

PART III

Linguistic Anthropology

Language, whether spoken, written, or non-verbal, allows anthropologists to connect and better understand the human condition across time, space, and cultures. Early in the history of American Anthropology, anthropologists like John Wesley Powell and Franz Boas embraced linguistics as a critical subfield of the discipline. Powell collected and compared vocabularies from American Indian languages as part of an effort to racially classify North American Indian Nations. Because Boas did not believe that culture and language were biologically determined, he disagreed with Powell's approach. Instead, Boas trained his students to use linguistic anthropology to facilitate fieldwork; in his view, language was a window into culture. Regardless of their contrasting theoretical positions regarding the nature of language, Powell and Boas considered linguistics a critical component of anthropology. European anthropologists like Bronislaw Malinowski and E. E. Evans-Pritchard also valued language research as a component of cultural anthropology, but only in the U.S. academy did anthropologists incorporate linguistics as an actual subfield of anthropology.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the transformation of Anthropology from an armchair pastime to a scientific, academic discipline coincided with the rapid extinction of cultural traditions and languages. When undocumented or poorly documented languages go extinct, humanity loses the specialized knowledge, histories, and worldviews embedded in these languages. In order to preserve and document "disappearing" cultures, early linguistic anthropologists focused primarily on documenting the vocabularies and grammars of endangered cultural traditions. Nevertheless, of an estimated 7,000 languages spoken in the world today, linguists predict that approximately half of these languages will become extinct in the twenty-first century. Contemporary anthropologists continue to document endangered languages, but the field of linguistic anthropology has grown considerably as researchers have developed new approaches to study language scientifically to explore what it means to be human.

Today, linguistic anthropologists typically divide their subfield into three specializations: Historical Linguistics, Descriptive Linguistics, and Sociocultural Linguistics. Historical linguistics includes research on extinct languages as well as the evolution and migration of languages. In Selection 23, Bhattacharjee explains how computer modeling helps linguists see the influence of children and migration on the evolution of language throughout the history of humankind. Because language is not confined to speech and the written word, descriptive linguistics also studies the development of specialized sign languages to learn about the evolution of language (Selection 25).

Linguistic anthropologists who specialize in descriptive linguistics specialize in unraveling a language. Many anthropologists study descriptive linguistics so they can quickly learn an unwritten or lesser-known language in the field. Descriptive linguistics researchers study words (morphology), sentences (syntax), and meaning (semantics), as well as the physical qualities (phonetics) and structure (phonology) of speech. Sociocultural linguists, on the other

hand, examine the relationship between language and sociocultural systems. For example, a focus on speech behavior and miscommunication between males and females (Selection 28), can tell an anthropological fieldworker a great deal about a society in which he or she studies and their cultural values.

In sum, linguistic anthropology is a multidisciplinary and scientific study of human language. Linguists apply their skills as teachers and researchers in universities, but you will also find them working in government agencies, professional consulting firms, the corporate setting, and more recently in the high-tech sector (to design and improve Internet search engines, speech recognition, computer language modeling, the development of artificial intelligence, and computer mediated communication). Ultimately, the linguistic anthropologist uses her or his unique methodological toolkit to do what cultural anthropologists, biological anthropologists, and archaeologists do; they develop and test hypotheses to examine the complex diversity and universals of the human experience across time and space.

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From Heofonum to Heavens

Yudhijit Bhattacharjee

New Technology is one of the many ways new words enter our daily vocabulary. Before 2001 the terms “iPod” and “podcast” did not exist, but now these are ubiquitous words used every day on college campuses throughout the United States. New words like “podcast” and “email” may seem like benign additions to our language, but not everyone is ambivalent to this technology-inspired linguistic evolution.

In 2008, for example, linguists from the Ministry of Culture in France banned the word “podcast” along with over 500 other words like “wi-fi” and “supermodel.” Because these non-French words have crept into daily French vocabularies, the Ministry of Culture seeks to prevent these linguistic intrusions by offering alternative terms such as “courriel” instead of “email.” Linguistic nationalism and transformation is not unique to France; it was not long ago that the U.S. Congress legislated that french fries in the Capitol Hill cafeteria would be called “freedom fries.”

Languages evolve to fit the needs and lives of the people who use them. In this selection, Bhattacharjee explains how computer modeling helps linguists see

the influence of children and migration on linguistic transformation throughout the history of humankind.

