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Reaching for the Heart: An Analysis of Language as a Weapon of Empathy For Three Capetonians

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Reaching for the Heart: An Analysis of Language as a Weapon of Empathy For Three Capetonians

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Abstract

In this paper, I examine the role that cross-cultural language study plays in the lives of three Capetonians in order to explore its capacity to foster empathy between people of different backgrounds. Framed in the context of South African history and modern academic discourse around language use in educational and public spaces in the country, I present the stories of my three interviewees and analyze particular experiences that they relayed in order to trace trends of empathy and understanding through their language use.

Through my discussion of this qualitative data, I reach the conclusion that language can be an effective tool to promote cross-cultural understanding and empathy, particularly when the multilingualist engages continually in the use of their language skills and the exploration of cultural contexts associated with such languages.

Key Words: language, linguistics, South Africa, empathy, culture, understanding, translanguaging, education

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Introduction

Language is a powerful tool that has been used throughout South African history to promote the agendas of dominant groups (Msila, 2007). Under the apartheid government, language was strategically employed in the realm of education in order to serve the dual and contradictory purposes of popular division and unification; promotion of separate African indigenous languages facilitated the regime's "divide and rule" tactics, while mandated Afrikaans instruction in the later apartheid years aimed to integrate the nation's various cultural groups into one economic and social system dominated by the white Afrikaner-run regime (Van Heerden, 1991). In today's post-apartheid South Africa, with its 11 official languages and countless distinct cultural groups, language instruction programs in the nation's education system have inherited this potent and recent history of politicization. Teachers and policy-makers are now left to grapple with the essential question: How can language be transformed from a tool of oppression into a facilitator of individual liberation and cross-cultural understanding?

In the academic discourse surrounding issues of language in post-apartheid South Africa, there is great emphasis on the evaluation and promotion of home language instruction in schools in efforts to improve the overall quality and effectiveness of the nation's education system, which has been ranked far inferior to those of the Global North (Pillay & Yu, 2015). There is substantial discussion of the role that language plays in fostering the identities of historically disadvantaged groups, and in this context, African indigenous language instruction is often framed as a means by which to break down the colonial and apartheid legacies that permeate South African society (Makalela, 2016; Mkhize, 2016). While the benefits of instruction in one's native tongue are manifold, there

is little attention paid to the investigation into the benefits of cross-cultural language studies, especially as they pertain to cross-cultural understanding and empathy.

In my research, I set out to explore the role that multilingualism plays in the lives of three people in Cape Town. I spoke to my interviewees about their experiences acquiring and using language skills, paying particular focus to the ways in which language shapes their interactions with people of different cultural backgrounds from their own. In doing so, I hoped to answer the essential question: Can cross-cultural language study foster understanding and empathy between people of different cultures? In this paper, I will present my research findings in order to justify my assertion that it can. After a brief personal note, I will begin by presenting an overview of relevant literature to this topic so that I may frame my research appropriately in the context of the current academic discourse about language in South Africa. Next I will describe my research methodology, which I will pair with a thorough examination of my own positionality in the context of my study so that the reader may better qualify and interact with the content of my paper. I will then present my findings and move into a discussion around my research question, where I will establish that cross-cultural language study has the potential to foster empathy and understanding between people of different cultures.

My research for this report was conducted during a one-month period of time as the culminating project of a three-and-a-half month period of study in South Africa in 2017 with the School of International Training. Due to the vast limitations that these research circumstances present, it is important that the reader note that my research findings and conclusions are only a product of the

perspectives of the three individuals whom I interviewed for this project, along with my own perspectives gained from my personal experience and survey of literature. I do not claim to represent any conclusions drawn in this paper on any scale greater than that specified, as to do so would be a vast oversimplification of a complex and important issue.

A Personal Note on Language and Empathy

I grew up in the United States, where I learned Spanish as a second language throughout primary and secondary school. At the primary level, my school only had sufficient funding to offer one language study program, and so I was siphoned into learning Spanish, a language which, although spoken by over 35 million people in the United States, I seldom felt the need to use or even think about outside of the classroom setting (Gonzalez-Barrera & Lopez, 2013). Even in middle and high school, when my schools began to offer more language options and the rigor of my courses dramatically increased, I struggled to reach proficiency as my circle of predominantly English-speaking peers sheltered me from ever having to put my skills to the test. The curricular side of my Spanish education seemed cumbersome and impractical, and so many of the students at my high school stopped studying Spanish (or their foreign language of choice) after the 10th grade, logging the fewest number of language courses acceptable to graduate.

That summer after 10th grade, I had the great opportunity to travel to Spain for a month to study Spanish language and culture. I lived in Barcelona, where I took classes with an American program, and though my language skills improved dramatically through my increased exposure and practice, the

experience was far from immersive, and I found myself avoiding speaking Spanish in public settings unless deemed absolutely necessary. In a city as tourist-filled and international as Barcelona, this was hardly a problem, as most people spoke to me in English of their own accord once it was established that my Spanish skills were unimpressive. Though I was lucky to have this experience of going abroad and undoubtedly benefitted from it in many ways, the trip did little to dismantle my conception of English as the norm of communication in my life and in the world. By my 12th grade year, I left the Spanish classroom and enrolled instead in an independent study course in Spanish where I wouldn't need to speak the language every day. As a result, I quickly lost what little confidence I did have in speaking Spanish, and my language skills themselves began to fall by the wayside while I focused instead on prioritizing my various other courses of study.

My current home institution, Cornell University, boasts programs of study for 52 different foreign languages, a repertoire that, interestingly, only barely overlaps with South Africa's list of 11 official languages, on the basis of an isiZulu course that is video-broadcasted from Yale University ("Language Study at Cornell," 2017). As a testament to Cornell's understanding of the value of global citizenship and cross-cultural studies, the majority of the university's undergraduate students are required to enroll in at least two semester-long courses in one of these language programs as part of the requirements for their degree (this assumes that students will likely be continuing with a language study that they've already begun in their previous schooling and that they'll therefore reach a relatively high level of proficiency). At Cornell, I am a student in the College of Engineering pursuing a degree in Materials Science and Engineering,

which comes along with a rigorous curriculum that, the university has decided, leaves insufficient room in my four undergraduate years for me to fulfill a language study requirement. In accordance with this logic, no students in the College of Engineering are required to fulfill a graduation language requirement (“Degree Requirements,” 2017).

In my life today, I am not often challenged to depart from my communicative comfort zone; I hear countless languages being spoken around me on the streets of New York City and across Cornell’s campus, but the street signs and movies and comedy nights and public transportation announcements in my communities are all in my mother tongue. There are spaces in the United States where this would not be the case, but my linguistic, educational, racial, and class privilege allows me to remain separate from these spaces. In this process, I am also isolated from people, backgrounds, opinions, and beliefs that are different from my own, a phenomenon which, on a large scale, has been cited as a cause of recent and frightening trends of xenophobia in the United States (Tate, 2016). As the rise of populism and nationalism in the US and throughout the world gains popular and governmental support, it is more important than ever to find ways to foster empathy and understanding between people. South Africa, too, with its countless cultures and subcultures as well as its history of oppression and division, has great stake in this quest for weapons of empathy as the nation strives to redefine itself in light of its post-apartheid democracy. As I’ve engaged with my studies and conducted this research project, I’ve been especially motivated by the similarities between the US and South African contexts, and I plan to look for ways to apply key takeaways from this research project in the context of my life and language studies when I return home.

