

Identity, ideology and discourse: Classroom spaces for deconstructions and reconstructions

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ABSTRACT

South African student identity, constructions of the other and experiences in higher education have been the subject of many studies and examine how students are making sense of their past, present and future. Student-led actions have played a leading role in South Africa's democratisation and their social movements continue to shake their elders out of inertia on issues of inclusion in higher education. In response to concerns of inclusion, this study examined the potential foregrounding of ideology through theory and practicals to uncover the workings of language and discourse. Using a qualitative methodological case study of first-year students, the workings of ideology and discourse are made explicit through lectures, tutorials, individual and multi-lingual group narratives. With this background students are prompted to make explicit, and start critically examining the validity of common assumptions of particular language groups. This study shows that when students are given opportunities to make their assumptions of identities explicit in a safe space, they largely remain reflective of apartheid ideological assumptions. The paper argues that such a first step, of foregrounding assumptions, then creates a basis for class work on ideologies and their workings, thus providing students with tools for critical deconstructions of assumptions.

Keywords: discourse, ideology, identity, safe space, third space, common sense assumptions, language

INTRODUCTION

Language is the medium in which one, as an individual and collectively as a society, tries to make sense of the world around one and one's place therein. It follows then that the meaning created in language will, in application, manifest in a material manner in the way in which individuals live and in the social conventions recognised as accurate interpretations of truth and reality: in Foucauldian terms, a 'discourse'. Foucault (1981) argues that a discourse forms a framework within which a particular society or sector of society is compelled to function and that, as such, reflects relationships of power within that society. Fairclough (2001: 64) concurs with Foucault, describing discourse as a '...practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning'. In consequence, a particular discourse or set of discourses reveals much about the particular society or context in which it occurs.

In South Africa, discourses reveal a society that remains fragmented and racialized. It is a society that continues to be characterised by structural and institutional inequalities. Badat (2015: 7) argues that it is '...time to learn, listen and to hear what causes the bitterness, pain and anger...' in South African discourses. He stresses the need for empathy and the interrogation of transformative processes and institutions in South Africa. One way of responding to such a call is through the creation of spaces in higher education where students can interrogate how discourses operate and critically deconstruct and reconstruct persistent discourses and ideologies.

This study seeks to probe the role of language, discourse and embedded ideologies in the perception of identity among South African first-year students at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University enrolled in a

language studies course. It examines the potential ideological contribution in the form of common sense assumptions in the construction of own identity as well as in the perception of identity regarding those from different language groups. It also poses the question whether possible shifts could occur with an awareness of such discourses. By means of formal lectures, reflection, group discussions and a group research task, first-year students interrogate language, discourse and the embedded ideologies in the construction of their own linguistic identities and those of other South Africans. Students are introduced to the concept of ideology through a lens of common sense assumptions, and thus as a specific interpretation of reality which forms a framework within which a particular society is compelled to function.

The language studies course foregrounds discourses as language in use which embodies ideologies which are unknowingly sustained and reproduced by users of those discourses (Fairclough, 2001). The paper presents preliminary findings of a longitudinal study on the potential of foregrounding ideologies and discourses in a language studies course in order to encourage critical analysis of own identities and construction of other language users.

BACKGROUND

South African higher education students have shown with the #Feesmustfall movement that the 'born-free' narrative is not their story to tell. Essentially, the moniker of born-free has positioned South Africans born post-1994 as unburdened by the separatist policies of the South African past and thus able to live their lives freely and equally (Mattes, 2011). However, the narratives of students have been of structures and cultures that continue to constrain them. This has led to a national social movement of student protests for free decolonised education and university outsourced worker rights. Thus, reconciliatory and rainbow (a metaphor for an inclusive and united South Africa) discourses have been superseded by discourses of disenchantment with the enduring structural and cultural inequalities in higher education and society at large. Naidoo (2016: 2) argues that the student movement is 'forcing an awareness of a time when things are not this way'. Racialized discourses also persist as could be seen in the description by students of a university vice chancellor as black but not understanding the plight of students during the #Feesmustfall protests. Alexander (2002) states that racialized descriptors persist because South Africans have not interrogated race and that the four nation thesis of racial descriptors of Black, Indian, White and Coloured persist in official discourse. This study's findings will show that this is still evident today.