As you read this selection, ask yourself the following questions:

- Why do anthropologists study the evolution of words and grammar?
- Why do languages change, and why do linguists view language change as a paradox?
- What role do children play in linguistic evolution?
- How do non-native speakers transform a language?
- How does population growth impact the evolution of a language?

The following terms discussed in this selection are included in the Glossary at the back of the book:

<i>creole</i>	<i>sociolinguistics</i>
<i>computational linguistics</i>	<i>verb-second structure</i>

If a modern-day priest were to chance upon an eleventh century manuscript of *The Lord's Prayer* in English, he would need the Lord's help to decipher its meaning. Much of the text would be gobbledygook to him, apart from a few words that might have a recognizable ring, such as heofonum (heavens) and yfele (evil). And even after a word-for-word translation, the priest would be left with the puzzling grammatical structure of sentences like “Our daily bread give us today.”

Although researchers generally think of languages as having evolved slowly over many millennia, language change occurring over time spans of a few centuries

has confounded scholars since medieval times. After trying to read a 600-year-old document, the first known printer of English works, William Caxton, lamented in 1490, “And certainly it was written in such a way that it was more like German than English. I could not recover it or make it understandable” (translated from Old English).

The comparative analysis of such texts is the closest that researchers can get to tracing the evolutionary path of a language. By studying the evolution of words and grammar over the past 1200 years of recorded history, linguists hope to understand the general principles underlying the development of languages. “Since we can assume that language and language change have operated in the same way for the past 50,000 years, modern language change can offer insights into earlier changes that led to the diversification of languages,”

Bhattacharjee, Yudhijit. “From Heofonum to Heavens.” *Science* 303, no. 5662 (27 Feb. 2004):1326–1328. Reprinted with permission from AAAS.

says Anthony Kroch, a linguist at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, that hope has driven scholars to document a variety of grammatical, morphological, and phonological changes in French, English, and other languages. In the past three decades, more and more theoretical and historical linguists have turned their attention to analyzing these changes, and sociolinguists have explored the social and historical forces at work. Now researchers in the growing field of computational linguistics are using computer models of speech communities to explore how such changes spread through a population and how language changes emerge in multilingual populations.

The simulations are infusing precision into the study of a phenomenon once thought to be the exclusive domain of humanistic inquiry. “Computational modeling of language change is in its infancy, but it is already helping us to reason more clearly about the factors underlying the process,” says Ian Roberts, a linguist at the University of Cambridge, U.K.

VOICE OF THE VIKINGS

Linguists view language change as something of a paradox. Because children learn the language of their parents faithfully enough to be able to communicate with them, there seems no reason for language to change at all. But historical texts show that change is common, although the trajectory and rate of change may be unique for any given language. In the tenth century, to consider a classic example, English had an object-verb grammar like that used today in Modern German, requiring sentence constructions such as “Hans must the horse tame.” By 1400 c.e., the English were using the familiar verb-object grammar of “Hans must tame the horse.” French underwent a similar change before the sixteenth century, whereas German retained its basic grammar.

To find out why such changes happen, researchers explore the historical circumstances surrounding them. In the past few years, based on a comparative analysis of religious texts from northern and southern England, Kroch and his colleagues at the University of Pennsylvania have suggested that northern English was transformed during the eleventh and twelfth century as Viking conquerors married native Anglo-Saxon women, who spoke Old English. The resulting bilingual households became crucibles for linguistic change. For example, whereas Old English had distinct verb endings to mark differences in person, number, and tense, the speakers of what is now called Early Middle English began using simpler verbs—perhaps

because the Scandinavians had difficulties keeping track of all the verb forms—and settled on a simplified system closer to what we use today.

In the absence of invasions and other external influences, languages can remain stable for long periods. Japanese and Icelandic, for instance, have hardly changed since 800 c.e. But researchers point out that isolation does not guarantee the status quo; grammatical shifts can also be triggered by internal forces such as minor changes in the way a language is spoken.