Literature Review and Historical Context

For much of this paper, the data and discussion that I put forth will be focused on the theme of multilingualism, or the ability of people to read, write, speak, and otherwise communicate in multiple languages. In this section, I will attempt to provide the reader with an overview of the current academic discourse in South Africa surrounding the benefits of multilingualism by presenting a large majority of the literature that I will reference in my analysis so that I might better convey the relevance of my research on language and empathy. Yet, while multilingualism is the word of the day, I'd like to begin this literature review by first presenting some conclusions and perspectives of academics related to South African unilingualism, or the use of only one language in a space of discourse, in order to demonstrate the complexity and implications of debates between unilingualism and multilingualism in post-apartheid South Africa.

South Africa's linguistic and cultural diversity faced centuries of erasure and oppression from white colonists and then the apartheid regime before its official recognition in the 1994 democratic constitution with the inclusion of a provision to establish 11 different official languages (Msila, 2007). Since the beginning of European colonization in South Africa, oppressive groups have gone to great lengths to undermine the country's vast multiculturalism in their use of tactics of forced cultural and linguistic assimilation as a way to promote their own authority (Msila, 2007; Van Heerden, 1991). Under the rule of first the Dutch East India Company and then the British Empire, schools were set up with the intention of asserting the new social orders that each authority commanded. These schools educated slaves and indigenous people with relation to their prescribed roles in South African society and promoted ideologies, such as

Christianity, meant to brainwash the people into acceptance of white supremacy as a norm (Msila, 2007).

Throughout this time, language played a very poignant role in the facilitation of colonialism. During the period of early Dutch colonization, the Afrikaans language was developed – a creole tongue that incorporated parts of Dutch and Khoisan, along with influences from other indigenous and slave languages. Afrikaans became widely used as the medium of communication between colonists and their slaves as a means of bridging previous linguistic divides (Van Heerden, 1991). When the English took over rule of the Cape Colony, however, in 1795, English was pronounced as the official language, and all subsequent public discourse was ordered to be conducted in this manner (Msila, 2007). This mandate undermined the usage of all of the other languages spoken in South Africa, as the people were forced to learn how to communicate in English in order to participate in the operations of their own country. After the end of the Anglo-Boer War in 1902, Dutch was adopted as a second official language, but even this small expansion of language policy served to emphasize European authority and dehumanize the indigenous majority through invalidation of their languages and cultures (Viljoen, 1923).

Under apartheid, the Afrikaner nationalist government explored other ways of using language as a tool to facilitate segregation and oppression. Various acts of legislation, such as the 1953 Bantu Education Act, the 1963 Coloured Persons Education Act, and the 1965 Indians Education Act created a system of education based fundamentally on the practice of racial, cultural, and linguistic segregation. Such a setup appealed to state leaders as it facilitated their “divide and rule” philosophy, which aimed to maintain apartheid’s social order by

keeping racial and cultural groups ignorant of each other and distributing tiered privileges so that the oppressed came to look down on those who were even more oppressed than them instead of revolting together against their oppressor (Msila, 2007).

In 1974, after South Africa was declared a republic and freed from British rule, the government passed legislation that dictated that all black schools had to incorporate Afrikaans as a language of instruction in addition to and on equal footing with English (“A History of Apartheid in South Africa,” 2016). This demand was idealistic, of course, as it did not necessarily account for the linguistic abilities of teachers in these schools, many of who could not speak Afrikaans. It additionally marked a critical shift in linguistic thought; though Afrikaans originated as a language spoken primarily by colored people, the descendants of the slaves of the Dutch colony, the nationalist Afrikaner government had since adopted it as their part of their brand and identity (Van Heerden, 1991). White Afrikaaners justified this usurpation by citing linguistic differences between different dialects of the Afrikaans spoken by the different groups, and then proclaiming “Colored Afrikaans” as a separate language from “proper Afrikaans.” This dissociation with the language’s roots was so effective that Afrikaans became colloquially associated with the apartheid regime; this association was the cause of mass disapproval of the 1974 mandate and led to the eventual uprising and massacre of students in Soweto in 1976, which brought apartheid to the attention of the world (Van Heerden, 1991).

In light of the troubled and intertwined histories of language and oppression in South Africa, the language clause in the 1994 democratic constitution of South Africa, in addition to its enumeration of the nation’s 11

official languages, includes provisions that call upon the state and its affiliates to actively work for the promotion of indigenous languages, as a means of redress (Republic of South Africa Government, 1996). However, the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, while perhaps stripped of the legal authority that they once wielded, still echo throughout many areas of South African society in ways that greatly complicate the path to the realization of this goal. Though Afrikaans is broadly spoken today by more colored people than white people, many still colloquially associate the language with apartheid and Afrikaner nationalism, which has led many to reject it as a standard of public discourse in favor of English (“South Africa’s Stellenbosch University...”, 2015). Despite negative connotations associated with unilingualism in South Africa, particularly where English is the accepted language of communication, perhaps partially due to this and historical public resistance to widespread Afrikaans use, scholars have cited certain benefits of unilingualism that are hard to abandon in the name of diversity (Alexander, 2005). The first, and perhaps most highly weighted benefit of a unilingual society is rooted in the fact that English colonialism is not a phenomenon that is unique to South African history. Since British imperialists colonized a great amount of the world at one point or another, the English language has such a global footprint that it is commonly accepted to be the international language of communication (Alexander, 2005; Pillay & Yu, 2015). This means that a nation’s ability to participate in world markets and discourse in other areas besides economics (i.e. law, tourism, science, etc.) is heavily reliant on the ability of that country’s citizens to engage in an English-speaking society. Alexander (2005) analyzes the implications that this phenomenon has on South African society, where the desire of many people to help realize a multilingual

and multicultural post-apartheid nation is directly at odds with their relative need to advance themselves economically in a system where mastery of English finally gives them socio-economic mobility after years of racialized oppression. He says:

Most post-colonial African elites, for reasons that are both well known and complex, chose to behave as though they were dealing with a “unilingual” environment, exacerbated by the fact that the only language they could use as a “unifying” tool and strategy was the language of the former colonial overlord (8).

Indeed, in a multilingual context where clear communication is needed, it takes less time and effort to fall back on English-speaking norms than it does to encourage the extensive multilingualism that would be necessary to facilitate communication in all 11 official languages (Alexander, 2005). Pillay and Yu (2015) characterize this conflict as a battle between an “efficiency mindset” which prioritizes concrete, measurable, and short-sighted benefits, such as economic advantages, and a “social justice mindset” which is, they argue, more important and more often ignored by institutions that have the power to influence the way that South Africans interact with language. In their study, they looked at enrolment trends in language classes among students at South African institutions of higher learning over a period of 13 years and used the resulting data as a framework through which to consider and criticize language instruction policies and offerings at these institutions. They found in their research that rates of enrollment in English courses are on average about three times higher than the rates of enrollment in indigenous language courses, and that the large majority of students enrolled in language courses of all kinds are African (the racial categories used to organize data were the same as those introduced by the apartheid regime: African, Colored, Indian, and White). When looked at side-by-side with recent census data about mother tongues, a clear picture is painted that

corroborates the trends that Alexander observed: massive numbers of students who speak indigenous languages as their first language are flocking to learn English in school, while native English speakers are content enough with their own language skills that they do not try to pick up additional languages. Because of this association of English with intellectualism and education, indigenous languages become accordingly associated with low-level thinking and stupidity, a reaction that imperialist and oppressive groups have used strategically throughout history in order to socialize South Africans into accepting systems of inequality as the natural order of things.

