' languages" – meaning English and Afrikaans – but her narrative focuses predominantly on the varieties of English she needs to negotiate her identity in two different places or homes. This immediately complexifies the identity positions available to her – the different language varieties signal membership of two quite different speech communities and Candace's story is one of continual adaptation and accommodation as she shuttles between her two homes.

The situation is a consequence of her family background which she outlines, saying that she has a “half black half coloured mother”, “a ‘full-blown’ coloured” father, and a “white British step-father”. She lives with her mother and step-father – presumably in the suburbs, although that remains unsaid – and frequently visits her father and his side of the family in Eldorado Park, a historically “coloured” area on the edge of Johannesburg. The English spoken in Eldorado Park is referred to as “broken English” and, as the label suggests, it is a low prestige variety of English which flexibly incorporates Afrikaans words.

Candace’s feelings for this language are deeply ambivalent and at various points in the narrative she refers to finding it humorous, highly interesting, frequently irritating, even saddening. It becomes clear that she only speaks it when she visits her father in his community. She describes her feelings about speaking it in the following way: “I feel as if I haven’t received a proper English education when I speak ‘broken English’. To me it’s like speaking the worst and lowest form of English.” Adopting such a strong deficit approach towards this language inevitably affects her relationships with its speakers, as she in effect creates a judgemental distance between herself and this side of her family, however unintentionally.

Having so clearly expressed her lack of identification with this language, it appears at first to be somewhat surprising that she “automatically” switches into this variety of English when she visits her father’s family. She explains that she does this in order to facilitate communication but it quickly becomes clear that she does this as much for reasons of linguistic accommodation as for self-protection, as the following extract suggests:

When I speak the English I learned at my schools and at home from my step-father, my family think I do that to act white. My grandmother makes comments like “Just because your mother married a white man now you think you white!” It irritates me. Just because I speak the language better than they do, why should I be criticised about that? My family make me feel bad about my version of English but that’s who I am and who cares if I sound white. To avoid hearing critical comments I just speak their version of English.

It would appear that when Candace enters this space/place, she has a choice to make: she can either speak the variety of English of the place and be treated like an insider, or she can continue to speak a different, high prestige variety of English and be treated like an outsider. There seems to be little or no room for her to negotiate an alternative position for herself. She cannot speak “proper” English *and* be an insider – at a glance her insider/outsider status seems to be more strongly determined by her linguistic practices than by her familial relations. However, as a family member who does not fully inhabit the space but is a frequent visitor, Candace straddles the insider/outsider divide and is therefore positioned in a very particular way. It seems as if on some level she is required to prove her loyalty to her community by speaking their language variety; speaking a different variety of English would therefore be interpreted as a rejection, particularly if the different variety carries with it overtones of greater prestige. In this space, the regime of language is such that spoken by Candace, a transient, semi-insider, the “upscale” variety of standard English occupies a lower rung of symbolic value on the language hierarchy than the “downscale” variety of “broken English”.

So, while Candace's switch into this variety of English is "automatic" and is done to accommodate this side of the family, she also finds speaking it "strange" and does it in order to protect herself from criticism. What comes across is a sense of being caught up in a cycle of judgement and counter-judgement, self-protection and contradiction. While she deeply resents that her father's side of the family accuses her of "acting white" or superior by speaking a standard variety of English, she nevertheless reveals her own feelings of linguistic superiority by admitting that she considers their English to be an inferior and uneducated variety of English – "the worst and lowest form of English". While she maintains that she does not care if she "sounds white" to her father's side of the family, she adjusts her English when she is with them in order not to sound "white".

Once again, the assumptions and expectations which cluster around language practices are racialised. It is on the basis of her racial affiliation that she is expected to speak "broken English" and is labelled a "coconut" for speaking a variety of English associated with whiteness. The way Candace reads the situation, in choosing between language varieties she is choosing between labels – that of a stereotypical "coloured" person, whom she describes as "creating my own school uniform, owning the world's gold and going around telling people 'I'm coloured'", or that of a "coconut". Candace is so powerfully positioned by conflicting discourses her sense of her own agency extends only to a choice between two extremes and she seems unable to negotiate an alternative identity for herself in her father's community. She reads this choice as a near-ultimatum, and her response is "I'd rather let my language label me a coconut."

What is then particularly striking is that although she takes up ownership of the "proper English" which she speaks, describing it as "natural" to her, her ownership of this language variety is brought into question by the compliment her mother and step-father frequently receive: "Your children speak so well". It is a compliment that serves to position her as an outsider who has successfully acquired "the goods". This is reinforced by the fact that even in the "white" community she is sometimes seen as a "coconut". She expresses her feelings about this in the following way:

It's as if in every community or racial environment I'm in I'm seen as something I'm not meant to be....In the coloured community I'm a coconut because I speak well and in the white community it's almost as if it's not expected that I can speak well because of my race.