Students find themselves in higher educational settings that have widened access to all (DHET, 2001). However, students are experiencing neither academic nor social universal inclusion in the academy (Badat, 2010). Of significance for this study are student encounters of environments that still 'other' students on the basis of indigenous languages. Ramphela's (1995) argument that the hegemony of English in higher education acting as a gatekeeper to academic success, can be extended to the status quo in higher education, and this despite a national multilingual policy promulgated 14 years ago (DHET, 2002). The student movement has opened up dialogue about the slow pace of transformation in higher education and the country, the discourses of privilege surrounding different linguistic groups and the implementation of the language policy in higher education. Soudien et al. (2008) in what has come to be known as the Soudien Report, found that discrimination and exclusion were still unpalatable realities in higher education and spoke of the time being a critical moment to deal with discrimination. Despite the many lofty recommendations of the report, the disjuncture between policy and implementation in higher education remains (DHET, 2015). Higher education finds itself at such a Copernican moment again and for academics the question is how to teach through this moment (Soudien, 2015). This study is attempting to provide one response of teaching and talking back to discrimination and exclusion via classroom spaces.

Spaces (physical or metaphysical) have played a significant role in the higher education landscape. These spaces

have been argued to be alienating and untransformed (Badat, 2010; Soudien Report, 2008). This study engages with spaces and seeks to provide safe spaces as well as third spaces to encourage critical deconstructions and reconstructions of the other.

The researchers of this study would argue that spaces that are safe, yet disrupt, in a South African higher education context are necessary precisely because of a past that endures into the present and is resistant to change. It is also necessary for articulation of the transformative issues at the heart of student protests. An argument against safe space is that a space may not be safe if issues of de-privileging are at the heart of the discussion and can verge from a softly approach to a too combative one (Rinehart, Barbour & Pope, 2013). Barrett (2010) advocates a space that is characterised by civility for one another, and this may counter Rinehart et al.'s (2013) caveat, but we would go one step further and argue for a space that is humanising in its essence. This is one that recognises the humanity of others through self-reflection and seeing oneself as tied to others whilst empathising (Nussbaum, 1997), and therefore is marked by the shifts and agency needed for democratic and transformative processes.

This study used safe spaces in conjunction with the notion of third spaces as a way of reconstructing a space as one that encourages not only story telling of discomfort but also of reflection, shifts, agency and healing, reconstruction and redesign (Janks, 2010). Third space has its origins with Lefevre who spoke of an alternative way of seeing, making sense and agency (Soja, 1996). A third other evolves to disrupt and reconstruct binaries (Soja, 1996; Bhabha, 1994). Student reconstructions on language, identity and ideology can be conceptualised as a third space as they disrupt taken for granted assumptions to a new reconstituted other. The study data findings reported are students' preliminary narratives and largely constitute the two binary opposites of essentialised descriptions. However, the data findings do begin to show the power of this space in the shifts towards a third other in the deconstruction of student own assumptions.

McKinney (2007), McKinney and Norton (2007) and Soudien (2012) show the discomfort students have with the interrogation of race or the South African past, and thus this research endeavoured to give first- year students a safe space to do this interrogation. It does this by positioning their reflections on discourse and ideologies as related to linguistic identities. This is not to avoid an honest engagement with race as is necessary but rather to proceed from a space which allows both voices of disenfranchised and voices of privilege a forum on which to start their engagement. The focus is also on linguistic identities as this is a language studies module. The issue of race emerges naturally as race and linguistic identity are conflated in the discourses in South Africa. This is because language, along with gender, class, ethnicity and xenophobia, is intertwined with discrimination and used to justify and reproduce it (Soudien Report 2008: 8).