Educational institutions have power to affect and ultimately determine trends like this based on the decisions that they make regarding resource allocation and academic requirements. Hence, the fact that unilingualism still appears to be a lived reality at colleges and universities across the country indicates clearly that there is a disconnect between the constitution's goals of promoting multilingualism and the practical appeal of a national public discourse dominated by English.

When taken out of the South African context with its vast multiculturalism and its less-than-glamorous history of forced use of English and Afrikaans, unilingualism is still an alluring ideal – after all, translation is time-consuming and expensive. Consequently, a significant amount of research has been conducted around multilingualism and its many benefits, as part of general efforts to convince people of its merits over unilingualism and to dismantle modern legacies of colonialism.

Africa is an interesting place to study multilingualism, first because of its history of widespread European colonialism, but also due to the linguistic

genealogy that has produced several of the languages spoken across the continent today. Bantu languages are characterized by their use of a series of common prefixes and root words, and the 250-odd languages that belong to this classification are geographically distributed throughout most of southern Africa (Knappert, 1987). Because of these similarities, speakers of one Bantu language are often able to understand someone speaking another Bantu language without any prior study of that tongue (Gooskens, 2007). This phenomenon demonstrates a unique circumstance for studies of multilingualism, one that is particularly applicable to South Africa, as nine out of the nation's 11 official languages (and all of its indigenous languages) are of the Bantu classification: Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and isiZulu.

Makalela (2016) uses the similarities of South Africa's Bantu languages as a launching point for her studies of Ubuntu, which is an African philosophy stemming from a concept of shared humanity, often described by the phrase "I am because you are; you are because we are." Makalela describes case studies of multilingual primary schools in different regions of South Africa, and argues based on her findings that students' understandings of multiple languages leads them to be better thinkers, as the knowledge that they acquire through their education must transcend language and therefore be processed on a more intimate level. Each language in which information is heard, seen, conveyed, or processed adds a new layer of understanding that poses the student to better apply their learning to the world around them.

Mkhize (2016) takes this a step further by tying these multiple perspectives to opportunities for identity formation among students, who, when given the tools consider their surroundings through the lens of different

languages, find freedom to explore and define their own perspectives and positionality in the context of diversity. This process is especially productive and critical in post-apartheid South Africa, where the previous system of imposed racial categorization and the resulting all-encompassing systems of control based on these restrictive boxes left little room for people to explore, develop and proclaim their own identities. In light of the new opportunities for self-identification that the repeal of such legal racial categories affords, multilingualism, especially in the world of education, has the power to help characterize a new landscape where identity is fluid and self-affirmed.

Another benefit of multilingual education that Mkhize (2016) describes relates as well to the dismantling of internalized oppression. As I discussed earlier, the predominantly English educational instruction in South Africa reinvestigates the colonialist idea that English is the language of intellectualism and academic advancement. As demonstrated by Pillay and Yu's data (2015), this emphasis on English leads to a reduction of emphasis on indigenous languages, and with that, these Bantu languages become associated with stupidity and primitive thinking. By making changes to instead use indigenous languages as languages of instruction, especially at the primary and secondary levels, students can come to understand knowledge as a force that transcends language. They can additionally learn to view indigenous languages as capable of communicating intellectual thought, and with that, African students can come to view themselves and their cultures as more intelligent.

The policies set forth by South Africa's Department of Basic Education dictating the structure of language education at the primary and secondary level allow room for students to learn languages at the Home Language, First

Additional Language, and Second Additional Language levels. While this structure allows students to study multiple languages as subjects in school, the separation of languages into different isolated courses does not give students the opportunity to fully realize the benefits of multilingualism. Krause and Prinsloo (2016) argue that this format of language instruction causes students to feel a disconnect between their home language and their additional language, which causes them to continue to consider the language of instruction as a carrier of knowledge and to simultaneously become disengaged with their language studies which they then consider to be just another subject in school. They and Mkhize (2016) argue that, in order for multilingual education to be the most effective, multiple languages must be used interchangeably throughout general instruction and school activities, a dynamic which allows students to gain better mastery of all languages used and also feel more invested in their language studies. The department's mandate that schools conduct their classes and administrative functions in one language goes against this idea and fails to promote effective multilingualism, despite the department's claims to support the further use of multiple languages, and particularly African languages, in the nation's schools ("The Incremental Introduction....," 2013).

This unilingual instruction policy additionally makes education more difficult for students who already speak multiple languages. Based on its practical appeal and politicization, English is often the favored language of instruction at many schools that teach students who speak a different language at home. In such environments, students' mastery of English is sometimes insufficient to communicate instruction in all subjects, which presents a barrier to their academic success. In such circumstances, teachers often employ a tactic called

“translanguaging,” where the home language and language of instruction are mixed together in their use, filling each other in so that information can be more clearly conveyed to a multilingual audience (Krause & Prinsloo, 2016). This practice, conducted by teachers under the radar in many cases in order to avoid criticism from policy-bound administrators, is effectively the model of education advocated by Makalela (2016) and Mkhize (2016), and brings with it the benefits discussed previously. However, Krause and Prinsloo (2016) identify a great problem with the current use of translanguaging, based in the disconnect between policy and practice in schools; since government standards favor unilingualism, students who learn in multilingual translanguaging settings often do not reach a level of proficiency in their official language of instruction and consequently perform at a lower level on examinations. They lament, “teachers in this environment feel the pedagogic need for [translanguaging], but the benefits do not materialise in learners’ good results, because the rules and regulations do not consider actual practice” (p. 355).

In light of these conflicts between unilingualism and multilingualism, language legislators and policymakers in South Africa are left to grapple with the balancing of two opposing forces. On one hand, unilingualism is beneficial because it facilitates efficiency in mass information transfer and also favors widespread languages, like English, that give their speakers the ability to participate more easily in global discourse. On the other hand, multilingualism is an effective tool in promoting deeper learning and the breaking down of colonialism on the individual level, as it allows for the exploration of complex identities and perspectives rooted in a sense of commonality through diversity. These two dynamics operate on opposite scales, where the first sees its impact in

intergroup dynamics and the second operates at the intrapersonal level. What about the space in between – how does language impact interpersonal interactions? The post-structuralist lens described by McKinney and Norton (2008) emphasizes the role of individual interactions in characterizing and breaking down systems of social order; based on this framework, one can begin to consider the ways in which everyday interpersonal exchanges interact with language and particularly multilingualism. Research in this area has the potential to upset current conceptions about the beneficial effects of multilingualism, and a focus on studying empathy and cross-cultural learning in such research can additionally be used to frame these benefits as useful tools to promote post-apartheid healing. From there, further discussion can commence in order to evaluate plausible alternatives to current national language policies, so that the vision of an egalitarian and multilingual nation outlined in South Africa's democratic constitution can be further realized.

Methodology

Research Methods

In my experience studying engineering, most of the research that I conduct and read is based in the realm of qualitative reasoning, whereby questions have definitive answers that can be discovered and verified through experimentation and the collection of reproducible numerical data sets. As I began to work on my research involving language and empathy for this project, I immediately recognized the need to broaden the way that I think about research, and with that, conceptions of knowledge, experience and truth. In order to best prepare myself

to engage in this new area of social science research, I turned to literature to inform my understanding, most particularly, Glesne's work on qualitative inquiry (2006). Glesne discusses key differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches to research: where quantitative research is deductive, qualitative research is inductive; where quantitative research seeks to characterize a norm, qualitative research explores subjective and complex ideas; where the quantitative researcher strives to remove themselves from their results, the qualitative researcher actively engages with theirs on a personal level. For the purposes of this study, I decided that a qualitative approach would provide the best framework for me to engage with my topics, given the vastness of the topics that I would be grappling with and the limitations of my research; this approach would allow me to engage with complex themes while avoiding making harmful generalizations in the name of reaching definitive and unambiguous conclusions.