French is a case in point. In the sixteenth century, the language changed from a system in which the verb always had to be in second place (known as a verb-second structure) to one in which the verb (V) could be in any position as long as it came after the subject (S) and before the object (O); Modern French and Modern English both have this SVO structure. For example, “Lors oient ils venir un escoiz de tonnere” (Then heard they come a clap of thunder) became “Lors ils oient venir un escoiz de tonnere” (Then they heard come a clap of thunder). Roberts, who documented the transition by comparing a representative text from each century between the thirteenth and the seventeenth, believes that the change arose because speakers of Middle French reduced the emphasis on subject pronouns—“they” in this example—to the point where children learning the language barely heard the pronouns. Roberts inferred this decline in phonetic stress from usage changes in the written language. For example, subject pronouns were earlier used with modifiers, such as “I only,” but later they did not carry such modifiers. The result of this reduced emphasis, says Roberts, “was that for sentences beginning with a subject pronoun, the verb sounded like the first word of the sentence to the listener.” That ambiguity dealt a fatal blow to the verb-second rule, paving the way for the emergence of an SVO grammar.

9 JOHN THE BOOK BUYS

1 But a new grammatical feature cannot emerge overnight. For a variant such as an innovative construction 1 by a single speaker or a novel form of syntax produced 0 by a new adult learner to become part of the language, it must get picked up by other speakers and be transmitted to the next generation. Historical texts show that it can take centuries for a change to sweep through the entire community.

David Lightfoot, a linguist at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., says the key to understanding large-scale linguistic transformation lies in the link between the diffusion of novel forms through one generation and large grammatical shifts occurring across generations—changes he calls “catastrophic.” And this

link, according to him and many others, is language acquisition. Children may simply carry forward a variant that arose in the preceding generation. But more significantly, says Lightfoot, children may themselves serve as agents of change “by reinterpreting a grammatical rule because of exposure to a variant during their learning experience.” As adults, they may end up using a somewhat different grammatical system from that of their parents. Repeated over generations, this can lead to a dramatic makeover in the language.

Computational linguists such as Partha Niyogi of the University of Chicago have built computer models to understand the dynamics of such evolution. Their goal is to map out the relationship between learning by the individual and language change in the population, which Niyogi calls the “main plot in the story of language change.”

In one of the first attempts to unravel that plot’s outline, Niyogi and Robert Berwick, a computer scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, came up with a class of models simulating the transmission of language across generations. They started out by considering a virtual population with two types of adult speakers. The first type uses one set of grammatical rules—say, one that, like English, mandates a verb-object order for all constructions, generating sentences such as “John buys the book,” and “I know that John buys the book.” The rest of the speakers use a different grammar, for example one similar to German, in which the first verb goes in the second position but the second verb goes after the object. The speakers of the second grammar produce some sentences exactly like speakers of the first—“John buys the book”—but they also produce other kinds of sentences such as “I know that John the book buys.” The researchers spelled out a learning algorithm for children in this population, providing each learner with logical steps for acquiring grammatical rules from linguistic encounters with adults.

Following the linguistic behavior of this virtual community over generations led Niyogi and Berwick to a startling conclusion. They found that contrary to expectation, the population does not inevitably converge on the grammar spoken by the majority, nor on the simpler of the two grammars. Instead, the winning grammar is the one with fewer grammatically ambiguous sentences like “John buys the book,” which, although simple, might be analyzed as belonging to either grammatical type. In other words, if minority speakers consistently produce a smaller proportion of grammatically ambiguous sentences as compared to the majority, the population will over time shift completely to the minority grammar.

Niyogi, who first presented the work at the International Conference on the Evolution of Language

at Harvard in April 2002 and has published it in his book, says the finding makes it possible to imagine how a grammatical variant spoken by a handful of individuals might replace an entrenched grammar. It’s conceivable for the variant to pose no threat to the established grammar for many generations, he says, until the proportion of grammatically ambiguous sentences produced by speakers of the variant drops below the corresponding proportion for the dominant grammar. “For instance, sociocultural factors might change the content of conversations among minority, English-type speakers in a way that they stop using single-clause sentences like ‘John buys the book,’ “ says Niyogi. That would make their speech more complex—but less grammatically ambiguous. Then learners would hear a higher proportion of the multiple-clause, uniquely English constructions in English speech than they would hear uniquely German constructions in German speech. This would make them more likely to infer the English grammatical system from what they heard, even though their overall exposure to German and even uniquely German constructions would be greater. Suddenly, the mainstream German grammar would become unstable and the English grammar would begin to take over.

“That a little good info should be able to trump a lot of bad [ambiguous] info makes sense,” says Norbert Hornstein, a linguist at the University of Maryland, College Park, who sees the mechanism of change suggested by Niyogi as “a good fit with our understanding of language acquisition.” He says it provides a possible explanation for how small local changes—for instance, a simplification of the verb system by mixed households in thirteenth century northern England—may have spread through the entire population. Confirming this account of change would require testing computational models with real-world data such as the proportion of specific syntactical forms in historical texts, assuming written language to be a faithful impression of speech. Niyogi admits that the task could take years.