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

More than two decades have passed since South Africa turned its back on the institutionalised racism of the apartheid regime and embraced democracy, including a constitution explicitly opposed to racism and, indeed, discrimination of any kind. In spite of this, it appears that in many cases, apartheid ideologies regarding race still determine common sense assumptions about identity. This reality was reflected in a classroom discussion among English Language Studies first-year students during a module on the nature of language. The focus of the discussion was the perception of identity with regard to an individual's language usage or language grouping in the context of South Africa. The ideas voiced by the students to a large extent reflected ideologies of race and culture reminiscent of apartheid South Africa, along with a parallel desire to 'move on' from the past and its racist connotations. These conflicting ideologies are reflective of the contradictions characteristic of the South African context as a whole. In *(Post) Apartheid conditions*, Hook (2013: 5) suggests that the chronological progress of South Africa from an apartheid state to post-apartheid democracy is not always reflected in the lived experience of everyday life but rather that '...everyday South African experience is characterized by historical dissonance, by the continuous juxtaposition of forward- and backward-looking temporalities'. Similarly, Forde (2011: 226) states that there is no longer one South Africa, but several, '...each one a product of various pasts and presents...' and each of which is '...tangled up in the process of trying to forge an identity somewhere between the old and the new'.

It is not surprising that language within such a context would reflect the many paradoxes within our society, and yet the ideological inconsistencies inherent within the discourse of our students prompted much reflection on our part as lecturers. It appeared that much of the stereotypical thought on race, as promoted in apartheid times, had been uncritically taken on board by students whilst simultaneously seeing themselves as part of the 'new' generation of post-apartheid South Africans. The language module on language, identity and ideology was developed with the twin goals of developing critical thinking in students as well as gaining insight into the workings of ideology in the construction of identity among them.

Fairclough (2001) suggests that a study which attempts to analyse or examine discourses should recognise three dimensions of discourse, namely text, interaction and context. According to Fairclough (2001: 20), a text may be either written or spoken and is '...simply what is said in a piece of spoken discourse'. Fairclough's (1989) discourse model consists of three inter-related dimensions of discourse: object of analysis (including verbal, visual or verbal and visual texts); processes by means of which the object is produced and received (writing/speaking/designing and reading/listening/viewing by human subjects) and socio-historical conditions which govern these processes. For the purposes of this longitudinal study, both written and spoken texts were used as data. However, although this is part of the present research as a case study, it does not comprise the only focus area. While drawing discursively and diachronically on perceived changes or modifications in the way that individuals 'identify', this will feed into the overall understanding of discourse as it relates to identity.

South African critical linguist Janks' (2010) critical literacy synthesis model of power, diversity, access, design and redesign speaks to deconstructions and reconstructions of discourse. Power refers to the way language is used to maintain or disrupt existing forms of power; diversity to how others are included or excluded; access to knowledge, and design and redesign to the shaping and reshaping of meaning-making texts (Janks, 2010). The focus of the language studies module was to assist students to identify and foreground ideology and the common sense assumptions embedded in their discourse, hereby presenting an opportunity to assess critically that which they generally take for granted.

Ideology, as an interpretive lens which an individual uses in making sense of the world, determines what is taken for granted as 'truth' or 'normal' (Belsey, 1980). Ideological assumptions underlie the production and the interpretation of language as discourse (Fairclough, 2001). In the process of producing language one references a particular

interpretation of reality, assuming that the receiver will use the same set of perceptions to interpret the message accurately. Locke (2004: 5) speaks of this assumption as a 'sense-making story', an understanding of reality and truth which acts as a backdrop to any interaction between individuals within a particular society or sector of society. These assumptions are presented in the guise of common sense, which Belsey (1980) describes as that which one takes for granted and perceives to be obvious or natural, not only to oneself but to also to those around one. In this way ideology - in the disguise of common sense - presents itself simply as truth.

It is the sinister manner in which ideology works which ensures not only its perpetuation but the loyal and unquestioning adherence of its subjects. In his explanation of the workings of ideology, Althusser compares ideology to the unconscious, saying that there is '...an organic link between the two propositions...' (1971: 161). Indeed, there appear to be very salient similarities in the way that both concepts function. As ideology presents itself simply as reality, it remains hidden in the same way that matters in the unconscious remain hidden. Despite this, both the unconscious and ideology influence the actions and speech of the individual and it is in this material manifestation that both become tangible. Therefore, it is in the careful examination of language in use, or discourse, that we find the potential to expose ideologies.