I used semi-structured interviews as my research methodology, which involved me asking my interviewees a series of pre-written questions in a casual and relaxed environment that allowed the conversation to flow more freely than it would in a formal interview. The informality in semi-structured interviews comes from an intentional effort on the part of the interviewer to allow the interviewee to define, to a reasonable extent, the direction of the conversation based on their responses. The researcher additionally has the power to choose to rephrase, add, or omit interview questions based on their relevance to the discussion's progression and the interview's goals (Longhurst, 2016). This methodology was appropriate for my research as it aimed to develop a personal connection between each interviewee and myself in order to make them feel more comfortable in sharing their stories with me. I strategically wrote my list of interview questions

with this goal of promoting the participant's comfort in the forefront of my mind; I began each interview by asking a series of questions that established some essential context to the conversation (i.e. What languages do you speak? What languages do your parents speak? How did you learn them?) and also helped to acclimate the participant to the research environment before moving into questions that required them to think more deeply about their lived experiences and opinions (i.e. Is language linked to culture? How has language shaped your life?) (Kvale, 1996). The interviews were conducted in restaurants in the Cape Town area that were chosen by each respective participant, and as compensation for each session, I paid for my interviewee's refreshments.

Given the short time frame of the project, I chose to take advantage of my SIT network and recruit my research participants through personal channels (I also figured that the nature of this strategy might additionally help my interviewees feel more comfortable speaking with me than they would if I were a complete stranger). I set out initially with the goal of interviewing four people who could speak at least three of South Africa's official languages, and while I did not seek participants of a particular age group or who aligned themselves with a particular cultural, racial, or gender identity, I was hopeful that I would encounter diversity among my participants in these areas so that my research could be informed by a wider variety of life experiences. In the end, due to time and scheduling limitations, I conducted interviews with three individuals, whom I will introduce presently.

My first interviewee is referred to throughout this paper by the pseudonym Nhex. Nhex is a middle-aged black man, who works as a private driver in the Cape Town area. He speaks all 11 of South Africa's official

languages and loves to learn more, though he identifies very strongly and proudly with his Zulu heritage and isiZulu mother tongue.

My second interviewee, Rebecca, requested that I use her real name in this paper in place of a pseudonym. Rebecca is a white millennial woman who does work at an NGO related to rural women's empowerment. She speaks English as her mother tongue, but is also able to speak isiXhosa, Afrikaans, French, Spanish, and Kiswahili, to varying degrees. Her ancestry is German and Afrikaaner, but she does not identify strongly with either of those identities.

My final interviewee, referred to under the pseudonym George, is a black millennial man who is active in the world of academia. George recently returned from studying in England, where he received a master's degree in biodiversity, conservation and management. He speaks all 11 South African languages, as well as Mandarin. His mother is Tsonga and his father is Pedi, and he speaks Xitsonga as his first language.

Ethical Reflexivity

The lens through which I have gathered, analyzed, and presented my research in this paper is one constructed by a combination of the influences of all of my various identities and lived experiences. I echo Maxwell, Abrams, Zungu, and Mosavel (2015) when I claim that an understanding of my intersectional positionality in this research space is essential to the reader's qualified interpretation of my discussion and findings, given that objective research is a virtual impossibility in the realm of qualitative inquiry. In the research phase, my salient identities, which I will promptly discuss, undoubtedly played a role in determining the nature and extent of the information conveyed to me by my

various interview participants, particularly due to the nature of the informality and flexibility in semi-structured interviews. I used my own judgment in the interview process to elect the best ways to phrase questions based on information already conveyed, and also to determine when and how to go about asking off-script follow-up questions to further explore ideas and perspectives brought up by each of my interviewees. Therefore, the raw data that I recorded, though consisting of the direct words of my interview participants, feels my presence as an author as well.

With respect to my data discussion and analysis, as well as my synthesis of past academic research in my literature review, the scaffolding of arguments and placement of details and stories are all my own, and consequently reflect my own ideas and biases, in terms of my decisions regarding not only what data to present but also how to draw conclusions from it. Here my positionality is perhaps the most relevant to the reader's informed interaction with my research, and so in the interest of mediating as much of my own subjectivity as I reasonably can, I will take this opportunity to discuss a variety of my own identities that I believe may have impacted my research.

Owing to the topical focus of my research, my identity as a unilingual English-speaker undoubtedly played a large role in all parts of the research process. While I theoretically support multilingualism and acknowledge its benefits over unilingualism, my English language skills have afforded me the privilege of never having to learn how to communicate effectively in anything other than my mother tongue. In a purely practical sense, my linguistic limitations necessitated that all of my data be collected in English. This was not a pressing roadblock with regard to basic understanding in my interviews, as each

of the interviewees actively affirmed their comfort with the English language when asked; however, the irony of unpacking the significance of speaking to someone in their mother tongue while conversing with interviewees in a second language of theirs, as was the case with Nhex and George, was not lost on me. For these two interviews, there could have been subterranean power dynamics and linguistic limitations at play that might have affected the degree to which Nhex and George felt comfortable and able to share their opinions about and perceptions of language. Then, in all of my interviews and writing, my English unilingualism stands to establish that my proclaimed belief in the benefits of multilingualism is either too weak or too recent for me to have put in the effort to learn a second language. The truth lies in a combination of these two reasons, whereby my fledgling appreciation of multilingualism exists both in the context of and, to a degree, in spite of the poor emphasis on language education relative to my technical education observed in my experiences throughout my youth and current schooling. This perspective likely influences the way that I engage with the themes of this paper.

Another important and salient facet of my identity in my research is my whiteness. As is true in both this South African context and the American context in which I usually exist, the implications of my whiteness are not merely skin deep. Humans have created a notion of race that, compounded with imperialist and capitalist histories, has programmed my whiteness to carry with it vast amounts of privilege at the expense of people of color. The influence of colonialism in South Africa persists into the modern day, and therefore, in my interactions with people of color in particular, my skin color cannot be ignored. In my interviews with Nhex and George, both black men, my whiteness would

have created a power imbalance between us, accentuated by my positionality as the interviewer and theirs as the research subject, which could have influenced their responses to my questions. In my interview with Rebecca, where both of us were white, any power imbalances would not have been a result of race, but of other aspects of our identities; however, our mutual whiteness might have impacted the candidness of her expression of opinions about how white people, and particularly white English speakers, interact with language in South Africa. Throughout my written analysis too, it is important to note that there are potential effects of my whiteness represented in the conclusions that I draw and the perspectives that I relay.

The aspect of my identity that I consider most salient in my everyday life, and which likely shone through in the creation of this paper is my identity as a woman. In considering this facet of myself, I initially had a very hard time coming up with potential repercussions that it might have manifested in my research, since the aspects of language that I'm considering here do not seem to have much to do, on the surface, with gender identity; yet, while people of all different genders speak languages and experience culture, my female identity in the interview process might have affected the way that my interviewees conveyed their thoughts to me. Nhex, in discussing his experiences interacting with his friends at boarding school, might have been more inclined to explain or justify their behavior to me since I am a woman. Rebecca might have felt more comfortable speaking to a woman than she would have if I were a man, since she identifies similarly. George might have felt freer to discuss his sexual orientation with me than he would have if I were masculine-presenting.

