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Language planning, security, police communication and multilingualism in uniform: The case of South African Police Services

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ABSTRACT

The virulence of global conflicts and conflicts between different ethnolinguistic groups makes language, now more so than previously, a central issue within the state security apparatus. Police are at the forefront of law enforcement, making language and language planning an integral component of police communication. The centrality of language is more pertinent in complex multilingual contexts like South Africa. The sociolinguistic and discourse analysis of the security in South Africa makes an important contribution to policing to the extent that it adds social and linguistic dimensions, critical-theoretical and sociological approaches relevant to multilingualism, language policy and planning in security contexts over and above conventional security research, which, to date, has been dominated by psychological and anthropological approaches. As a result, this article explores ways in which language and language planning can address security issues in a multilingual context, focusing on the case of South Africa and the South African Police Services. The objective is to analyze multilingualism in relation to security and to draw implications for sociolinguistics of policing studies, and conversely the implications of security studies (and security, policy) for sociolinguistics and multilingualism. This article builds on the limited literature on the sociolinguistics of security and at the same time situates security at the nexus of sociolinguistics and multilingualism in South Africa. The article maintains that while it is true, to a degree, that multilingualism enhances security, the significance and value of multilingualism may be exaggerated especially if language is viewed as disembodied practice. Unless multilingualism is embedded in other semiotic practices that embrace ways in which both historical and contemporary communication in security are framed; it will remain at the periphery of police communication.

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1. Introduction

The main aim of this article is to explore perceptions about language, multilingualism and police communication from the viewpoint of the public and the police themselves. We then compare what the public expect of the police with regard to language and communication practices with what the police's assume is expected of them. We explore issues related to police communication and security, with a special focus on the South African Police Services' (SAPS) in the context of South Africa's policies around multilingualism. Even though there is a robust tradition of research into language planning in relation to

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multilingualism in South Africa (Heugh, 2008; Kamwangamalu, 2002; Makoni, 2011; Stroud, 2001), research at the nexus between language and discourses of state security is limited. Research into police communication in South Africa has largely been concerned with exploration of the degree of trust between the police and local African communities). The findings in most of these studies has shown that trust between the police and the public particularly in Black communities is complicated by the intractable legacy of apartheid evidenced by the Black communities' nickname of the police as *amahata* (harassers) which is in sharp contrast with terminology used to describe gangsters.¹ In a context where perceptions about the police are negative, communication is integral in overcoming such stereotypes and creating positively valorized relationships between the public and the police. In order to unpack some of the challenges police communication poses in such environments, it is necessary to develop a nuanced analysis of communication embedded in a context in which we analyze how the police are formally framed complemented with what their language needs are in a local context as articulated by the communities they serve.

In addressing these issues, the present article is organized as follows: first, we focus on the nature of communication within policing after which, the article will turn to the various ways in which the police represent themselves in their own annual reports. The specific focus in this analysis will be the cover of SAPS of 2012 annual report. In particular, the analysis will examine the design of the cover of the SAPS to capture the formal representations and discourses associated with the police. The rationale in this part of the analysis will be to glean some insights into how the police view and understand themselves and their relationships to the public. In the second section, the focus would be on security with the aim of establishing the adequacy of the police's knowledge about language and cultural knowledge from the perspective of local Black community members in a town hall meeting. An analysis of the language and cultural knowledge of the police is conceptually feasible in a town hall meeting because the town hall constitutes a cultural and language space in which participants can be analyzed. In the third and final section, we turn to an analysis of five interviews with the police at one police station. The objective of the analysis was to explore the cultural knowledge and language practices the police feel they need in order to carry out their professional obligations. The study was aimed at comparing whether what the local communities feel the police should know about language and cultural performance is comparable to what the police themselves feel is necessary in order to carry out their obligations.

1.1. *Communication and policing*

Communication between the police and the public in complex multilingual contexts requires a high degree of linguistic dexterity. The equation of language = communication (also referred to as a conduit metaphor of communication (Harris xxx)) in which language is encoded by one speaker and decoded by the hearer at the other end of the communication may not be adequate in describing communication between the police and civilians in multilingual contexts. Urban multilingual contexts such as Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Durban, where many languages, including languages of the state (South Africa's own multiple official languages) and those *in* the state (those from different parts of the world that have become part of South Africa due to migration), jostle for space. The South African Minister of Police recently captured the centrality of communication in the delivery of services by SAPS when stating this; "Our view is that effective communication should not be seen as a function and responsibility of the police leadership and management only, but that it should be the responsibility of each and every police officer in the force." *Womack and Finley (1986)* also underscore the Minister's position when they refer to communication as "[...] the central most important commodity that the officer has at his [or her] disposal" (p. 14). However, meaningful communication depends upon mutual recognition of the linguistic resources (i.e. verbal and nonverbal) of police and those of the clients. Research and law enforcement agencies have reiterated that one of the primary factors in crime prevention is the capability of civilians and police to work together (*Bayley, 1994*). Yet residents in many communities, including those in South Africa, have negative images of local law enforcement agencies and are reluctant to report to or cooperate with them (*Hajek et al., 2006; Sunshine and Tyler, 2003*). In Black communities, for instance, civilians are suspicious of the police and view their fast moving cars, loud sirens as aggressive, and an act of intimidation. While for the police, fast moving cars and loud sirens, as semiotic systems, communicate the fast-paced nature and seriousness of their task, this is perceived differently by some of the communities they serve. These diverse and incongruent frames of reference suggest that even if there was a common language between the civilians and the police, communication challenges would persist.

In addition to this, gaining an understanding of the role of accommodative practices and compliance in police–civilian encounters in South Africa is complex because of racial, ethnic, and xenophobic tensions that have arisen due to an increase in the number of African migrant communities. If communication is considered to consist of encoded and decoded language, then communication is not likely to succeed, because it is always going to be difficult to determine the intentions of an individual. When a socially embedded communication orientation is adopted, a more realistic perspective emerges regarding the impact of communication on security and policing. That is, a reorientation of communication perspectives results in a change of understanding of policing in which individual interpretations of the context are important. Socially embedded communication, which is to say *socially realistic* communication, is elusive, untidy, and always provisional. If communication is always indeterminate, concerns by police clientele that their reports are not understood accurately are

¹ While, in township parlance the police are referred to or *de hatas* (in Afrikaans) gangsters and/or gang members are referred to as *amagents* (gentlemen). The police are therefore conceptualized as people who harass local communities in contradistinction to gangsters who are positively valorized as gentlemen.

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