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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates attitudes of domestic workers in South Africa toward English and the process of learning the language. Interviews that were conducted with domestic workers in Durban are described. Several themes emerged from these interviews, including the need for workers to know English to secure employment, domestic employment as an informal language school for learning English, employers' linguistic chauvinism as an incentive for learning, and the employer's role in facilitating language acquisition. Interviews also revealed that speech patterns between employer and employee are directive and instructive in nature and reflect the unequal relationship between the two individuals, that domestic workers insist their children learn English in school, and that workers perceive English as a social indicator and an instrument of change. (Contains 7 references.) (JP)

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"English is the Umbrella of all the Languages in South Africa"

Domestic Workers' Englishes

Introduction

Domestic workers in South Africa belong to the most exploited group of workers. They have almost no legal protection, many of them live in isolated dingy backyard rooms, separated from their families and friends and with no place to go to and little or no access to leisure facilities during their scarce off-time. Few of them become domestic workers as a first choice - they work in people's homes because the alternative is unemployment.

Many of them come from rural areas, unequipped to deal with the technocratic environment of employers' homes. A common experience is previous sporadic formal schooling, or none at all - as girls they were needed to look after younger siblings and do domestic chores in their homes. (Suzanne Gordon: Introduction to A Talent for Tomorrow,Ravan Press, Johannesburg. 1988) In addition, few domestic workers entered employment with a functional command of English.

This paper is a tentative first step towards investigating domestic worker's attitudes to English and the process of learning or acquisition of the language. The basis of this research are interviews conducted with domestic workers in

Durban, originally with a view towards attempting to understand how these women survive in an often hostile (language) environment. It soon became clear that the experiences and views of people like those, who were interviewed should inform policy-making, particulary with regards to the process of informal English language learning and acquisition.

English - the language of work

Olga Majola, a woman in her fifties, lives with her daughter in a small house in Inanda. She entered employment as a domestic worker after her husband died. She was reluctant to work outside her homestead as her traditional background militated against wives working in the cities, and she had always managed to grow enough food on her plot for her small family. Unable to pay the taxes she had to seek work.

Up till then English was a language which her parents spoke when they went to work in the cities but upon returning to their children they left the foreign language behind. Exposure to English was very limited - in more than one way, as the description which Judith gives, shows:

> "My father was speaking English. He worked at Durban when I was still young. When he came home he said: `hey, come on man!' And `rubbish'."

Like her, Ntombi Gwala had had little contact with English before coming to the white cities:

"At home I heard only Zulu. They speak English at work, not at home. I think the Africans can't speak English in the family - they speak Zulu."

English is the language of work, even for white collar office workers. As a journalist of the magazine Tribute quips: after hours `the language of the eaters of fish' leaves him:

"Now I understand why they call it an `official language'. It is the language of the office: after hours it goes."
(Barolong Seboni, in: Tribute, Sept 1990, p.22)

Getting a job means having to become basically English literate. The little English which Olga Majola had learnt at school was forgotten:

"When I was out from the school nobody says I must speak English. Only Zulu. So I forgot everything. Specially when I got children I don't think about English, just think about my house, that's all."

But even if she had had more formal education - schools do not provide the majority of Black South Africans with a functional English literacy. As one of the women interviewed stated: the present Bantu education system does not equip children with a practical knowledge of the language:

"You know if a child is in Standard 9, if you have something like custard and say: please make me this custard, they can't make it. They know it's custard but they don't understand the instructions. Which means that the syllabus is very weak."

The need for English to secure employment has been experienced by all the workers interviewed. As Olga Majola says:

> "English is important because when you go looking for a job they want you to know how to talk, how to write, how to read English. Sometimes when you're looking for the job in the papers they're like this: I want a lady to know how to talk the English and to write. You know English - you can get a nice job."

And even if one has managed to find a job, the work situation is often intolerable if one does not have the ability to communicate in the language of the employers:

> "I cannot understand my employer, so she screams at me. I get very depressed but I need that job." (Sheila Gordon: A Learner-centred Approach to the Teaching of English as a Second Language. University of the Witwatersrand, 1985)

Misunderstandings or misinterpretations lead to direct victimisation and attacks on personal dignity. As a worker from the Rand described:

> "The woman from the flat next door took our sheets from the line by mistake. I could not explain this properly, so I was accused of stealing". (ibid.)