The last part of my identity that I will discuss here is my status as an American. My nationality follows me around like a badge in South Africa, announced by my distinctive accent and confused manner of crossing the street while looking the wrong way for cars. To be American in the South African context is a status of great privilege. The dollar is strong compared to the South African Rand, my country is rich, and I can afford overseas travel, and so it is assumed that I have a lot of money, which brings with it inevitable power dynamics, especially when I interact with people who are not financially secure. Since my time living in South Africa only spanned three and a half months, it is also assumed, correctly, that after my research project concludes, I will be returning back home overseas to a space where I will not have to deal with the everyday realities lived by my interviewees. This added layer of separation from my topic and subjects of study likely led to a degree of skepticism and guardedness among my interview subjects, a trend that, though I hoped to dismantle it through the semi-structured interview format and the nature of my personal connections with my interviewees, likely pervaded my research results.

While it is important to recognize that all of these various identities have inevitably left traces of myself in this research paper, the power dynamics imposed based on my interview methodology necessitated that I make efforts to mediate my impact so as to avoid creating harmful or uncomfortable situations for my interviewees (Maxwell et al., 2015; Racine, 2011). For this reason, I provided my interview participants with a written and verbal explanation of the nature and extent of my research, including provisions relating to anonymity and confidentiality (each participant chose their own pseudonym) as well as documentation (the interviews were recorded on a basic iPhone voice recorder).

Prior to each interview, the interviewee was also informed verbally that they could choose to stop the interview, temporarily or permanently, at any point and for any reason if they changed their mind about our agreement of consent. In light of these measures, I therefore conclude that all of the information presented in this research paper was obtained in accordance with the ethical standards of the School of International Training and the Local Review Board.

Research Findings and Discussion

Nhex's Story

Nhex loves languages. He spoke gleefully and with gestures as he described to me the similarities between South Africa's Nguni languages, a sub-classification within the Bantu language group. Nhex left school in 10th grade, but he raved about linguistics like an academic, describing for me the distinctive sounds of the languages in his repertoire. "A Swati person, if he wants water, he will say, 'Ifuna amati.' In Zulu, I will say, 'Nifuna amanzi.'...You see, there is a *ti*, because isiSwati..."

Language brings people together in Nhex's world, a process that is facilitated by the similarities of Bantu languages. Growing up, Nhex attended boarding school with students from all over the country, and it was here that language began to play a large role in determining his interactions with others. Since the student body was so multicultural, the languages spoken on the playground quickly became part of his repertoire, as he worked to connect with his classmates. "Every time, as boys, we are kicking each other, someone's mentioning rude words and a challenge, you get angry – that is to learn."

These language dynamics were not unique to Nhex's boarding school experience; as an adult, he worked for a period of time in public works, performing maintenance tasks for government facilities. At this point in time, South Africa's government was beginning to promote itself as the "Rainbow Nation" that Archbishop Desmond Tutu introduced, and so public works and other similar government jobs became a microcosm of multiculturalism, a playground for the enthusiastic linguist (Nevitt, 2017). Nhex certainly qualifies as such; he says, "Sometimes I will ask your surname. By seeing your surname, I will know exactly, she is a Tswana, or she is Suthu, then I must try...to speak your language." Most people in his area of public works spoke English as a second language, the language that was used for general communication and as a unifying force among diverse people, but Nhex always found that people's faces lit up when he spoke to them in their own language, and that communication, on an individual level, then became a lot easier. "Now, oh, big smiles! Now she says, 'Oh! I didn't know now who can I speak my language with. I was just getting this place would be boring!' Now we expand our relationship at work."

In a setting like this, where several languages were spoken, the similarities between different tongues became more evident and allowed Nhex to pick up new words and phrases more easily, given his pre-exposure to isiZulu and Setswana from home. His isiZulu skills gave him access to communicating in isiXhosa, isiNdebele, and siSwati, all Nguni languages of the Bantu branch, while Setswana helped him learn Sepedi and Sesotho, which are classified as Sotho-Tswana languages also within the Bantu linguistic category. The related languages often differ only slightly from each other in word sound and meaning, and so Nhex found himself able to communicate fully and easily in all of them

without formally studying any of them. He talked to people in their language and made mistakes, then got clarification that improved his skills. He eavesdropped on conversations at restaurants and in public spaces, and used contextual clues to guess what people were saying. He listened relentlessly, and then surprised people by speaking to them in their own tongue. His advice to aspiring linguists? “Stay with the people. Hear what they are saying. If you are talented, it’s easy to cope. Unless maybe if your brains or your mind is slow to pick, but to me it was very quick.” Even for Bantu language speakers who don’t speak other languages apart from their mother tongue, there seems to be hope; Nhex laughed and said that, when he speaks his own first language, isiZulu, to the Xhosa receptionist at his current place of work, the two are able to fully understand each other without ever speaking a word in the other’s language: “We laugh and enjoy everything. Nobody teaches each other, nah-ah, we understand it.” Communication, it then seems, can transcend small differences, and draw out commonalities between people and languages, just as Makalela (2016) claims in her writings about Ubuntu.

I would have happily accepted for fact Nhex’s claim about the linguistic similarities between isiZulu and isiXhosa, but, as luck would have it, I didn’t have to. In the middle of our interview, Nhex was describing how to make *umcaba*, a traditional Zulu food with similar names in various other Nguni languages, when a woman at a nearby table started laughing and talking loudly about how much her grandson likes *umcaba* (though she called it by another name). “That woman is Xhosa!” Nhex exclaimed. The two proceeded to engage in a lengthy conversation, half in isiXhosa and half in isiZulu, about their families and work and hometowns. Though I didn’t understand the words that they were

saying, the conversation demonstrated the uniting power of language that Nhex had been speaking about, and additionally served to illustrate the great degree of cultural context that is tied to languages and shared by the peoples associated with the linguistically similar Bantu and Nguni languages.

Though Nhex spoke passionately about the linguistics and cultural associations of South Africa's Bantu languages, he also mentioned how proud he was to be a speaker of the English language. Nhex learned English in school and has used it widely in his public and professional life. In public works, English allowed him to transcend language barriers between workers and give group instruction, which calls to mind Alexander's (2006) claim about language and professionalism, where English is seen as a necessity for socioeconomic advancement. Yet, despite the colonial history that gave English the reputation of professionalism that it has in South Africa today and the use of English to dismiss the need for multilingualism, Nhex did not appear bothered by the language's widespread use. Rather, he rates it as his second favorite language, after isiZulu, and proclaims his fluency with pride.

The only South African tongue that Nhex omitted in his commendation of language was Afrikaans, and when I asked him about his opinion on its history and use, his entire demeanor changed. He fell quiet for a moment, chuckled to himself, then chose his words slowly and carefully:

Since I stayed in Soweto, that's where my parents' house is...we didn't like to see a person with your skin, which is a white person, because white people, they were our enemies – you have seen what has happened. If I see a white person I feel like “Ayy! I wonder, should I take an axe and chop you into death.” You know, because they were brutal to us....So to learn the language of your enemy is not right. In Afrikaans, I didn't like to speak Afrikaans. Not at all. But as time goes on I found, like, although I hate Afrikaans, I must understand it. I hate it. I don't want to talk about

it, because I'm proud isiZulu....Afrikaans, for me, it was just a mistake to learn it. Just a mistake. Because I didn't like Afrikaans. And even now, I learned Afrikaans in order to hear them if they are talking something which is rude or something, to be aware.... Otherwise, their culture, I don't want even to know their culture. No. That's why I say I will just say it in a simple way. Ya. I don't want to know what is the culture of them, why they do that, I don't want even to learn about that....