This, however, is not as simple as it may seem. Ideology, as a particular interpretation of reality, is embedded in one's use of language and it is for this reason that Foucault (1981) ascribes an existence to discourse itself, separate (independent) to that of its users. In the opening passages of his inaugural lecture, *The Order of Discourse*, Foucault (1981) completely reverses the idea of a speaker using language as an instrument, implying that it is in fact language as discourse which uses the speaker to perpetuate the inherent ideologies whilst he/she remains oblivious to the role they are fulfilling.

Bourdieu (1977: 72) states that 'It is because subjects do not, strictly speaking, know what they are doing that what they do has more meaning than they know'. Ideology, embedded in discourse, generally remains invisible because we tend to think of language as a tool with which we can express our ideas, misguidedly overlooking the fact that ideas and ideologies are already inscribed into the very language we use. As Belsey (1980: 42) explains, 'The differences it (language) constructs may seem to be natural, universal and unalterable when in reality they may be produced by a specific form of social organization'. Fairclough (2001: 64) states that '...in discourse we routinely draw upon conventions which embody ideological assumptions which come to be taken as mere "common sense" and which contribute to sustaining existing power relations'. Of course, whilst the common sense assumptions which underlie our language remain unexamined, ideology is safe from critical considerations and thus the adage that ideology is '...most effective when its workings are least visible' (Fairclough, 2001: 71).

The objective of the language studies module is to foreground ideologies embedded within language as regards identity in the South African context, and thus to initiate critical deconstructions among students. In order for students to develop a consciousness about concepts which they have taken for granted, the relevant common sense ideas related to a particular ideology must be moved from the implicit to the explicit realm. This enables critical reflection and thus the opportunity for the individual to make a conscious assessment of their validity (Fairclough, 2001).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Methodology (as a justification of methods) is intricately interwoven with epistemology (theory of knowledge) and ontology (theory of being). Therefore, a methodology presupposes an understanding of the 'objects' of research – in this case, students as linguistic beings - and the means/way of knowing them in this case, through their discourse.

Qualitative Case Study

A qualitative methodological approach was used for this study as it is an approach whereby researchers enter a natural world (Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 2007) to discover the nature of human interaction, as a way of explaining the world (Henning, 2004). Further, a case study approach was selected so that the phenomenon of ideologies as embedded within language of the specific case of first-year higher education students could be revealed in rich detail (Swanborn, 2010). As explained by both Yin (2003) and Baxter and Jack (2008), a case study is useful for examining a phenomenon which is closely related to, and difficult to separate from, its context. This study examined aspects of ideology and identity as reflected by the discourses of the group of students within the context of post-apartheid South Africa. The context of this study was therefore essentially part of the aspects to be studied.

The case of first-year South Africans students was chosen for this study as they experience the first year of higher education to be particularly challenging because of the articulation gap between schools and higher education; they are confronted with social inclusion issues in the academy for the first time and for some it is the first time they inhabit similar spaces with other linguistic groups (Scott, Ndebele, Badsha, Figaji, Geyers & Pityana, 2013). Many schools have remained linguistically homogenous largely owing to historical reasons of position and access to resources.

The research site was a higher education setting, the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, which is a comprehensive university established in 2005 from a merger of three institutions and offers both vocational diploma and conceptual degree programmes. The students surveyed were first-year degree students enrolled in an English language studies course. The core content of modules in this course is English grammar, multilingualism, language, identity and ideology, and emotive language forms. Student narratives were part of the language, identity and ideology module.

The Language Studies Module and Data Collection

Data reported on in this study comes from one of three tasks done in the English Language Studies class module. The first-year language studies module had an enrolment of 500 first-year BA General, BA Psychology, B Education and B Administration students, but for this study a random sample of 100 tasks was analysed.

The module, entitled Language, Ideology and Identity, covered one term of seven weeks. The course content included lectures and tutorials. Lectures covered the theoretical aspects of language, ideology and identity using post-structural theoretical lenses and drawing on African scholars like Fanon, Janks and Banda as well as others such as Fairclough, Belsey and Locke. Students engaged in small group discussions in tutorials, applying the theoretical constructs to a variety of texts, plays and films. The lectures and tutorials were set with the goal of prompting reflection and discussion among the students, who were a diverse mix of students (predominantly isiXhosa and English mother tongue speakers with Afrikaans and other indigenous languages to a lesser extent), reflective of the broader Eastern Cape province.