In a broader sense, however, researchers have already validated the computational approach by matching the outlines of models to real-world situations. For example, University of Cambridge linguist Ted Briscoe modeled the birth of a creole, a linguistic patois that arises from prolonged contact between two or more groups. He specifically considered Hawaiian English, which developed between 1860 and 1930 through contact between Europeans, native Hawaiians, and laborers shipped in from China, Portugal, and other countries. Briscoe’s simulation started out with a small but diverse group of speakers and factored in the periodic influx of adult immigrants. He found that a population with the right mix of children

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and new adult learners converged on an SVO grammar after two generations. That matches empirical studies showing that many features of Hawaiian Creole, including an SVO word order, did not stabilize until the second generation of learners.

Salikoko Mufwene, a sociolinguist at the University of Chicago, says that a detailed picture of mechanisms of language change could emerge if computational researchers succeed in modeling very specific contexts. For instance, he says, modeling spoken exchanges on a homestead of eight Europeans and two African slaves could help illuminate the linguistic evolution of the larger community. "The two Africans in this example are likely to be so well immersed that after a few months they would be speaking a second language variety of the European language. Say one of the Africans is a woman and bears a child with one of the white colonists. The child is likely to speak like the father because the father's language happens to be dominant at the homestead. Growing up, this child will serve as a model for children of new slaves," explains Mufwene. "Non-native speakers will exert only a marginal influence

on the emergent language of the community," in this case the native European variety.

But if the population increases significantly through a large influx of new slaves, he says, the dynamics of interaction change, and more adult nonnative speakers of the European language serve as models. Children now have a greater likelihood of acquiring some of the features spoken by adult nonnatives and transmitting them to future learners; over time, a new variety of the European language will emerge.

Detailed modeling along these lines, Mufwene says, could unveil the significance of factors that researchers may have missed, such as the pattern of population growth and the pace of demographic shifts. "Even without real-world number crunching," he says, "the exercise would suggest what questions we should be asking and what kinds of evidence we should be looking for."

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Village of the Deaf

In a Bedouin Town, a Language Is Born

Margalit Fox

Sign language, like any language, differs from place to place. In 1924 when athletes from Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Great Britain, Holland, and Poland gathered at the first World Games for the Deaf, they had to develop a new language to communicate with each other. Their impromptu system of hand signs became the foundation of a global sign language called International Sign.

Despite the existence of International Sign, deaf people and others throughout the world have developed unique sign languages to fit the uniqueness of their lived experiences. In recent years, for example, deaf and non-deaf poets have adapted sign languages to share their worldviews in ways that words and speech alone cannot. Pioneering sign language poets like Clayton Valli have helped the hearing world understand that signing, like speech, has rhymes, rhythm, and meter.

Humans communicate to connect and understand each other. This desire to connect is no different in the deaf community, even in remote locations where deaf people may not have opportunities to learn established sign languages. This selection describes the evolution of Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language, a language created in a remote Israeli village where an inherited form of deafness has created an incidence of deafness approximately forty times that of the general

population. Linguistic anthropologists “discovered” this island of the deaf in the late 1990s and have collaborated with the local population to learn more about the evolution of language.

As you read this selection, ask yourself the following questions:

- In what ways is Al-Sayyid an “island of the deaf?”
- What is the difference between first and second generation users of Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language?
- How do Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language, American Sign Language, and British Sign Language differ?
- In what ways is Al-Sayyid an “island of the deaf?”
- How does Bedouin Sign Language grammar differ from the verb-second grammar discussed in Bhattarcharjee’s chapter “From Heofonum to Heavens?”

The following terms discussed in this selection are included in the Glossary at the back of the book:

<i>Babel</i>	<i>homesigns</i>
<i>Bedouin</i>	<i>language instinct</i>

On this summer evening, the house is alive with people. In the main room, the owner of the house, a stocky man in a plaid shirt, has set a long plastic banquet table on the earthen floor, with a dozen plastic patio chairs around it. Children materialize with platters of nuts, sunflower seeds, and miniature fruit. At

the head of the table, the owner is joined by a group of men in their thirties and forties. Down one side of the table is a row of boys, from toddlers to teenagers. At the foot of the table sits a knot of six visitors: four linguistics scholars, a video camera operator, and me.