These remarks are interesting because they completely associate the Afrikaans language with whiteness, the same way that the Nationalist Party intended under apartheid; Nhex's opinion is somewhat unsurprising, then, considering that he lived through many of the apartheid years. However, this strong aversion to Afrikaans, though perhaps predictable, demonstrates a certain lack of understanding with regard to the language's use and origins. Separately, Nhex mentioned the high regard he has for Cape Town's Muslim community and their disciplined cultural practices, not noting the population's close ties with Afrikaans, which he associates exclusively with whiteness (Van Heerden, 1991). His professed aversion to whiteness but reverence for English also fails to take into account the varied quality of South Africa's history of oppression and limits his resulting linguistic opinions to being influenced solely by the oppression that he himself experienced at the hands of Afrikaner Nationalists.

There remain significant differences between Nhex's discussions of Bantu languages, English, and Afrikaans that make it difficult to quickly observe a generalized answer to the question of whether or not language has the capacity to carry empathy. Certainly, for Bantu and Nguni languages, Nhex's experiences of bridging linguistic divides support the claim that language can surface similarities that allow people to more readily communicate cultural information that could lead to a heightened understanding of others' backgrounds and perspectives. The

same logic applies to Nhex's thoughts on English; while the language itself seems, in his case, to have lost any previous cultural associations due to its widespread use, its facilitation of universal communication leaves room for people to use it as a tool to transmit their own cultural information and bring about empathetic results similar to those yielded by Bantu language communication.

But what of Afrikaans? Nhex's generalizations about the language demonstrate a lack of empathy towards Afrikaner culture, as well as a non-linguistic sense of empathy toward Muslim people, and his professed hatred of Afrikaans in particular indicates a lack of desire to become more empathetic towards white Afrikaners. Nhex is knowledgeable enough about Afrikaans to be able to speak it, but he chooses not to use it out of spite, which he claims as a deliberate rejection of the culture he associates with it. While there is little empathy demonstrated in this choice, it indicates an assumption, on some level, that language has the power to foster empathy; thus, his refusal to speak Afrikaans translates to a refusal to open himself up to the possibility of understanding the Afrikaner people and their culture through linguistic empathy. Nhex still believes, though, that language is the key to understanding people through respectful communication, saying, "Only what I wanted to score, in my life as a lingualist, is to talk, to communicate;" and so even with the complications surfaced by his views on Afrikaans, Nhex's perspectives still clearly support the idea that language has the capacity to foster empathy.

Rebecca's Story

Rebecca's household, growing up, was unilingual in English, but she always had a knack for learning languages, and so her parents seized every opportunity they could to educate her about her country and the world. She considers herself quite privileged, she explained in our interview, as her scholastic language instruction was supplemented by a private tutor, frequent cross-cultural interaction, and national and international travel. Particularly, Rebecca always loved to learn and speak isiXhosa. "It was part of me from very young that I loved Xhosa, when I was like I was twelve I already knew, I love this language, and I really knew that I always wanted to study it because I was good at it I liked it, it was interesting, and it was a beautiful language..." She spoke it at home with the family's housekeeper, at school in her language classes, and in her free time with her tutor, until she went to university, where she studied it formally as a subject.

Rebecca's tutor was a Xhosa woman from Khayelitsha, a Cape Town township that was designated a black township under apartheid's Group Areas Act of 1950. The woman was a certified teacher whom Rebecca praised to the stars, but she had trouble finding employment at Rebecca's school, where administrators overlooked her extensive qualifications, because, as Rebecca said, "my fucking school never fucking believed in her because they were liberal racists." Outside of the formal classroom, however, the two developed a great friendship and mentorship as they together prepared Rebecca to write her matric Second Additional Language exam in isiXhosa, the only student at her school to do so in her matric year. As part of her preparation and general language education, Rebecca would often stay at her teacher's home in Khayelitsha over weekends in order to be immersed in the language and learn about Xhosa culture,

an activity that, Rebecca explained, was extremely educational and fun, albeit atypical for someone of her own racial and cultural background.

Since she lacked the kind of complex multilingual exposure that Nhex had access to at his boarding school growing up, all of Rebecca's language learning was extremely deliberate, even from a young age. And while she considers herself privileged to have been able to organize her own comprehensive language education as extensively as she did, she holds several strong opinions about the formal language education that she received in her official schooling, which, she explained, is the only language education that many of her peers ever received. Her secondary school allowed students to study Afrikaans and isiXhosa, but the presence of a few European languages in the curriculum, such as French and Portuguese, drew away emphasis from the South African languages, which Rebecca considers far more important for people living in South Africa. She spoke about how European languages are only practically used in the country for talking to tourists, then sighed, "I mean, obviously all languages are useful, but in terms of, if you're staying in South Africa and doing work here...." She trailed off.

Still, most of the students at Rebecca's school, chose to learn Afrikaans over isiXhosa, and then just barely scraped by, able to fall back on their English mother tongue communication skills in nearly every situation they encountered. This trend, which Rebecca spoke about in great frustration, appeared to me to a manifestation of compounded linguistic privilege from two eras. The fact that people in Rebecca's school generally didn't take language study seriously demonstrated their English-speaking privilege in the modern South African context, as they would have been able to easily participate in public discourse

throughout their lives without ever needing to put in the work to teach themselves a second language. Additionally, today's middle-aged white population, likely the parents of Rebecca's peers, would have themselves grown up at a time when it was most advantageous to know Afrikaans as a first or second language, and this would have perhaps influenced their children's decisions to study the language in their own schooling. Rebecca suggested that these two combined linguistic power structures would have been most oppressive towards people, across South African history, who didn't speak English or Afrikaans as a first language, a population demographic that consists of mostly black people who speak a Bantu language as their mother tongue. She therefore finds it appalling that, in the new South African democracy, more emphasis isn't being put on Bantu language education, as means of redressing historical linguistic oppression.

Even at university, when Rebecca took isiXhosa communication classes that were formally offered by her institution, the instruction left something to be desired. She found some of the professors, particularly one white woman, to be arrogant and out-of-touch with Xhosa culture, which, she believed, impeded their ability to effectively engage and teach their students in a way that demonstrated respect and empathy for Xhosa people. The few good teachers Rebecca had, however, she spoke very highly of; she described a Sotho woman lecturer who "really understood the feel for each different language,...how languages operated and stuff, which was great." Most in this group of teachers were either Xhosa or of other cultures associated with Bantu languages, which, based on the demonstrated cultural similarities raised in Nhex's interview, would have perhaps made them more familiar with Xhosa culture and therefore better able to communicate passionately about it with their students. Based on her experience

with both good and bad university teachers, as well as her excellent experience learning from her childhood isiXhosa tutor, Rebecca believes that good teachers, formal or informal, and cultural and language immersion are the most effective ways for people to really learn languages well.