Weakened by their general employment situation and economic dependency domestic workers have to rely on their voice, diction and grammatical structures to fend for themselves against an employer, who not only controls the purse strings but also the language with which commands and controls are given out.

Out of fear of an unpleasant situation, in which the employer impatiently treats the worker as `stupid' or even worse: the fear of dismissal (because she can't understand the English instructions) workers develop a number of coping mechanisms which tie them over in the specific situation and restore their sense of dignity.

The main response is pretending to understand when one is, in fact, not sure about what is being said:

> "you will be given instructions in English and you would say: Yes. You don't understand but you think the best thing to say is `yes`, always yes, because you don't want to embarras that person you are talking to and feel that if you say yes, everything yes, it will work positively in every way."

Learning English

Clearly, in order to survive, domestic workers have to look for a `language school', and for many of them the kitchen of their employers becomes the `classroom', with the `madam' as the teacher.

All of the women interviewed maintained that domestic employment was a

> "good place to learn because your're always talking to the white people. But in the factory it doesn't matter if you don't know English, because you just work, you don't talk with anybody."

Left to fend for herself in a foreign language context the worker has to survive, and

> "There are circumstances where you don't understand how people cope, because that person can't say a single word in English and the `madam' can't say a single word in the other language. That person is forced to learn the language."

However, the environment of domestic employment is not a `guarantee' for language acquisition. Both specific employer practises and the social awareness of the learner have an impact on the success or failure of the language skills gained.

Teacher chauvenism and learner motivation

Ironically, employers' linguistic chauvenism serves the worker in her attempts to learn the new language. Suzie Nkabinde asserts that this is an essential pre-requisite: being in domestic employment is only a `good school' for language learning

> "if you find people who say:, no, you can't speak any language, we cannot understand your language, you must speak English. Then you learn, because there's nothing you can do - you want to work and so you must learn their language."

Susie's initiation to English was by systematic enforced exposure: when she took up her job she was told that she had to speak English:

"I worked for Mrs X in Durban North for 15 years. I learnt most of my English with her because she's got children and she wanted the children to speak English. So I couldn't speak any other language. I used to stay with the children. Children make you speak and learn, because they ask you questions and you must answer them. That's how I learnt a lot of English. They never taught me; I just had to listen and try it out.

So the way I learnt was just by being in a place where I always heard English. Because I 've never done any upgrade. Some people go to language school to learn, but I've never been to that school. I just learnt by practising."

Clearly, the learning process which she describes is one of **language acquisition**, rather than learning as distinguished and **defined** by Krashen:

"Acquisition is the subconscious internalisation of second language knowledge that occurs through using the second language naturally and spontaneously; learning is the conscious study of a second language that results in knowledge about the rules of the language." (quoted Rod Ellis:Understanding Second Language Acquisition Oxford University Press,1981, p 113)

The employer as teacher

The worker's expectation of the employer to function as a source of strength and support and as teacher is rarely accepted

deliberately by the employer and the process of language acquisition is not usually facilitated by them.

For a start, employers might might not be at home to communicate with their workers, or they may not be in the mood to `teach'. Alternatively, the employer goes out when the domestic worker arrives, and there is little to no communication between the two. Often domestic workers spend their days in total isolation without anybody to talk to. But there's nothing you can do about the unreliability of your `teacher'. As Priscilla Hlongwane says:

> "you can't ask your employer for time to stay at home to teach you English, because, by the way, it's not his or her responsibility to teach you English."
>
> Sometimes the white people they've got bad mood. They don't like to talk. Sometimes they're very busy."