The man and his family are Bedouins, and the house is at the edge of their village, Al-Sayyid. Though they live in the desert, the Bedouins of Al-Sayyid are not nomads. Their people have inhabited this village, tucked into an obscure corner of what is now Israel, miles from the nearest town, for nearly 200 years. They are rooted, even middle class. Men and boys are

Fox, Margalit. “Village of the Deaf: In a Bedouin Town, a Language Is Born.” *Discover Magazine* (July 2007):66–69 from *Talking Hands: What Sign Language Reveals About the Mind* by Fox. (Simon & Schuster, 2007). Reprinted with permission of the author.

bareheaded and dressed in Western clothing, mostly T-shirts and jeans. They own automobiles, computers, and VCRs. But there is something even more remarkable about the Al-Sayyid Bedouins—an unusual language, never documented until now.

The house is a Babel tonight. Around the table, six languages are flowing. There are snatches of English, mostly for my benefit. There is Hebrew: two of the linguists are from an Israeli university, and many men in Al-Sayyid speak Hebrew as well. There is a great deal of Arabic, the language of the home for Bedouins throughout the Middle East. But in the illuminated room, it is the other languages that catch the eye. They are signed languages, the languages of the deaf. As night engulfs the desert and the cameraman's lights throw up huge, signing shadows, it looks as though language itself has become animate, as conversations play out in silhouette on the whitewashed walls.

There are three signed languages going. There is American Sign Language, used by one of the visitors, a deaf linguist from California. There is Israeli Sign Language (ISL), the language of the deaf in that country, whose structure the two Israeli scholars have devoted years to analyzing. And there is a third language, the one the linguists have journeyed here to see: Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), which is spoken in this village and nowhere else in the world.

In Al-Sayyid, the four linguists have encountered a veritable island of the deaf. In this isolated traditional community, where marriage to outsiders is rare, a form of inherited deafness has been passed down from one generation to the next for the last 70 years. Of the 3,500 residents of the village today, nearly 150 are deaf, an incidence forty times that of the general population. As a result, an indigenous signed language has sprung up, evolving among the deaf villagers as a means of communication. But what is so striking about the sign language of Al-Sayyid is that many hearing villagers can also speak it. It permeates every aspect of community life, used between parents and children, husbands and wives, from sibling to sibling and neighbor to neighbor.

The team plans to observe the language, to record it, and to produce an illustrated dictionary, the first-ever documentary record of the villagers' signed communication system. But the linguists are after something even larger. Because Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language has arisen entirely on its own, it offers a living demonstration of the "language instinct," man's inborn capacity to create language from thin air. If the linguists can decode this language—if they can isolate the formal elements that make Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language a language—they will be in possession of compelling new evidence in the search for the ingredients essential to all language. And in so doing, they

will have helped illuminate one of the most fundamental aspects of what it means to be human.

When Wendy Sandler, a linguist at the University of Haifa, first heard about Al-Sayyid in the late 1990s, she knew at once that she had to investigate. Over the next few years, she and Irit Meir, a colleague at Haifa, made cautious forays into Al-Sayyid, setting in motion the diplomacy that is a critical part of linguistic fieldwork: explaining their intentions, hosting a day of activities at the village school, over time earning the trust of a number of the villagers.

Their work has a sense of urgency. Although the sign language of Al-Sayyid arose in a linguistic vacuum, the social realities of modern life, even in a remote desert community, make it impossible for it to remain that way. Over the years, many of Al-Sayyid's deaf children have been bused to special classes for the deaf in nearby towns, where they are taught all day in spoken language—Hebrew or Arabic—accompanied by signs from Israeli Sign Language, a language utterly different from their own. In just one generation, when the older Bedouin signers die, the unique signed language of the village, at least in its present form, may be significantly altered.

Omar, the owner of the home in which we gathered for the first recording session, greeted us in Hebrew. Although he is hearing, Omar has deaf siblings and knows the village sign language. Carol Padden, a linguist from the University of California, San Diego, who is deaf, starts to sign to him, using gestures international enough that they can be readily understood. Omar replies expansively in Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign: the seeds of a simple contact pidgin have been sown. When signers of different languages come together, communication is achieved partly through the use of the most transparent gestures possible, partly through a shared understanding of the particular devices that signed languages use to convey meaning. (Just such a contact language, called International Sign Pidgin, has developed over the years at places like sign-linguistics meetings, where deaf people from many countries converge.)