Ultimately she doesn't problematise the prescriptivist attitudes to language which she herself seems to have internalised and which cause her to classify the two language varieties she speaks into the "lowest form of English" and "speaking well". Such an interrogation might help her to dismantle the various positions of overt and implied judgement that seem to be ping-ponging her around. In effect, she is "unhomed" (Bhabha, 1994, p.44 quoted in Bangeni & Kapp, 2005, p. 10), occupying an ambivalent space as she shuttles backwards and forwards between two communities, moving in/through both but belonging fully in neither.

Following this, the paragraph where Candace reflects on her relationship with the Afrikaans language functions like a "blue sky" moment in a narrative which is at times quite bleak – and one is left wondering why this discussion comes so late and is

so brief. The positive images she attaches to this language are unequivocal and uncomplicated. It is her “happy, feel good language”, has “all the best jokes” and most significantly, she says: “Afrikaans is my get out of jail free card.” This image speaks to the earlier implied senses of coercion and entrapment associated with English and the various expectations and assumptions tied to varieties of this language in different social spaces. Given the racialised, judgement-laden scenarios she has detailed, it comes as no surprise that Afrikaans – a judgement-free zone for her – is described as a space of freedom, relaxation, light-heartedness and humour. Ultimately, brief though it is, this paragraph functions, both for Candace and for the reader, as a respite from the heavy grappling she engages in in the rest of her narrative.

The various tensions, contradictions and gaps evident in Candace’s conclusion illustrate the extent to which these issues remain unresolved for her. We are left wondering when and how her languages “advantage” her, since the narrative has not focused on this. We are reminded of her sense of limited agency in not finding it possible to choose between her two conflicting identities and are left with her tentative suggestion that without either one of these identities, she would be incomplete.

### **Michelle: Moving between past and present spaces**

In her biography, Michelle harnesses reflective enquiry as a tool for re-evaluating past experiences through the frame of the course and by contrasting them with more current experiences. [See APPENDIX C for full biography.] She has clearly felt strongly positioned by the regimes of language occupying the institutional and pedagogic spaces which she has only recently entered and, through a dynamic interplay between affect and cognition, proceeds to trace her growing awareness of what she sees as her “monolingual” English identity.

She begins her narrative multilingually, asserting selfhood in three different languages – I am who I am, *ek is wie ek is*<sup>11</sup>, *jeg ar wem jeg ar*<sup>12</sup>. The presence of these languages is explained as she fills in her linguistic background, outlining her exposure to Norwegian, Afrikaans and some isiZulu by virtue of family and other close relationships in informal social spaces. Nevertheless, the dominance of English in her life is foregrounded. Having begun by stating she has been “raised speaking only English”, she punctuates her discussion of the various other languages with a qualified refusal of a multilingual identity, saying, “I do not consider myself a multilingual person but I do feel that I have a connection with these languages because they have been a part of my life.” Having thus, in effect, narrowed the parameters of her own linguistic identity to those of a monolingual English speaker, she proceeds to reflect on her feelings about “speaking only English”.

It is clear that she takes up with ease an intimate ownership of this language, frequently referring to it in the possessive form (“my language, my English”), and describing how she both uses it “with honour” and shapes it to convey a particular “personality” or identity, which can involve codemixing in Afrikaans and Norwegian. She captures the emotionally important place English occupies for her through her

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<sup>11</sup> I am who I am (Afrikaans)

<sup>12</sup> I am who I am (Norwegian)

choice of words and images. She feels “blessed” to know English, she loves this language that is so inextricably tied to her ability for self-expression, and it is a zone of comfort and solace: “My English language is my warm cup of Earl Grey tea that soothes my soul after a long day, it is my comfort. It is me.” But English does not only structure her private and socially intimate worlds; she signals her awareness of the globally dominant position of English, describing it as her “trade language” when travelling abroad and as her “key into many social and job opportunities around the world”.

Although Michelle’s experiences indicate that she moves through different environments, the spaces she inhabits regularly – home and school – are structured by the dominance of English. The others are spaces she travels through, as “tourist” or temporary sojourner – the Afrikaans community, township churches, global travel. In these spaces, she experiences contact with other languages and, if she chooses, can take up the opportunity of developing her situational competence (as she does with Afrikaans); however, not only is her identity as an English speaker not disabled, but she does not travel alone. She continues to be able to rely on English as her “trade language”, and she travels with someone close to her who is able to act as (linguistic) mediator and protector – her boyfriend when she is among the Afrikaans community; her grandparents when she visits the churches in the township. Consequently thus far Michelle’s narrative reflections entail few tensions and seem to require little need to renegotiate her own position.

