

25th KUASS
(Kyoto University African Studies Seminar)

**Ukuringa’ – The role of language in negotiating male youth
township identity on a south African street corner**

Date: May 26, 2014 (Mon.), 15:00 – 17:00

Venue: Kyoto University Inamori Center, 3rd Floor, Small Seminar Room

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ABSTRACT:

In South African townships, male youth spend a significant portion of their time among peers on street corners. During the period they draw on communicative styles as of the multiple ways to enacting their youth identities. The research locates itself on the township street corners of Thokoza, east of Johannesburg, where I explore male youth communicative functions. The main research question asks, how do communicative practices function to construct black male township youth identities? The intention of the research is to explore the ways young men in townships manage their social identities and constitute and reconstitute social divisions among themselves. The theoretical framework followed the works of Bucholtz and Hall’s (2005) tactics of intersubjectivity to define the parameters in which identities are performed by male youth on street corners. I interrogate multiple ways in which identities are created in the urban framework and how linguistic features take on social meanings that index different urban identities. Showing that, the ways in which young men construct their identities draw on various linguistic features.

The research draws on data that were collected over a period of two years in the township of Thokoza. To unpack the social identities of male youth I drew on the methodological framework of the ethnography of communication. The process allowed systematic qualitative observation of the three groups of young men taking part in the study. The approach enables the provision of a detailed account of their everyday lives and social practices. I would use observation as a primary method and audio and video recordings of participants’ interactions. The 31 participants in the research lived in Thokoza. Some had attended model c ‘previously white schools’ while most went to government public schools. Others were pursuing university studies.

Across the three groups, there are levels of being seen to represent a township identity ranging from what are perceived to be ‘softies’ to those considered ‘hardcore.’ These differences are reflected in the way they use language. The choice of language style

also shows to some extent, group affiliation and ways in which male youth adopt speech practices that reflect township styles. Youth who are considered to be softies often link with one or two individuals who are ‘hardcore’ and borrow new terms from them. Youth who are considered to be hardcore have the ability to be innovative within their group, and to influence the communication of other groups. Softies spend less time on the township streets and have greater access to economic advancement through family structures. Their use of language reflects these opportunities. ‘Hardcore’ youth do not have the same advantages and spend much of their time on street corners. For male youth, occupation of the street corners enables them to be innovative with their linguistic style and for many this is how an authentic township identity is achieved.

The results also showed some of the distinctive features of male youth speech, looking at their social meanings and the significance of language use among male youth in Thokoza. Furthermore it examines how male youth incorporate different languages into their talk as well as resemantization and their use of metaphor. In addition, I compare how the three groups borrow and invent new words and phrases. The ability to invent new words places one in the position of being seen as authentic. The research further showed the discursive strategies used when negotiating authentic personas in the township spaces.

Keywords: language, youth identities, intersubjective tactics

Co-hosted with:

Japan Society for the Promotion of Science Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (S)
“Comprehensive Area Studies on Coexistence and Conflict Resolution Realizing the African Potentials” (The representative, Prof. Ohta Center for African Area Studies, Kyoto Univ.)