The sign language of a particular country is rarely contingent on the spoken language that surrounds it. American and British Sign Languages are mutually unintelligible. A deaf American will have an easier time understanding a deaf Frenchman: ASL is historically descended from French Sign Language. Even the manual alphabet used by deaf signers can differ from one country to another. The letters of the American manual alphabet are signed using one hand; those of the British manual alphabet are made with two hands.

In her lab's mission statement, Wendy sums up how studying sign languages can illuminate how the

mind works: “It usually comes as a surprise to the layman to learn that nobody sat down and invented the sign languages of the deaf. These languages arise spontaneously, wherever deaf people have an opportunity to congregate. That shows that they are the natural product of the human brain, just like spoken languages. But because these languages exist in a different physical modality, researchers believe that they offer a unique window into the kind of mental system that all human language belongs to.”

Linguists have long believed that the ideal language to analyze would be one in its infancy. They even dream of the following experiment: simply grab a couple of babies, lock them in a room for a few years and record the utterances they produce. The scenario came to be known as the Forbidden Experiment.

It’s been tried. The historian Herodotus, writing in the fifth century B.C., told of the Egyptian pharaoh Psammetichus, who, in an attempt to discover what the oldest civilization was, took two infants from their mothers and dispatched them to an isolated hut under the care of a mute shepherd. Eventually, one of the babies uttered the word *bekos*, which turned out to be the Phrygian word for “bread,” bringing the experiment to a happy conclusion.

But near the end of the twentieth century, linguists began to realize that their sought-after virgin language existed in the sign language of the deaf. Signed languages spring from the same mental machinery that spoken languages do, but they are linguistic saplings.

The conditions that create an Al-Sayyid—a place where hundreds of people are habitual signers—are extremely particular. First, you need a gene for a form of inherited deafness. Second, you need huge families to pass the gene along, yielding an unusually large deaf population in a short span of time. Of Al-Sayyid’s 3,500 residents, about one in 25 is deaf—4 percent of the population. For deafness, a rate of 4 percent is a staggering figure: in the United States, the incidence of deafness in the general population is about one in 1,000. The presence of so many deaf signers in their midst also encourages widespread signing among the hearing. This helps keep the indigenous signed language alive for the village as a whole.

Wendy and her colleagues aren’t claiming that Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL) mirrors the evolutionary development of language in *Homo sapiens*. Rather, as Wendy explained, “we’re able to see, given the fully developed human brain, what happens when it has to make a language out of nothing.”

The first deaf children were born in Al-Sayyid 70 years ago, about ten of them in a single generation. By the time of our visit, only one member of the first deaf generation was still alive, an elderly woman too infirm to be interviewed. Today, the 150 or so deaf

people of Al-Sayyid include the second generation, men and women in their thirties and forties; and the third generation, their children.

When they were small, the first-generation signers had developed systems of gestures, called homesigns, to communicate with their families. With so many homesigners in close proximity, a functional pidgin could develop quickly. And in just one generation, the children of these signers, like children of pidgin speakers everywhere, took their parents’ signed pidgin and gave it grammar, spontaneously transforming it into the signed language of Al-Sayyid.

Over time, the language developed complexity. “People can talk about things that are not in the here-and-now,” says Wendy. “They can talk about the traditional folklore of the tribe and say, ‘People used to do it this way and now they don’t.’ They’re able to transmit a lot of information—and things that are quite abstract.” For example, “A signer told us about the traditional method of making babies immune to scorpion bites. It takes a high degree of sophistication about their culture, and it also takes a high degree of abstraction to be able to convey it.”

Another villager, Anwar, is a particularly fine signer. On the linguists’ previous visit, they recorded him telling a story nearly half an hour long, of how he was lost in Egypt for several years as a child. When Anwar was about eight, he somehow found his way onto a bus bound for Egypt. Because he couldn’t communicate with anyone, he had no idea where he was supposed to be going, or where to get off. He left the bus somewhere in Egypt, where he knew no one. He was taken in by a local family and lived with them for three years. One day, someone from Al-Sayyid passed through and heard the story of the mysterious deaf boy. He recognized Anwar and brought him home. Anwar recounted this for the linguists entirely in the village sign language.