Furthermore, some employers don't like their workers to learn. English, as Priscilla observes, some employers do not want their `girl' to learn English and so they speak fanakalo. Language restrictions are one way of excluding domestics from participation in the household and preventing them from talking about the intimacies of the family. Domestic workers may observe but in most cases they may not comment on their observations.'(1)

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(1) Ironically, some workers describe how they `train' their employers to suit themselves - however, negotiated terms of relations are rarely expressed explicitly and usually maintained almost clandestinely. Some of these processes and rationships are described in some detail in S. Gordon: A Talent for Tomorrow.

In rare cases the employer actually consciously assumes the role of teacher and sets specific time aside for English language lessons.

When Ntombi Gwala started her new job, working for two women, she could speak hardly any English. Her previous employers had always encouraged her to speak her home language, as they understood and were able to communicate in Zulu. Thus, she had had little exposure to English and no incentive to pick up the language.

With her new employers she was exposed to English and, in terms of coping with her job requirements had to try to understand and speak it. Furthermore, her employers were ready to help her and actually gave definite input in the learning process.

> "I learn English here, at work. Before this job everywhere I work the madam and the family speak Zulu. That's the trouble, I can't learn English. In this house now I can't speak Zulu, so I learn English. D. teach me little bit, little bit. I listen, then I speak pigin English mixed with Zulu. Now, D does not mix Zulu, but me, if I don't know a word I speak it in Zulu and she corrects me."

Although she claims, "they did not teach me", she proceeds to describe an informal learning process in which her employers willingly and deliberately assumed the role of 'teachers' while she became the learner:

> "If I speak - how do you say - and what I say is not right, D and B correct. Little bit by little bit they give me the English name and I repeat it. I was happy when I speak. I

like English. I am lucky that D help me with my English."

As an extention of their own attempts at language teaching Ntombi's employers recommended that she could get more `expert' help if she attended a language course, run by a church group / centre of concern, in Durban. However,the more `formal' approach to teaching domestic workers was not a very fruitful experience for Ntombi and she soon gave up, feeling bored and frustrated:

> "I think about three years ago I went to the school at St Thomas for English literacy. That was a help. Now, me, I am sick with my knees, with the legs. I told D: Ai, I can't go no more.
>
> Now that school - I can't learn. Eh, every time they give me the book for Standard 1. Me, I finish Standard 1, I did Standard 4.Now I know the words in the book. Every time the same book. I told D., I am bored!"

Domestic English

In most cases, the unequal relationship between `maid' and `madam' is carried over into their linguistic discourse and the employers assume an attitude which is similar to that which is felt for a child. Thus the worker is addressed like a child whose bahaviour has to be corrected or who is given instructions and directives, and the speech patterns reflect this attitude.

Olga Majola described the process of how she learnt English when she took up employment as a domestic worker.

> "When I see the white people I was feeling shy. When they talk to me I can't understand sometimes. But I find a nice woman at Illovo. I did the washing for that lady. She's talking fanakalo to me:Do this! Hamba lapha! Hamba lapha! Even that I didn't understand. That's why she said we must talk English.
>
> She talk nicely. She didn't say: do this, do that! She said: Olga, come here. I want to show you something. Do you see this? Swhat, swhat - calling like that. I know some words - the pot, the plate, the cupboard. But I didn't know how to put it together. Then I just start to talk. Then she said: Olga, I'm not going to talk fanakalo any more."

On the whole, English acquisition in the kitchens takes the form of listening, taking instructions and following orders, trying out what one has heard and struggling to make oneself understood in a trial and error fashion. Employee / learner and the employer / teacher get caught in a confined discourse using a language code which is extremely restricted, and, in turn, restricting. Linguistic relations reflect the social and economic power relations and entrench them. The English used is not an, interactional form of language which would equip learners for communication, but it further inhibits contact between the speakers rather than promoting understanding.

Olga's `madam', like many others, spoke in what Ellis calls `foreigner talk' - the register used by native speakers when they address non-native speakers. This `foreigner talk' has specific features, such as simplification of grammatical structures and vocabulary in varying degrees, and sometimes even leads to ungrammatical speech. Which type of foreigner speech occurs depends on various factors concerned with the proficiency of the learner and the role relationship between the participants:

> "the use of foreigner talk [serves] to mark the role relationship between the speakers - the `talking down' function. This involves the use of ungrammatical simplifications such as the omission of grammatical functors and a special lexicon. " (Ellis: Understanding Second Language Acquisition, p.137)

Asked, whether people all spoke the same kind of English, the workers responded with examples of clearly differentiated forms of English, based on conceptual and communicative criteria. The result of their own endavours was perceived as a `domestic English'. As Olga says:

> " I am talking funny English, not proper English. I am not satisfied, I want to speak nice English. When I talk Zulu I talk nicely and it's easy to talk. My English is a domestic English; it's not education English."