At this point in her narrative, Michelle shifts to a more critical exploration of a growing sense of the disadvantages of being a monolingual English speaker in South Africa. She begins by introducing an intertextual dimension into her biography by drawing on one of the student narratives in the course readings and using his voice to lament her own inability to speak a “black language”. She then explores the implications of this:

I think that not knowing another official language can limit you in many ways today. How can one communicate with the majority of people in our country? How can I as a teacher, communicate with my students who struggle to understand English? I can’t and that is why I need to change. I don’t want my identity to be of a socially, or more appropriately, linguistically sheltered person. Interestingly though, it was not until recently that I found that I felt limited in my home language.

Her need to learn an African language is presented as a desire to communicate both at a broad national level as well as in her future role as a teacher. What is particularly striking is the double move that Michelle makes: she establishes a clear link between her linguistic resources (or lack thereof) and her identity, maintaining that her inability to speak an African language in South Africa constructs for her an identity as a “linguistically sheltered person”; *and* she strongly rejects this newly-perceived identity, using her dissatisfaction with it to re-position herself as someone who is willing to change and to embrace new languages, specifically African languages.

A recent experience at university has had a considerable impact on Michelle and she describes it vividly and then uses this experience and her newly acquired lens on language to revisit her past experience of schooling. In this way, as narrator, her “autobiographical memory organises past experiences in a way that corresponds to [her] present situation” (Busch *et al.*, 2006, p. 15).

Another time that I felt disadvantaged about only speaking English was at the Wits formal assembly held earlier this year. Before Sello, the past Student President, gave his speech, a man dressed in traditional isiZulu dress came to the stage and started to shout in isiZulu. He was obviously saying incredibly uplifting and exciting statements because many (if not all) of the students who were black would stand up and shout or scream in agreement. After Sello delivered his speech, the new Student President, William, stood up and spoke in fluent isiZulu. More shouts and applause of agreement. I felt like time froze. I could see myself sitting in the audience with a puzzled and embarrassed look on my face as I tried to grab a term or word that I understood. As I sat there I thought, "I have never felt so white in my life. Something has got to change." It was then, as if a seed had been planted, my discontent at being monolingual grew.

Michelle vividly captures her sense of exclusion from the parts of the proceedings that were conducted in African languages. Her response to her feelings of "outsider-ness" is marked – she imaginatively projects herself into the position of a critical other, looking at herself from the outside, and finding herself lacking. In this multilingual space, she is momentarily othered, and, her English becomes – also momentarily – a "non-language" (Blommaert *et al.*, 2005, pp. 210-211). It is interesting that Michelle does not mention the fact that William, who addresses the student body in isiZulu, is a "white" student. She does, however, use her recent entry into the diverse institutional space of the university to offer her a new vantage point from which to re-evaluate her school context, saying

My time at Wits has been an eye-opener. If I look back and analyse my schooling career I can see that it was one of surreal "sheltered-ness". I was taught in English, I spoke in English. All different cultures that came to my school spoke English the same way I did, they didn't even have an accent. I was never given the opportunity to mix with different cultures because it seemed that everyone had morphed into a similar way of speaking and living.

In retrospect, she recognises the high degree of both linguistic and cultural homogeneity at her school, despite there being students from various cultures. Her description that "everyone had morphed into a similar way of speaking and living" perfectly captures the sense that within the current dominant assimilationist model of middle- and upper-middle-class schooling (Soudien, 2004; 2007), one doesn't only acquire English but one acquires "Englishness". This flattens the potential for a genuinely diverse environment and makes the transition to university one that comes across as a move from homogeneity to diversity.

It becomes clear that the narrative sets up an extended contrast between monolingualism and multilingualism, where Michelle views her monolingualism as the result of a "surreal 'shelteredness'", a deprivation of sorts, and as having the effect of locking her out of new and exciting worlds. Conversely, multilingualism is constructed as vibrant, engaging, public, outgoing – capable of "opening doors", creating opportunities to make new friends and touch more school children. Not only does she position herself as monolingual, but she constructs English monolingualism as the deficit position in this context. This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that she is responding to her experience of the linguistic contact zones constituted by an English-medium university and a subject English course.