In all human languages, the task of showing who did what to whom is one of the principal functions of grammar. Many languages do this through verb agreement. But as a young, relatively bare language, ABSL displayed little of the elaborate verb agreement—made by altering the path of a verb’s movement through space—that is the hallmark of established sign languages. Yet in the sentences they signed every day, the people of Al-Sayyid conveyed, clearly and without ambiguity, who did what to whom. Identifying the way in which they did so was the team’s first important discovery.

In most spoken languages, there is a trade-off between verb agreement and rigid word order when it comes to expressing who did what to whom. And rigid word order the sign language of Al-Sayyid had with a vengeance. The second-generation signers of ABSL,

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the team discovered, routinely rely on word order to encode the who-did-what-to-whom of discourse. As the linguists wrote in their first major paper on the village, "In the space of one generation from its inception, systematic grammatical structure has emerged in the language."

As the team analyzed sentence after sentence of ABSL, they saw signers use the same word order again and again: subject-object-verb, or SOV. In some sentences, subject or object might be absent (as in MONEY COLLECT, "I saved money," which has no overt subject). But in almost all of them, the verb appeared at the very end of the sentence or clause.

It was noteworthy that this very young language already had word order of any kind, especially given that ABSL, like any signed language, could just as easily do without it. This was truly astonishing: the

emerging language of Al-Sayyid makes vigorous use of word order even though it doesn't have to.

As long as the grant money holds out, and as long as the people of Al-Sayyid will have them, the linguists will come back to the village at least twice a year. It is too soon to tell whether the village sign language in the pure, isolated form will endure much beyond this generation. The signing of the deaf children, Al-Sayyid's third generation, is already permeated with ISL. Most parents in Al-Sayyid believe that for their deaf children to make their way in Israeli society, they will need to know the national signed language, and no one disputes their point. "We don't know how the language will change, and for us, that's where the drama is," Wendy wrote me in an e-mail message a few years after our trip. "And that's why we have to keep studying it very carefully across the generations."

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Lost in Translation

Lera Boroditsky

When we think about taking a trip and learning a bit of a foreign language, we usually think first about learning new vocabulary. “What is the word for *hello* in Chinese or in Spanish?” We assume that if we know the words, we can communicate.

We know that to learn a language also takes learning grammar, but most of us believe that we can insert new vocabulary terms to say the same things we would have said in our native language. So we ask, how do you say “X?” What we don’t seem to understand is that there are nuances of language that are far more profound than finding the right words.

What if different languages used different ways to describe the same event, for example, and these linguistic differences led to different ways of thinking about or understanding what just happened? Could it be that different languages allow you to think differently, and do they constrain what you think about yourself and the world around you?

These are important questions as we live and work more closely with people who grew up learning languages different from our own. Anthropologists have been thinking about the relationship between how we speak and how we think and perceive for a long time. Recent collaborations between sociolinguists and other researchers such as computer scientists and

neurologists have produced exciting results that deepen our understanding of the nature and power of language. In this reading, Lera Boroditsky explains that what we see, how we understand, and what we remember may be the result of the language we speak.

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As you read this selection, consider the following questions:

- Does learning a new language change how an individual thinks?
- Does a language’s use of absolute directions, such as north, south, east or west, rather than right or left, have any impact on one’s skills and abilities?
- Can language differences affect one’s ability to remember something that has been clearly witnessed?
- What is Chomsky’s universal grammar theory, and would Chomsky agree that language determines what and how individuals think about and understand the world?

The following terms discussed in this selection are included in the Glossary at the back of the book:

empirical
linguist

universal grammar

Do the languages we speak shape the way we think? Do they merely express thoughts, or do the structures in languages (without our knowledge or consent) shape the very thoughts we wish to express?

Take “Humpty Dumpty sat on a . . .” Even this snippet of a nursery rhyme reveals how much languages can differ from one another. In English, we have to mark the verb for tense; in this case, we say “sat” rather than “sit.” In Indonesian you need not (in fact, you can’t) change the verb to mark tense.

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In Russian, you would have to mark tense and also gender, changing the verb if Mrs. Dumpty did the sitting. You would also have to decide if the sitting event was completed or not. If our ovoid hero sat on the wall for the entire time he was meant to, it would be a different form of the verb than if, say, he had a great fall.

In Turkish, you would have to include in the verb how you acquired this information. For example, if you saw the chubby fellow on the wall with your own eyes, you’d use one form of the verb, but if you had simply read or heard about it, you’d use a different form.

Do English, Indonesian, Russian and Turkish speakers end up attending to, understanding, and remembering their experiences differently simply because they speak different languages?