Her lament reflects the survey of the needs of English amongst workers, as conducted by Sheila Gordon on the Rand:

"My beginner learners have asked for language that expresses a certain register. They want to understand and speak 'deep' English, which they describe as the language used between two mother tongue speakers. (...) It seems that speaking in the right register, even if this is not appreciated by English speakers, is important for people's sense of dignity, especially when whites expect blacks to speak in pigin English."

Strategies for English

In response to the inadequacies of the 'school in the kitchen' and out of their experience of frustration many workers insist that their children have to begin the long battle for English before they themselves did: the process has to start at school.

Chosing the subjects offered according to the medium of instruction is one way, avoiding overcrowded and understaffed conditions in black township schools by sending one's children to school in other areas is another. The prospect of English being the medium of instruction is an added plus.

Suzie instructed her children

"to take the English subjects at school. They mustn't say: no, we won't take the English subjects, because it doesn't matter; I said: you must."

Interestingly, the choice of subject appears less important than the medium of instruction - a fact which a story told by another

woman bears out:

> "I was speaking to some parents from KwaMashu at the creche [for so-called coloured children in Sydenham] this morning. They've got three kids. One was at school, but the mother decided that she wants her to come to the creche because the younger one is there and she can say a few things in English, and she understands instructions in English. The other one is in class two and can't understand English. So they were talking about taking her out of school and putting her in the creche. English is becoming more important than basic education."

English is the means towards `making it in life', getting jobs and coping with the system. Specific subject-knowledge is thus considered less important than the acquisition of the language which opens up access to development.

For themselves, some workers have developed strategies for improving their language skills. Both Priscilla Hlongwane and Susie Nkabinde spend as much time as possible reading. Initially, says Susie,

> "I used to read, books, anything. You know those people who about sending papers to learn scriptures: Watchtower. They used to send me their English scripture and I used to read those papers. That helped me. Now I can read anything I get in English."

Priscilla worked out a method of reading newspapers :

> "You know, if you read papers, if you always read the Daily

News, you learn English. At lunchtime I close my door and lie on my bed and read. Yesterday's paper, or the day before's - as long as it's English. Newspapers are good because most of them have short stories you can understand, because once you have understood the first sentence you know very well what this paper's talking about."

English as a social indicator

The domestic workers I spoke to made it clear that English is not merely a means of communication, a necessary prerequisite for getting a job in the cities. English is a means of breaking out of stereo-types (like: Blacks speak pigin) and the relations of dominance, as established and maintained by English at the workplace. Their life experience has taught them that English is a means of control, both at the workplace and outside.

Firstly, they asserted that

"English is power, power that you could be able to challenge most things in English, because people believe that every white person speaks English and every instruction outside your home is in English, and the laws that govern you - in order to understand the laws you must know English. Everything that is in power, in control, is in English. To take the power you must take the language."

Secondly, they dispelled with a number of popular myths like 'English is a sign of people's class position'. Their own experiences have taught them that in many cases access to English

is dependent on financial resourcefulness. The language is thus often associated with those who live in better parts of the townships, "in big houses." Furthermore, those people

> " speak English with their children because they want their children to go to the white people's schools. Like my neighbours - they've got a big house, their children don't go to our schools, they go to Wentworth school."

They also recognise, that some people only suggest to be better off by speaking English, even when it is rude or unneccessary to do so. Both Susie and Priscilla criticise the way in which people mix English and Zulu in the presence of non-English speakers:

> "If there is no need to speak English they show off. Because if we sit together, we speak Zulu - there's nothing very important we're talking about."