Bangeni and Kapp (2007), in their research with “black” undergraduate students at UCT, make the point that in their early undergraduate years their students conflate English with “whiteness”, having come from environments where they had little contact with “white” people and viewing English as social capital owned by “whites” (p. 258). The contrast Michelle sets up between monolingualism and multilingualism is also racialised, so that her use of these terms seems to have less to do with the *number* of languages spoken and more to do with the *kinds* of languages spoken. For her, monolingualism is associated with English and other “white” languages, while multilingualism is associated with “speaking a black language”. It is therefore particularly interesting that for Michelle, a “white” student, her attention seems focused on the flipside of the language/race conflation, positioning herself as deprived of the multilingual social capital she associates with “black” students, hence her remark, in response to her inability to understand the African languages used in the rousing Wits assembly, “I have never felt so white in my life.”

Given the way in which Michelle has taken up the narrative space, what can be said about how she has interpreted the regimes of language of the pedagogic space? In the early part of her narrative, she details the emotionally important place English occupies in her life, showing the kind of linguistic pride that the course made space for. In the second half of her narrative, it becomes clear that she has unambiguously taken on board the valorisation of multilingualism, in particular the valorisation of African languages. In a previous article (Ferreira & Mendelowitz, 2009), we have discussed how the language narrative assignment momentarily shifts the usual power relations of the English classroom, disrupting the dominance of English monolingualism. Michelle too draws on incidents that position her, as an English-only speaker, at a disadvantage and thus constructs herself as linguistically “deficient” for not speaking an indigenous language. She pays scant attention to the benefits of English for economic and global mobility and makes no mention at all of the academic advantages of being an English-speaker at an English-medium university.

## CONCLUSION

In our course on language and identity, a particular pedagogic space is constructed which seeks to create a multilingual contact zone. Within the constraints of a subject English course in an English-medium institution, we seek to value multilingualism and linguistic diversity. In order to achieve this, narrative is used in two ways. Firstly, as a pedagogic tool to facilitate students’ engagement with issues of linguistic identity through the reading of others’ narratives; and secondly, as means of negotiating their own linguistic identities through the writing of their own language narratives.

Students’ choices about what kind of identity to construct for themselves have to be seen in the context of the pressures and strategies of writing for assessment purposes. Canagarajah (2004) reminds us that as writers we “textually construct images of the self that appeal to us and display to our readers the types of identities that are to our advantage in specific communicative situations” (p. 270). So while an awareness of performance needs to be incorporated into our analyses, it is clear that the textual identities which students “perform” are inflected by their reading the pedagogic space and its regimes of language and they therefore insert themselves into these regimes in



ways that are not fully determined by the space but are significantly shaped by their own linguistic resources and by their own socially and historically located identities.

We have argued that the pedagogic space is structured so as to foreground linguistic diversity and multilingualism. What this means is that the various pedagogic strategies which are largely employed to valorise multilingualism throw monolingualism into sharp relief and serve to denaturalise first-language English speakers' taken-for-granted linguistically dominant identities. This shifts the normative relations of the English classroom – where instead of structuring students' linguistic identities according to their level of proficiency in English, their identities are structured according to the range and diversity of their linguistic resources *across all available languages*. English is no longer the sole, valued, cultural and linguistic capital, but is displaced – however temporarily – by other usually silenced languages.

Ultimately, the pedagogic space of the course creates a range of opportunities for students to re-think linguistic identities in relation to the self and the other. However, it needs to be emphasised that whether students take up these opportunities and *how* they choose to take them up depends on their readings of the course space and their own socially constructed identities. It is therefore important to reiterate that the textual identities which students construct in their biographies are in no sense fixed, resolved or close-ended, but part of an ongoing process of negotiation between the individual and the spaces through which s/he moves.

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## Appendix A: Biograph 1 – Zodwa

### I AM THE NEW BREED

Language is the vocabulary of a particular group of people whether in a society or Ekasi. A person's roots is what attaches him or her emotionally to a particular place where his or her ancestors lived for a long time. Identity is the condition of being a specific person.

February the eleventh two thousand and nine, the day I found out who I really am. Earlier that day I was questioned about my language, my roots and my identity. Guess what? *Bengacavi fokol*<sup>13</sup> about that. *Jampasi*<sup>14</sup> I tried so hard *ukuthi ngi-gidle*<sup>15</sup> but my mind wouldn't let me. The question of my roots, language and identity kept ringing in my head. That's when I woke up and did an introspection of who I am. These are the following amazing results I got.