My hypothesized correlation between language and empathy is common knowledge to Rebecca, whose life experience indicates that people feel more comfortable speaking to a person when they can do so in their mother tongue; Nelson Mandela characterizes this sentiment in his famous quote, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." In her work, Rebecca deals with women's empowerment initiatives that target women on farms who have experienced gender-based violence, and so she consciously uses Afrikaans, the first language of many of these women, in her communications with them, in efforts to foster deeper connections. Afrikaans is widely spoken in her office as well, though she attributes this more to the demographics of the employees than to the people whom they help in their work. In this setting, there is one Xhosa woman, whom Rebecca speaks to in isiXhosa, as much as she knows how (none of her other colleagues know the language well enough to try), an act of respect that has led to the development of their relationship over time.

Rebecca similarly used her isiXhosa skills to communicate respect at a gathering held by her tutor to celebrate her son's coming-of-age. The partygoers consisted mainly of the woman's close family and friends, many of whom were familiar with her difficulties garnering respect for her teaching abilities from her school's white administrators. When Rebecca, her strongest student, stood up and

gave a brief and simple speech in isiXhosa, her words were received emotionally, as validation of her teacher's unyielding hard work and success.

While this tendency for language to facilitate deeper understanding has shown itself through Rebecca's personal experience, she also notes that there are differences between ways that the people around her respond to her efforts to connect through speaking their language:

A lot of older people will find it, will be very appreciative...and then younger people will be like "okay, what are you trying to prove?"...it's a variety...some young people will be very accepting, you know "that's so sweet, a white person speaking our languages, whatever", but I mean, I have one friend who is a proper, deep Xhosa speaker from the Eastern Cape and he will often speak to me in Xhosa just to challenge me...you know, I mustn't just get comfortable in the fact that I'm a white person who can speak Xhosa and then I never speak it...I can't use it as a card....

And white people do use their language skills as a card, in Rebecca's experience, as if seeking some kind of award for being a "Good White Person," based on a common agreement that white Bantu language speakers in particular are more empathetic and culturally aware than their monolingual peers. This idea, which calls to mind Steve Biko's (2002) writings on toxic white liberalism, frustrates Rebecca to no end:

For me it's a sign of respect if you can speak to someone in their language, but...people know that also, and manipulate it. Colonists have done that for years, where they learn the language...English colonists, French colonists, Portuguese colonists...and people manipulate it, white people manipulate that. People in positions of power manipulate it. They think, oh, because I can speak Xhosa that makes me a great South African, or some shit, like it's one step out of many, obviously...

She supposes, then, that not all people who are multilingual have received the full empathetic advantages that language study is capable of transmitting, despite their proclaimed cultural literacy.

While the assumption that multilingual people are more culturally aware is probably true to some degree (after all, Rebecca still emphatically agreed that language study fosters empathy), this conflict around the strategic and non-genuine use of language leads me to consider qualifying my understanding of the connection between language and cross-cultural understanding. Since language and culture are more fluid than discrete (Makalela, 2016) and since the post-structuralist perspective of analysis allows for complex correlative relationships (McKinney & Norton, 2008), it follows that I cannot make a definitive claim about language study always or never fostering empathy, and so I believe that such a qualified association is justified. I would argue, based on the information conveyed by Rebecca in her interview, along with my previous conclusions from Nhex's interview, that language can foster empathy in general, but that it is able to do so most effectively when the speaker is continually and actively engaged in using the language and familiarizing themselves with the cultural context surrounding the language. This qualification would help characterize Nhex's complex relationship with Afrikaans and Afrikaner culture, where his simple knowledge of the language itself did not in and of itself bring about cultural understanding, respect, or empathy.

George's Story

George's hometown, a township located just outside of Pretoria in the Gauteng province, defied the norm of cultural segregation set by the 1950s Group Areas Act under apartheid. The township's name, Soshanguve, is a conglomerate term, a combination of the names of several of the cultural groups represented in its residents: **S**otho, **S**hangaan, **N**guni, and **V**enda. Growing up, George's peers

came from an array of cultural backgrounds and linguistically represented all nine of South Africa's officially recognized Bantu languages; unintentionally, George grew up a multilingualist. His mother spoke to him in Xitsonga, his father spoke to him in Sepedi, and he attended a Setswana-speaking school, where he learned English and Afrikaans. The rest of South Africa's 11 languages he picked up on his own, from interacting with his friends and neighbors in Soshanguve: "We're playing, someone is speaking Venda, and I'm intrigued, as a kid...and once you speak their language, their reaction and treatment of you changes, so for me that was very powerful."

From the beginning, then, George drew mental connections between language and meaningful communication, which led him to a lifelong passion for linguistics. Though his formal higher education studies were in the sciences, the context of his education allowed George to continue to hone his language skills on his own, first at Oxford, where he spoke English in his courses and practiced his other languages with international South African friends, and then back in Cape Town, where he became a tutor and then a lecturer for an isiXhosa Communication class at a local university. George's travels have given new depth to his perspectives on linguistics, as he has come to associate languages with places; as he travels, the tongues that narrate his dreams move with him.

George said:

Now that I'm in Cape Town, I think in English and speak in English and translate to other languages, but once I move back to Soshanguve, immediately when I get off the taxi my brain switches and I see myself thinking differently and translating from my mother tongue to English.

Each of George's languages holds meaning for him beyond its literal words. He told me how distinctive tongues bring with them distinctive styles and emotions:

Suthu is softer, it's less troubling on the tongue, you know, there's no, like Setswana, for instance, there's not a lot of clicks in Setswana, it's much more, you know, sultry. Zulu's more romantic, Xhosa's more violent, so if you didn't know what someone's saying, you're going to think they're fighting.

These connotations inform George's use of his various tongues and bring cultural context and nuance into his cross-cultural interactions, which, he believes, makes him a better communicator. He told me particularly of a time when he worked as a translator on a research project conducted by one of his friends from Oxford. His job was to interview South Africans in their mother tongues on topics of genetics, and in one particular interview, George sat down to speak with a Venda woman in her language, Tshivenda. The two engaged thoroughly over the theme and their conversation drew passionate hand gesturing and excited language. After the interview, George's friend, who doesn't speak Tshivenda, expressed worry that George was being too harsh with the woman, as he was unaware of the stylistic elements that characterize the language in its proper use.

George's ability to understand and apply such linguistic styles effectively has allowed him to engage with people in their languages more thoroughly than he believes that he ever could with just "textbook" knowledge of a language. When he speaks a language, he takes on all of its mannerisms and nuances – George believes that this has made him particularly successful in his capacity as an isiXhosa teacher. Though he is not Xhosa himself (as is the case with many of Rebecca's teachers, good and bad), George described how his deep linguistic

understanding, combined with cultural knowledge, has often led students to think that he is Xhosa and to engage more effectively in their education on the subject.

Among George's observations about South African linguistics, he's noticed several ways in which language plays a role in systematic and individual-scale oppression in the modern context. While apartheid and European colonialism are, on paper, systems of the past, George expressed frustration over the relics that they left behind in the form of popular perceptions of languages. He positively enjoys English and appreciates its capacity to facilitate communication between people of different cultures, but noted with annoyance the overemphasis that South Africans place on the language by treating it as a measure of intelligence. This tendency, which has been shown to largely affect the realm of higher education (Pillay & Yu, 2015; Alexander, 2005), has led George to experience scrutiny over his language abilities as they pertain to fluency, accent, and articulation: "Your proximity to English allows you access to privileged spaces and I think if you don't have that ticket, you are out..." In light of this English standard, which he likens to a standard of whiteness, he said that he felt that his multilingualism, and the similar multilingualism of other Bantu language speakers, does not garner much respect from the people around him because of the particular languages that he speaks. Even though his languages are South African and thereby the most practical for fostering connections with people in the various communities of his home country, skills in speaking "white languages," such as French, German, and Hebrew, he claims, would be typically lauded to a much higher degree because of persisting belief in white supremacy.