The lectures specifically dealt with the concept and nature of language as discourse, enabling the students to understand the hidden ideologies within their use of language. This commenced with the Saussurean explanation of language as a system of signs, the nature of the sign being arbitrary, conventional, relational and differential (De Saussure, 1983). Structural linguist de Saussure's theory on language as a signifying system was taken as starting point but as his theory may seem to view meaning as fixed (Baxter, 2016), lecturers moved on to a poststructuralist view of meaning and truth being temporary. The theme of language as a perception of reality was developed through the introduction of the concept of common sense assumptions which, although implicit, determine one's understanding of the world and one's actions (Fairclough, 2001).

Students were given time in class to reflect on common sense assumptions made about people in their own language group as well as those made about people in the various other language groups mentioned in class. Students then anonymously wrote their ideas on a piece of paper and handed these in at the end of class. This prompted the students to start considering the common sense assumptions made about their own and other identity/ies within the South African context. In addition, this formed part of the strategy to disturb common sense deliberately through an intervention – one of the strategies, suggested by Fairclough (2001) in which common sense can be foregrounded. In the subsequent sessions, the connection between common sense and perception of identity was developed. The identity one owns for oneself, as well as those which one ascribes to others, is determined to a large extent by the resources within the discourse of the society in which one finds oneself. This is in line with the Lacanian view as described by Lee (1990) that the individual's entry into the realm of language constitutes an important element in the construction of identity. Identity as fluid, multiple and a social practice, constructed by relationships, negotiated and renegotiated (Norton, 2010), as imposed and assumed (Ferris, Peck & Banda, 2014) were discussed in the final lecture sessions.

In this light, students were asked to consider individually the identity they assumed for themselves through the use of language and to reflect on this and write down their thoughts. They were also asked to consider the manner in which they positioned themselves linguistically within the South African context in terms of the language groups with which they aligned themselves and those from which they felt alienated. Students were then asked to reflect within the South African context on the common sense assumptions made about groups - their own and other groups – thus returning to the principle of a signifier being value- laden. They also reflected on the validity of addressing ideology and identity, from their point of view, of those assumptions.

Data reported on here were gathered from the anonymous class feedback on common sense assumptions as well as from the first of three tasks in this section. This task requires students to hand in a written narrative in which they identify a language group of which they see themselves as a member, and to comment on the validity of common sense assumptions made about this group. Thereafter, the student needs to identify a language group in which they do not feel comfortable, mention common sense assumptions about that group and then discuss the validity of those assumptions from their point of view. The ensuing task for this section comprised a summary of group discussions on aspects of the course whilst the third section, prompting critical thought on the core aspects of the course, was again done individually as a narrative. The assessment for all three tasks depended on participation and students were given a mark for submission and relevance only.

Validity and Reliability

Validity and reliability considerations usually apply to quantitative data while trustworthiness and credibility apply to qualitative data. Validity refers to the ability of an instrument to measure what it set out to measure while reliability is when study findings and conclusions can be replicated (Gray, 2009). Concerns of trustworthiness and credibility, authenticity and richness of detail (Basil, 2010) were addressed through triangulation of multiple data collection methods in the longitudinal study. These include three student narratives and two focus group sessions. This particular report focuses only on the first two student narratives.

It was possible that the discussions in this module may have caused some discomfort and even communication breakdown and miscommunication. It was therefore vital to obtain ethical clearance that addressed concerns of participant anonymity, informed consent and provided guidance and information about counselling services available during the data collection period. The latter was to assist students who may have felt traumatised through the remembering of past events.

Data Analysis

The discourse analysis approach of Janks (2010) framed the data analysis of this study. This approach was discussed in the literature review above. Data was coded according to Janks' (2010) critical literacy synthesis model of power relations in discourse, assumptions about diversity, access in terms of exclusion and inclusion, deconstructions and reconstructions (redesign) frame the analysis of the data. Janks's (2005) linguistic rubric was also used in the analysis of the data to consider linguistic features such as lexicalisation (word selection), relexicalisation (renaming) and pronouns to illustrate the linguistic choices and positioning of each other.

FINDINGS

Whilst asked firstly to state assumptions made about a language group, students were also asked to provide input from their own perception regarding the validity of those assumptions. The following emerged as the strongest themes.