My name is Zodwa Gladys Majola. I was born 17 years ago at the Baragwanath Hospital in Soweto. I grew up and live in Pimvillage or you can also call it Pimtown. I have a Zulu name and I also speak Zulu. "Speaking a language or having a name that suggests a certain ethnic lineage is just not enough for one to become a member" (Moya, 2005). I really agree with Moya due to having a Zulu name and speaking Zulu but not being a member of the Zulu tribe.

*I-olady* is *umXhosa* and *itayma lam* is *umSwati*<sup>16</sup>. My mom was born and bred in White City, Soweto, and she has never been to Ekoloni, Easter Cape. This is because her father (my grandfather) moved from Eastern Cape to Gauteng in search of work. He then changed his family name Bhengu to his clan name Majola. I think this was because of apartheid. After getting *ithesha eligrand eMjib*<sup>17</sup> he never returned to *emaplingo*<sup>18</sup> to see his family and friends. This resulted in me and my mom not knowing how to speak Xhosa. My father was born and grew up in Bethal, Mpumalanga. He then moved to *eMjiba*<sup>19</sup> and now he rarely visits Bethal. This is why I don't speak Xhosa nor Swati and I don't see myself belonging to those cultures. Like Moya, my parents' origins and background are not enough to make me honestly say that I belong to the same community, culture and society.

My culture is urban black, my language is *kasitaal* and my roots lie in Soweto so that makes me a Sowetan. In my culture we don't do rituals like other cultures but we do believe in ancestors and visit their graves. I am very proud of my culture because it doesn't have specific rules like other cultures. For example, in the Indian culture you are not allowed to *ukugawula*<sup>20</sup> with your left hand. My culture allows me to explore the world, experience new things and it doesn't give me limits on what to do and what not to do. Although sometimes I envy those who practise their culture. For example,

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<sup>13</sup> (kasitaal) I didn't know anything

<sup>14</sup> (kasitaal) at night

<sup>15</sup> (kasitaal) to sleep

<sup>16</sup> (kasitaal) My mother is a Xhosa speaker and my father is Swati.

<sup>17</sup> (kasitaal) a stable job in Jo'burg

<sup>18</sup> (kasitaal) his hometown

<sup>19</sup> (kasitaal) Johannesburg

<sup>20</sup> (kasitaal) to eat

the Zulu society, *Amacheri*<sup>21</sup> go to initiation to check if *useyintombi nto*<sup>22</sup>. I like that because somehow it prevents teenage pregnancy and lowers the rates of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. I'm very proud of my language which is *kasitaal*, my identity which is urban black and I can honestly say my roots are in *Jozi Maboneng*<sup>23</sup>. I'm one of the new breed: URBAN BLACK. This makes me unique and I'm loving it.

My first day at Wits University *beyintsebu*<sup>24</sup>. I tried making friends with *ama student abo darkie* as I thought *sizo frostanana* because *singabo darko* and *siringa isiZulu*<sup>25</sup>. There was a communication barrier between the fours of us although we spoke one language, well, I thought we did. The coconut girls *baringa isingamla*<sup>26</sup> and, well, as ghetto as I am, I'm used to *ukuringa ikasitaal*<sup>27</sup>. I felt like a goat among the seep so I changed to *isingamla*. While I was talking to them in English *bengibanjwa i-load shedding*<sup>28</sup> and my tongue just knotted itself. *Benginesikam*<sup>29</sup> as I couldn't pronounce the words properly and my word order was terrible. I thought as human beings *ukuthi bazofrostana*<sup>30</sup> that there's no master of language and pronunciation but *bengidenka*<sup>31</sup> wrong because they acted like barbarians. They kept correcting me and saying that I was a product of a township school. At that moment I was so devastated, angry, sad and felt very insecure about my language. I felt as if my language was trapping me in the closet. On the other hand I wanted so hard to beat those girls but as mature as I am I contained myself and *ngazivayela*<sup>32</sup>. I was hurt and so I went to the bathroom and cried.

That was nothing compared to this second language experience I had. At lunch time I called my cousin who is doing Law at the main campus. I deeply wanted someone to comfort me. We met at the Matrix. She was with her model C friends. When she introduced me to them, she said "This is my cousin Zanele, please don't speak to her in English or else she will break down and cry because she doesn't know it. She's been to township schools all her life. This year is her very first time speaking to a white, Indian, coloured person." Yep, my own cousin said that to her friends about me. I couldn't believe it either. What kind of a person was she? What was the motive behind all this? "One of the worst things about life is not how nasty people are, you know that already. It is how nasty the nice people can be" (Powell). This one really hurt me the most because *bengidenka ukuthi iblidoms* was thicker than *ivati*<sup>33</sup>. I guess I thought wrong. I really didn't expect that from her. For that moment I lost my voice, my eyes were pouring with tears, my heart was bleeding with sadness. I felt betrayed by my language and by my cousin.