> "You know when people have a bit of education they like to mix English and Zulu. If they are together they don't want to speak their pure language, they want to mix it even when they are with people who are not educated. Sometimes they are not even saying the right thing.If you know English you can hear they are not saying the right words. They're showing off."

However, to believe that English is the language of only the educated is another myth. A middle-aged woman was observed in central Johannesburg reprimanding some teenage girls for speaking rudely, in English, to a man who could be their grandfather. The

woman said that if speaking a foreign language to old people meant being educated she was glad that she was not educated. (Nomavenda Mathiane: The triumph of English. in: Frontline, Sept 1989)

Similarly, Susie Nkabine relates the following experience:

> "When people in the townships hear others speak English they think they must be educated people or clever people, like teachers and nurses, and people like that. We think they must be educated and never think that they are like us - we never went to school for a long time.
> When people find out that you haven't been to school, you're not educated they are surprised. They ask: Where did you learn English?"

She concludes that English is not connected to education but intelligence - which for her means resourcefulness and determination to succeed:

> "English is not connected to Education. Not at all. We haven't been to school for a long time but we can speak English. I can speak Afrikaans. I've got no problems, but I haven't been to school up to the high standards. It's just your brain. You just use your brain. Then you know. I'm learning from you, I'm learning from my employers - when they speak I listen to what they say, then I know. Even if the children ask me to speak Zulu, I say:no. I want to learn English from you."

Similarly, Olga had refered to the wisdom of life experience which determines 'cleverness'. If one defines an educated person

as someone who can identify his/her own needs, set goals and develop strategies for meeting needs and monitoring his/her actions, there is no doubt that these women would be termed highly educated.

English as an instrument for change

> "We need to break out and use English as a vehicle for communication and as an instrument of liberation. It frees one from the confinement of thinking like a Zulu or a Mosotho." (Sej Motau, in: Matlhasedi vol 7, no 1/2, 1988)

In early 1990 some 100000 people in Durban were addressed by leaders of the mass democratic movement. They spoke in English. Their choice of language was presumably informed by the considerations expressed by Motau. Since the system of apartheid divided people into different cultural groups on the basis of their language, a counter ideology to apartheid has to target the language issue as a central component. Since the fifties English has been discussed as a lingua franca and vehicle of unification and liberation.

The domestic workers interviewed showed an acute insight into the need for English proficiency as a tool of social literacy and political transformation. One woman had a clear awareness and understanding of the politics involved in the language debate. "English is the umbrella of all the languages in South Africa" asserted Priscilla Hlongwane, pointing to the need for a national language with which to communicate outside Zulu-speaking Natal.

Language policies must be informed by the concrete experiences voiced by those people who are most affected by future provisions: workers, and particularly women. If, as this research showed and studies of second language learning bear out, workers acquire English in non-formal learning processes rather than through systematic and formal study, informal structures should be targetted for assistence and support. In the case of domestic workers a number of suggestions have emerged: employers must be informed about the damaging consequences of speaking foreigner language, pigin or any other linguistic deformation, and they must become aware of the way in which their social power-relations are reinfoced through linguistic interactions. Conversely,, domestic workers must insist on their right to be addressed in 'deep' English and their request to use English as a means of communication must be respected.

There is clearly a great need for English reading material, particularly for adult new readers. Some projects and organisations are beginning to address this need by producing books, readers and magazines in simple (but grammatically correct) English. At the same time there is a strong argument for a redefinition of `correct' English usage. As Njabulo Ndebele stated:

> "South African English must be open to the possibility of its becoming a new language.This may not happen only at the level of vocabulary, but also with regard to grammatical adjustments that may result from the proximity of English

to indigenous African languages." (Njabulo Ndebele: The English Language and Social Change in South Africa. in: English Academy Review 4, 1986, p. 1-16)

On a different scale the oral medium of radio should be used to promote English. Domestic workers spend a good deal of time listening to the radio while engaged in tedious and lonely housework. Stories in simple English would serve the double function of entertainment and language instruction. Recommendations for policy-makers have to focus on the process of language learning, and consider that you learn best, when you enjoy it, not just when you need it.

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