Power relations and diversity

The conflation of race and linguistic groups

Firstly, the conflation of race and linguistic groups emerged clearly in the data. In many cases, certain language groups were assumed to be of a particular racial group – even when, in reality, more than one racial identity could historically be attributed to that group. However, in the student narratives, a particular racial group was immediately linked to a particular language. For example:

All coloured people are Afrikaans [speakers]

All white South Africans can speak Afrikaans.

Also linking language and race, a student stated that there was the assumption that a Black person can't speak English or can't speak the language well, that all Black people living within the Eastern Cape can speak Xhosa.

In many additional similar statements, it became clear that – to a large extent – language and race were presumed to be closely related and, in many instances, inseparable and also determined power relations of not having proficiency in languages of power.

Persistence of common sense assumptions

Common sense assumptions regarding diverse language /racial groups appeared to persist among young South Africans. These assumptions, as reflected in the narratives, essentialised diverse linguistic groups as displaying similar behaviour: *'They behave differently' in opposition to 'us'*. The discourse positioned groups as other *'they'*, a pronoun that suggests othering and exclusion. Foregrounding ideas as those held by society at large about the other, the narratives often seamlessly flowed into expressions of personal opinion based upon the foundation of those assumptions:

Xhosa people are sometimes too sensitive and they love acting like victims. They see every little thing as racism. They often use Apartheid as an excuse for everything. The majority of black people are thugs and I am scared of them.

In this case, black people had been relexicalised as *'thugs'*. In these types of statements one can clearly see evidence of Locke's (2004: 5) notion of 'sense-making stories' – of the persistence of reference to an ideologically constructed background for interactions between people.

It was not only in constructing the identity of the 'other', but also in construction of their own identities that students

appeared to take into account the common sense assumptions made about them as a member of a particular language group. Examining ideological assumptions held about themselves as a member of a language /racial group, a student wrote:

Coloured and Afrikaans People of Afrikaans descent who attempt to speak English but have a strong accent are commonly seen as unintelligent...

Tensions and contradictions emerged in the questioning of students as to who they were, which stereotypes they held and who they should be:

Assumptions are that Black people make up the most people in prison and are the highest abusers of welfare, of a lower intelligence yet in the highest positions, well known for patronage and corruption – these assumptions could be another myth or a misconception or factual, it is infuriating, depressing and demeaning all at once.

This student was here examining ideological assumptions held about themselves – an exercise which could potentially have moved them into a critical examination of those that they held unconsciously about others.

Of course, students responded in different ways to the ideologies which came to the fore in voicing common sense assumptions. There were those who, in constructing their own identity, appeared to embrace the marker of being tied to a particular group, rather than take on a less essentialised identity marked by primarily being 'South African':

I'm not a woman in South Africa but rather an Afrikaner Coloured woman in South Africa.

The persistence of the past

Another clear theme which emerged was the tendency to link language groups to a racialized apartheid past:

Afrikaans is associated with the period of Apartheid and therefore links to a time when Black people were oppressed by the 'Afrikaans Boere'.

And

The assumption is that it [Afrikaans] is a language of apartheid and that everyone that speaks it is racist.

Past socio-historic perceptions persisted, sometimes leading to the perception of an insurmountable barrier between different language/racial groups:

The Afrikaans language group is a language group that I do not see myself as being part of. This is because I am Black and a sad reality in our society is that racism will never die.

And

Most Afrikaans speaking people are so rude and racist I wouldn't like to be one, just imagine hating another race group because of their colour or language.

These perceptions are, as explained by Belsey (1980: 42), particularly resilient because of the assumption that they are based upon truth and not opinion, thus 'natural, universal and unalterable'.

Persistence of common sense assumptions

Power relations were evident in the perception of English mother tongue speakers and those who were similarly proficient in this language as higher status. Interestingly, English speakers were constructed more in terms of the language being of high status than tied to racialized descriptors and assumptions. This may be linked to perceptions of English as the language of economic empowerment. Assumptions were that English speakers were *'highly educated'*, *'high up on the social ladder'*, *'more intelligent'* and even *'exemplary to other races'* in contrast to a racist Afrikaner, or loud and uncompromising isiXhosa. The narratives also showed the tendency among students to ascribe differing linguistic identities to those who shared the same mother tongue (not English), but spoke English in a particular way:

A guy from the location may be intimidated by a student who speaks English in a different way or in a different accent. Usually it may come across as though he/she is more educated or knowledgeable...