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<sup>21</sup> (kasitaal) girls

<sup>22</sup> (isiZulu) a virgin

<sup>23</sup> (kasitaal) Johannesburg, City of Lights

<sup>24</sup> (kasitaal) it was horrible

<sup>25</sup> (kasitaal) I tried to make friends with the black students as I thought we would understand each other because we are all black and we speak isiZulu

<sup>26</sup> (kasitaal) only spoke English

<sup>27</sup> (kasitaal) to speaking kasitaal

<sup>28</sup> (kasitaal) I became clueless

<sup>29</sup> (kasitaal) I was very embarrassed

<sup>30</sup> (kasitaal) they would understand

<sup>31</sup> (kasitaal) I thought

<sup>32</sup> (kasitaal) I walked away

<sup>33</sup> (kasitaal) I thought blood was thicker than water

I felt what Vanessa Thobeka Simonds<sup>34</sup> felt in her article of Shifting reflections on monolingualism (2007), when she said these two experiences were so tough for me because I felt no sense of belonging. I was ashamed of my *kasitaal* but not anymore. It tore me apart, lowered my self-esteem and I really felt lost in this big world.

Today English is the language most used to communicate in the media, schools, church and so on. As ghetto as I am, I'm not used to *ukus'ringa njalo*<sup>35</sup>. "This is a disadvantage for me because I'm limited to a very small number of social groups" (Taylor<sup>36</sup>, 2005). At school we mostly spoke Zulu, even in the English class. I have no problem with other African languages because Sowetans are a mixed masala. When it comes to English, I feel like it's a foreigner in my country. "Now that I've grown wiser and become more knowledgeable about life I have realised that only knowing one language is a major disadvantage to me and also to the people around me" (Taylor, 2005). I strongly agree with John's statement because knowing my *kasitaal* only has been a huge problem as I couldn't interact with other people who speak English.

I'm a *kasi* chick and Ekasi is where my roots lie. "My language is a dialect that has an army and a navy"<sup>37</sup>. I'm black and urban to conclude my biography I am URBAN BLACK, THE NEW BREED and this does not make me any better or worse it just makes me – me! (Moya, 2005).

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<sup>34</sup> A reference to the narrative of a previous student that was included in the reading pack. We have used a pseudonym.

<sup>35</sup> (*kasitaal*) to always speak

<sup>36</sup> A reference to a narrative written by a previous year's student included in the reading pack. We have used a pseudonym.

<sup>37</sup> The original source of this quotation is unclear; it is, however, associated with the linguist Max Weinreich.

## Appendix B: Biography 1 – Candace

### THE IDENTITY CRISIS MY LANGUAGE CREATED

It never occurred to me that language plays a big role in my identity. Although I only speak two “common” languages, I feel as if these two “simple” languages give me multiple identities. my languages have left me with an identity crisis.

I’m Candace, born in Lenasia and raised in many different places. I was called “the confused race” by high school friends because I have a half black and half coloured mother, a “full blown” coloured (that’s the term they use in the coloured community) father and a white British step-father. I know it’s a lot but it’s what makes the person that I am. I live with my mother and father number two (step-father) and visit my biological father when I want to, which is most of the time. I have different languages and identities in my two homes.

I speak two different kinds of English. It sounds strange but it’s true. When I speak English to my coloured family, which is on my father’s side, I speak what the coloured community call “broken English”. My description of this type of English is humorous. Words are mispronounced and sometimes people create their own words that they think you would understand because the word is derived from an Afrikaans word. I feel as if I haven’t received a proper English education when I speak “broken English”. To me it’s like speak the worst and lowest form of English. Oscar Wilde once said, “Today we have everything in common with the Americans, except of course the language.” I relate to that because I feel I have a lot in common with my father and his family except the kinds of English we speak, except our language. Oscar Wilde implies that the Americans don’t speak the “Queen’s English”. They don’t speak “proper” English. That’s exactly what I think about the English my coloured family speak.