On a more individual scale, George has seen the power of words that are used to attack others. George identifies as homosexual, an identity that it took

him a long time throughout his life to come to terms with. He only just claimed his sexual identity three years ago, and jokingly calls himself a “fledgling gay” as a result. There’s a derogatory word that is shared among Nguni languages, *stabane*, which carries with it the same negative connotations that the term *faggot* carries in English; as a child, George’s peers used this word as an insult against him. He laments, “language was used to bring me down, language was used to break me.”

A third and critical example of George’s learning about the negative power of language pertains to his perception of Afrikaans. As a black Afrikaans speaker, George’s linguistic skills often came as a surprise to those who racialized the language. Based on this assumption that black people cannot speak Afrikaans, George has found that many Afrikaans speakers, both black and colored, will use the language around him and other black people when they want to gossip in the open. Here, there’s a power structure at play, where linguistic advantage gives some people access to information and keeps others outside of the loop; used to enable communication of insults and gossip, this dynamic is especially poignant.

As a child, when George learned Afrikaans in school, his perception of the language was highly influenced by the legacy of apartheid and the Soweto uprising, which occurred a mere 114 km away from Soshanguve. After watching a film about the language’s politicization under apartheid and the resultant protests across the country, George felt angry and betrayed for a while on behalf of South Africa’s black population, and he was consequently reluctant to learn the language for a period of time. A change occurred, however, as his knowledge of history and linguistics developed through his exposure to travel and media:

I think it is not the language of the oppressor. Afrikaans is a creole language, it was the language of the slaves, which was usurped by the oppressor, because now, more colored people or people of mixed race in this country speak Afrikaans than white people, however it's seen as a white language.

This newly realized perception of Afrikaans allowed George to engage in his language studies more fully and willingly, which in turn allowed him to upset the assumptions of those around him with regard to the language's use. In the context of people gossiping publicly:

I'm going to say something in Afrikaans, just so you know I can speak Afrikaans, so it's social capital as well that I drop, so it's either to make friends, so make people think "oh you're one of us, you can speak our language" or to say "careful, I can speak your language...."

He now uses Afrikaans without hesitation or fear when speaking with his white and colored friends, in order to connect with them in their own language.

George's reclamation of language was an act of power, which he saw space for in his personal life as well. As George came to accept and affirm his identity as a gay man, the term *stabane* took on new meaning for him. Where it would once make him cry, it now fills him with joy and pride: "There are times when I'm like *please* someone say it to me, *please*." Language, even in the form of this oppressive term, helped form his identity.

George's story suggests that the reclamation of language from its prescribed social and political context can be used to foster self-empathy and through it, self-acceptance, which adds a new dimension to the observed relationship between language and empathy. George's use of different languages in different settings and for different types and styles of expression also serve to validate Mkhize's (2016) point about multifaceted views of the world, whereby each language a person speaks arms them with tools that help them consider

themselves and their surroundings in a new way, a process that aids in identity formation.

In a similar way, George's perspective offers up new information that can be used to reframe the conclusions about language and empathy that I drew from the two previous sections. George's selective use of language according to various facets of context (time, place, intent of interaction, etc.) prevents him from engaging continuously with each of his several languages all of the time – he reported to me that he sometimes goes weeks without speaking his mother tongues – which, according to my past conclusions, would limit the degree to which he is able to become more empathetic through his multilingualism. Yet, from the perspective expressed in his storytelling and explanations of his opinions, George seems to demonstrate a great deal of empathy towards South Africa's various cultures, as well as a critical desire to continually grow in his linguistic empathy and cross-cultural understanding. This tendency is not necessarily a direct result of his relationship with language, as various aspects of George's life story seem like they could have helped bring about this result, from his multicultural upbringing to his access to travel. However, based on the connections that I have already drawn between language and empathy, I would make the assumption that George's general love of and appreciation for languages enhances his effectiveness in engaging meaningfully with people of different cultures. Thus, the qualifications to my hypothesized connection between language and empathy shift from their emphasis on continual use of a particular South African language to a continual exploration of South African linguistics in general. At the end of it all, George believes that all people should make an effort

to learn languages, particularly South African languages, based on multilingualism's potential for fostering empathy and understanding:

There's power in naming, and I think one of the things is if you don't name something, or you don't want to know what the word means, what someone's name means, you can easily see them as nonhuman, and I think once you start to learn how to speak languages...something in you changes. Nothing's going to tell you to stop being racist, it just happens naturally. You're going to be sympathetic to Africans as long as you can see them as human, as you are.

Conclusion

In this paper, I've discussed at length the question of whether or not language can foster understanding and empathy between people of different cultures. My three interviewees each contributed unique perspectives to this discussion that led me to my eventual conclusions, which I will enumerate promptly.

In Nhex's story, I examined the influence of various languages on his life experiences. Bantu languages, based on their linguistic similarities and the parallel similarities between their associated cultures, most effectively illustrated the benefits of cross-cultural language study, as Nhex uses them to connect more deeply with people in his life. English seemed to assist in this process as well, as its use as a universal language of communication facilitated efficient communication in the absence of linguistic commonalities. Afrikaans, though highly politicized, also emerged as a carrier of empathy, albeit one that is not always desirable for Nhex, who prefers to disassociate himself from Afrikaner culture to as great a degree as possible.

In Rebecca's story, I explored the role that language plays through the perspective of her unilingual cultural background, taking a close look in particular at the ways that language study played out in her formal schooling.

Through a comparison of characteristics of effective and ineffective language education, I further explored my assertion that language can carry empathy, by qualifying it in order to make room for Rebecca's observed experiences of trends of white liberalism and apathy pervading in language study. From this new information, I suggested that language is able to most effectively carry empathy when a person uses a particular language continuously and with the intention of engaging with cultural information.

In George's story, I looked at ways in which language has been used in his life for the dual purpose of oppression and liberation. By looking at particular circumstances surrounding identity exploration and reclamation of language, I affirmed my conclusions from previous sections about language and empathy, while switching the qualification from Rebecca's story to reflect the potential for general linguistic engagement to foster empathy despite limited or situational use of individual languages.

My data from these interviews, in the context of current literature and historical thought, lead me to conclude that cross-cultural language study has the capacity to foster empathy between people of different cultures. I acknowledge that this process is complex and can exist to varying degrees, depending on the unique circumstances and motivations surrounding a person's language study and use. It seems, from my data and analysis, that cultural information in language study is likely communicated to the fullest extent when the student's investment in learning about language is met with the teacher's understanding of, respect for, and efficacy in conveying elements of the culture and linguistic nuance associated with the language, a trend that pertains to informal teachers as well as formal teachers in school settings.

Framing these inferences in the context of modern academic discourse on language and education in South Africa, I further conclude that language study and emphasis on multilingualism, in their associations with empathy and cross-cultural understanding, show potential for their use in promoting the egalitarian principles and linguistic and cultural respect that South Africa's Department of Basic Education aims to emphasize in its policy. I therefore recommend that further research be conducted in this area in order to formally evaluate current education language policies and reconstruct them to reflect and take advantage of the benefits of multilingual education in the context of promoting post-apartheid healing through youth engagement.

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