But also

Xhosa speakers come across snobbish as they have an extra flair when they speak English with a British accent, they come across as pretentious and fake.

These comments clearly reflect the validity of Fairclough's (2001) claim that ideological conventions hidden in language, serve to perpetuate existing power relations. Whilst these ideas remain implicit and taken-for-granted, it is unlikely that they would be interrogated. However, once these common sense assumptions are made explicit, the student is then able to assess critically the validity of such ideas.

Related to this theme of power and status were the assumptions students made between language groups and social class. A student stated that

Afrikaans speaking people are ...rich, they have cars at a very young age whereas we have to buy our own.... the majority of students with cars are the white students...

These comments again refer to the concept of 'sense-making stories' (Locke 2004: 5) and, in this sense, may speak to underlying tensions of inclusion based on class in higher education.

Access

Exclusion and Inclusion

Students, on the whole, expressed an awareness of their access to those from 'other' groups. Group social experiences on university campus were with own and not diverse linguistic groups:

On campus we have different groups; these groups are clustered according to the language in which that particular group speaks. We consciously and unconsciously limit the social interactions ...

And

People tend to form friendship groups with those people that they share common identities, according to race, language and ethnicity. This is because each group has its assumptions about the other groups

when we are assigned a group work, Whites, Coloureds and Indians hardly take the opinions of the blacks. The assumption that Blacks are not creative thinkers and they are not good problem solvers than other racial group. On the other hand, Blacks assume that Whites ...discriminate against others in terms of race. This causes fear within ourselves to get involved with other social groups, because in most cases assumptions kicks in our minds when we see other groups.

By simply acknowledging their limited exposure to those considered 'different', students were implicitly implying the unexamined nature of their assumptions about one another. This in itself should, if reflected on (as is prompted in the subsequent tasks in this module) provide reason to interrogate the validity of the 'sense making stories' (Locke 2004: 5) uncritically accepted as truth but are, as is shown here, based upon assumptions rather than experience.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The students' readiness to share their thoughts was an encouraging indication that the module and the feedback mediums had provided a space in which they were able to express themselves in a reasonably open and honest manner. This could be due to the fact that, instead of racial markers, language groups were used and so the instinctive, and often defensive, responses relating to discussions on race in South Africa were avoided. However, race does emerge due to the conflation of language and race. Additionally, the data used was taken from the individual written feedback, which was marked only for relevance to the topic, and this allowed the students to state their own personal perceptions without fear of recrimination or disapproval.

It is clear in the data that many students continue to see linguistic groups as strongly tied to racialized categories. In this sense, common sense assumptions regarding a particular linguistic group are largely determined by the perception of the racial identity of the speakers in that group. Ideologies inherent in the assumptions indicate that South African youth have inherited many of the practices of racial categorisation characteristic of the apartheid era.

Students were able to verbalise the assumptions made about their own language group as well as the groups to which they themselves do not relate. In many cases, it was clear that the binary nature of apartheid society is still reflected in the construction of 'us' and 'them'. Discourses, as Gee (2014: 184) states, '...are ways of recognising and getting recognised' and in the student discourses it was often clear that recognition depended upon racial identity.

In some cases, when considering the validity of the assumptions, students embraced a critical approach, rejecting the stereotypical identity imposed upon them or others as a consequence of their language/ racial grouping. This could be because of the input in the module concerning the ideological nature of language prompting students to reconsider the assumptions they had previously taken for granted. On the other hand, it could be an indication of a pre-existing critical approach which these students had already developed before the module. Either way, it is an indication that a sector of the students are indeed prepared to engage critically with the concept of racial stereotyping, reflecting a partial trend towards the transformation we desire for the South African population. Student movements in 2015 and 2016 have indicated that the higher education transformation project has failed in South Africa and this may indicate a willingness to engage critically and rigorously with issues of identity and ideology.