I come from a place called Eldorado Park. It’s on the South West end of Johannesburg. When I go there to visit my father’s family I automatically change the English I speak and the way I pronounce words to accommodate the “broken English” they speak. Even though I don’t like this language, it interests me. So many people use this form of English and everywhere in any coloured area that you go to, people speak their own kind of “broken English” but amazingly they all understand each other. Some of the words they create make no sense to an English speaker but complete sense to an Afrikaans speaker. “Broken English” saddens me and also sometimes irritates me but as much as it makes me feel strange speaking it, I feel I have to speak it to communicate easily with people in coloured communities. When I speak the English I learned at my schools and at home from my step-father, my family think I do that to act white. My grandmother makes comments like “Just because your mother married a white man now you think you white!” It irritates me. Just because I speak the language better than they do, why should I be criticised about that? My family make me feel bad about my version of English but that’s who I am and who cares if I sound white. To avoid hearing critical comments I just speak their version of English.

In most of the coloured communities I’m either looked upon as a “coconut” or called one. “She’s coloured but she keeps her white” is the “broken English” comment I always hear. I don’t declare myself coloured if it means speaking “broken English”,

creating my own school uniform, owning the world's gold and going around telling people "I'm a coloured". No thank you, I'd rather let me language label me a coconut.

The other type of English that I speak is seen as "proper" English. My mother and step-father always received comments like "Your children speak so well". My step-father is British and I've lived with him since I was three. He taught me the English language as he learned it. The English that I speak when I'm on this side of my family feels natural and doesn't make me feel bad or strange in any way. One classification I have never been able to get rid of is "coconut". Even in the white community I'm sometimes labelled as a "coconut". It's as if every community or racial environment I'm in I'm seen as something I'm not meant to be. "It is because I am smart and speak perfect English. That is why people treat me differently" (Matlwa, 2007). This is taken from an extract from Coconut that I can relate to. In the coloured community I'm a coconut because I speak well and in the white community it's almost as if it's not expected that I can speak so well because of my race.

I also speak Afrikaans. I learned how to speak the language when I was growing up. My parents' families both spoke Afrikaans and therefore I just picked up on the language. Afrikaans is my get out of jail free card. I express my opinions and emotions best in Afrikaans. I speak the language when I feel it's appropriate or when I have to due to communication barriers. Afrikaans is my happy, feel good language. All the best jokes are in Afrikaans and the language has a wonderful way of getting my message across.

My languages make me feel unsure and uncertain about my identity. I know where I come from but I don't feel as if I fit in there just because of the difference between the English I speak and the English they speak in Eldorado Park. There are so many assumptions and expectations on the type of English I speak or the way I speak English just because of my race. I feel as if I have two different environments. I'm comfortable speaking any of the languages I speak to people who aren't critical or judgemental of the way I speak. It seems unreal yet amazing that my languages have a big role in my identity.

I have concluded that my languages created the person that I am. No matter what language I speak or how I speak a certain language, there will always be a critical comment or someone will disapprove. My languages irritate me but also advantage me. I will just have to live with having two different identities because choosing one between the two doesn't seem possible to me. I don't think I could function without one of them, which means I have an identity. Language is so wonderful and powerful. It does more than create communication links.

## Appendix C: Biography 3 – Michelle

### A LIMITING REALISATION

I am who I am, *ek is wie ek is*<sup>38</sup>, *jeg ar wem jeg ar*<sup>39</sup>. I am an individual who is unique. I am an individual who is shaped by my past, my actions as well as by my experiences with languages. If I look at who I am today, I see that my identity is undoubtedly linked to my language, they cannot be separated. My language biography will look at my life, examining my history of languages and my experiences and feelings towards them.

My name is Michelle-Ellen Gouws. I was born on 18 October 1990 in Johannesburg. My parents chose to call me Michelle as I looked similar to my uncle, Michael. The second part of my name, Ellen, comes from my Grandma's name, Susan-Ellen. My grandparents who were *Abafundisi*<sup>40</sup> gave me the Zulu name "Thandi" which means love.

My mother is an English Norwegian and my father is Afrikaans. I have been raised speaking only English at home. My parents did try, repeatedly, to teach me Afrikaans and Norwegian when I was younger but these "language lessons" would usually end up in tears and frustration (from both sides)! Eventually, I started to learn Afrikaans at school. However, it was not until I began dating my boyfriend whose family is very involved in the Afrikaans community that my Afrikaans improved. My Norwegian only began to show some signs of activity when my older cousin went to live in Norway. He would speak to me in Norwegian and try to teach my younger cousin and me how to speak our family tongue. His attempts paid off. I now know a few terms and I'm learning more. So today, I am fluent in only English, I can speak Afrikaans relatively well (my dad would disagree!) and I can understand some Norwegian. I have also been around isiZulu since I was a young child because my Grandpa would speak it to my Grandma or he would preach in isiZulu when we visited the township churches, however, I am extremely limited in understanding the language. I have travelled a lot for someone my age but I have always been able to use English as my "trade language". But I have also seen that there are many different cultures that modify the English language to form different identities. I do not consider myself a multilingual person but I do feel that I have a connection with these languages because they have been a part of my life.

My personality is one that is outgoing and friendly but still straight forward. One can understand my character by listening to how I use my English. I don't abuse my language and use it harshly, I use it to show kindness and correct [?] when appropriate. I feel that when I use my language, my English, I have to use it with honour as it is a part of who I am. I have noticed that when I speak to my friends, I speak fondly and sort-of codeswitch around them. I call them "*liefie*", "*bokkie*" or even "*lammertjie*"<sup>41</sup>. When I speak to a loved one I will mention "*Jeg elske deg*"<sup>42</sup> or "*Ek is lief vir jou*"<sup>43</sup>!

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<sup>38</sup> (Afrikaans) I am who I am

<sup>39</sup> (Norwegian) I am who I am

<sup>40</sup> (isiZulu) pastors

<sup>41</sup> (Afrikaans) various terms of endearment

<sup>42</sup> (Norwegian) I love you



The way I speak and the way I use my language skills has given me the identity of a caring and affectionate young woman.

I have many feelings about speaking only English. I feel blessed to know this language as I strongly believe that English is my key into many social and job opportunities around the world. I also love my language because I feel it's the only one that I can truly express myself in. I could never imagine shouting in Norwegian or Afrikaans. It would sound so wrong to me! My English language is my warm cup of Earl Grey tea that soothes my soul after a long day, it is my comfort. It is me.

I do have some negative feelings towards being monolingual. John Taylor states in his language narrative that he wishes he had learnt a black language because "so many doors would open for me and I would be able to touch so many lives" (2005). I agree completely with Tennant. In modern South Africa it is a disservice to oneself to not know another official language. I think that not knowing another official language can limit you in many ways today. How can one communicate with the majority of people in our country? How can I, as a teacher, communicate with my students who struggle to understand English? I can't and that is why I need to change. I don't want my identity to be of a socially, or more appropriately, linguistically sheltered person. Interestingly though, it was not until recently that I found that I felt limited in my home language.

The first time I found myself wishing I could speak and understand another language was when I paid for my groceries at a shopping till in Sandton City a few years ago. The two men obviously had a lot to say about me, perhaps because I had come to the wrong till or something. They spoke isiZulu so that I would not understand them. They laughed and shook their heads in distaste towards me. I felt so insulted that these men were speaking about me and so irritated that I could not reply to them or understand everything they were saying. I felt excluded because I realised that language can unite or alienate people.

Another time that I felt disadvantaged about only speaking English was at the Wits formal assembly held earlier this year. Before Stephen, the past Student President, gave his speech, a man dressed in traditional isiZulu dress came to the stage and started to shout in isiZulu. He was obviously saying incredibly uplifting and exciting statements because many (if not all) of the students who were black would stand up and shout or scream in agreement. After Stephen delivered his speech, the new Student President, William, stood up and spoke in fluent isiZulu. More shouts and applause of agreement. I felt like time froze. I could see myself sitting in the audience with a puzzled and embarrassed look on my face as I tried to grab a term or word that I understood. As I sat there I thought, "I have never felt so white in my life. Something has got to change." It was then, as if a seed had been planted, my discontent at being monolingual grew.

My time at Wits has been an eye-opener. If I look back and analyse my schooling career I can see that it was one of surreal "sheltered-ness". I was taught in English, I spoke in English. All different cultures that came to my school spoke English the

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<sup>43</sup> (Afrikaans) I love you

same way I did, they didn't even have an accent. I was never given the opportunity to mix with different cultures because it seemed that everyone had morphed into a similar way of speaking and living. However, as I put my feet on Wits soil, I realised that I hadn't been living in the truth; there were actually people who I would study with who had not grown up with the same home language.

Elizabeth Mathakga Botha states in her language narrative that "today multilingualism is regarded as fashionable in formal education and at academic conferences" (1994, p. 30). I agree wholeheartedly with Botha. However, I would like to take that further and say that it is not only fashionable in formal education and at academic conferences but also in modern day society. Multilingualism is necessary in many ways as I mentioned earlier. A new found friend at Wits told me that it is a compliment when a white person walks up to you and says, "*Sawubona sisi, unjani?*"<sup>44</sup>. It opens doors to new friendships and new opportunities.

I had never really evaluated my language and identity properly or how closely linked they are until I walked into my first English lecture. I now see that I need to push my personal boundaries, expand my identity and learn new languages and build new bridges.

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<sup>44</sup> (isiZulu) Hello sister, how are you?