In many other instances, students affirmed allegiance to the ideologies inherent within the common sense assumptions, indicating that perception of identity in South Africa is still, to a large degree, tied to racial categories and that related ideas are uncritically taken on and owned by the youth. Not only does this imply that racist assumptions are still alive and well within South African discourse, but also that society itself will continue to reflect these ideologies. As mentioned in the introduction, discourse not only reflects reality but also creates reality and meaning (Fairclough, 2001). As language is the medium in which one make sense of the world around one, it is also the medium which imposes that meaning or understanding upon the world around one. If racist ideologies continue to be uncritically reflected in language, then one can be sure that those ideologies will continue to play out in the larger arena of all human interaction in our society, including the institutional culture of higher education institutions. No matter the rhetoric or policies or good intentions of those committed to transformation, the persistence of contrary ideologies under the cover of language as a neutral medium will ensure a continued resistance to change within large pockets of the population.

The data in this paper has been taken from individual papers, preceded by minimal input on the ideological nature of language. This exercise needs to be followed up by additional readings and reflections on the topic, as well as input on the deconstruction of ideologies. As a next step, we argue that lectures on common sense assumptions and how they arise, an accompanying analysis of discourses, particularly in South African contexts, in class and the multilingual group work assignment would give students opportunities to work together on their assumptions in an attempt to deconstruct these. A final narrative would require students to respond to the question of whether or not, over the period of the module and group discussions, they have had anything challenge/change how they think of the identities of their own linguistic groups and others; and if the content and their reflections influence the way they thought about language and the way it is used to speak about the identities of others. The researchers have only reported on the data findings of the first two tasks to show how students grapple with the complexities of language, ideology, common sense assumptions and identity. Such critical deconstruction of their own and other discourses could lead to a shifting of discourses and ideologies.

The researchers recognise though that discourses and ideologies are tied to enduring structural inequalities in a neoliberal society and that until there are social and economic reforms, shifts may not be to the full extent that is

needed. The potential of our study, however, is in helping to provide students with tools to think through critically their attitudes towards race and identity and, in this way, to prompt them to consider their role in transforming our South African society.

This paper has examined the potential of using classroom spaces to deconstruct ideologies and identities, as constructed by common sense assumptions, about language users in South Africa. The study has dealt with the first step in addressing these common sense assumptions – namely, making the implicit explicit, bringing that which functions under the radar into the light of visibility. The study has shown that to a large extent, students still construct identity using common sense assumptions of apartheid ideologies based on race and language. Linguistic groups and race are conflated and power lies in being able, or not able, to speak a high prestige language like English. The study data findings are from students' preliminary narratives and largely constitute undeconstructed essentialised descriptions. It shows where we are at. However, through the use of theory and application tasks, these ideologies can be made explicit and brought into the realm of the visible – thus rendering them accessible to interrogation and discussion.

Students have shown in this paper that they are able to recognise common sense assumptions held about themselves, thus creating the potential to move them to deconstruct assumptions about others. Lastly, this study has shown that students engage more openly and find a space safe if discussion centred on linguistic groups rather than the highly charged marker of race. However, students naturally conflate language and race in their discussions.

At present, the mood and discourses of higher education spaces appear to be more alienating than ever. Relationships across diverse language groups were challenging before higher education protests, but now threaten an even more separatist context in the increased use of racialized discourses. These discourses were present particularly on social media during the student protests in 2015 and 2016. It is thus ever more important to create spaces in which students are able to understand and interrogate their own allegiances to ideologies underlying these matters. In light of the activity and related insights described in this paper, we recommend the following areas for pedagogical implementation and further research:

- In-course modules which, as a part of the curriculum, could enlighten students as to the nature and workings of ideology and the opportunity to apply such theory to the South African context.
- Tools for critical deconstructions, so that these can be used to address assumptions. For instance, those assumptions found in competing discourses within student movements, about an untransformed higher education system and strategies to achieve transformation, can be more meaningfully engaged with if students have the necessary tools.
- Self-reflective tasks, marked only for relevance, which allow students to unpack their own allegiance to ideologies of cultural/ racial/ language identity and interrogate the validity of these according to experience. Such tasks also allow students opportunity to explore their own discomforts within such discourses.
- Humanising spaces in which students from diverse groups are able to address their perceptions of one another in a manner allowing for discussion and empathy.

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