These questions touch on all the major controversies in the study of mind, with important implications for politics, law and religion. Yet very little empirical work had been done on these questions until recently. The idea that language might shape thought was for a long time considered untestable at best and more often simply crazy and wrong. Now, a flurry of new cognitive science research is showing that in fact, language does profoundly influence how we see the world.

The question of whether languages shape the way we think goes back centuries; Charlemagne proclaimed that “to have a second language is to have a second soul.” But the idea went out of favor with scientists when Noam Chomsky’s theories of language gained popularity in the 1960s and ‘70s. Dr. Chomsky proposed that there is a universal grammar for all human languages—essentially, that languages don’t really differ from one another in significant ways. And because languages didn’t differ from one another, the theory went, it made no sense to ask whether linguistic differences led to differences in thinking.

USE YOUR WORDS

Some findings on how language can affect thinking.

- Russian speakers, who have more words for light and dark blues, are better able to visually discriminate shades of blue.
- Some indigenous tribes say north, south, east and west, rather than left and right, and as a consequence have great spatial orientation.
- The Piraha, whose language eschews number words in favor of terms like few and many, are not able to keep track of exact quantities.
- In one study, Spanish and Japanese speakers couldn’t remember the agents of accidental events as adeptly as English speakers could. Why? In Spanish and Japanese, the agent of causality is dropped: “The vase broke itself,” rather than “John broke the vase.”

The search for linguistic universals yielded interesting data on languages, but after decades of work, not a single proposed universal has withstood scrutiny. Instead, as linguists probed deeper into the world’s languages (7,000 or so, only a fraction of them analyzed), innumerable unpredictable differences emerged.

Of course, just because people talk differently doesn’t necessarily mean they think differently. In the past decade, cognitive scientists have begun to measure not just how people talk, but also how they think, asking whether our understanding of even such

fundamental domains of experience as space, time and causality could be constructed by language.

For example, in Pormpuraaw, a remote Aboriginal community in Australia, the indigenous languages don’t use terms like “left” and “right.” Instead, everything is talked about in terms of absolute cardinal directions (north, south, east, west), which means you say things like, “There’s an ant on your southwest leg.” To say hello in Pormpuraaw, one asks, “Where are you going?”, and an appropriate response might be, “A long way to the south-southwest. How about you?” If you don’t know which way is which, you literally can’t get past hello.

About a third of the world’s languages (spoken in all kinds of physical environments) rely on absolute directions for space. As a result of this constant linguistic training, speakers of such languages are remarkably good at staying oriented and keeping track of where they are, even in unfamiliar landscapes. They perform navigational feats scientists once thought were beyond human capabilities. This is a big difference, a fundamentally different way of conceptualizing space, trained by language.

Differences in how people think about space don’t end there. People rely on their spatial knowledge to build many other more complex or abstract representations including time, number, musical pitch, kinship relations, morality and emotions. So if Pormpuraawans think differently about space, do they also think differently about other things, like time?

To find out, my colleague Alice Gaby and I traveled to Australia and gave Pormpuraawans sets of pictures that showed temporal progressions (for example, pictures of a man at different ages, or a crocodile growing, or a banana being eaten). Their job was to arrange the shuffled photos on the ground to show the correct temporal order. We tested each person in two separate sittings, each time facing in a different cardinal direction. When asked to do this, English speakers arrange time from left to right. Hebrew speakers do it from right to left (because Hebrew is written from right to left).

Pormpuraawans, we found, arranged time from east to west. That is, seated facing south, time went left to right. When facing north, right to left. When facing east, toward the body, and so on. Of course, we never told any of our participants which direction they faced. The Pormpuraawans not only knew that already, but they also spontaneously used this spatial orientation to construct their representations of time. And many other ways to organize time exist in the world’s languages. In Mandarin, the future can be below and the past above. In Aymara, spoken in South America, the future is behind and the past in front.

In addition to space and time, languages also shape how we understand causality. For example, English likes to describe events in terms of agents doing things. English speakers tend to say things like “John broke the vase” even for accidents. Speakers of Spanish or Japanese would be more likely to say “the vase broke” or “the vase was broken. Such differences between languages have profound consequences for how their speakers understand events, construct notions of causality and agency, what they remember as eyewitnesses and how much they blame and punish others.

In studies conducted by Caitlin Fausey at Stanford, speakers of English, Spanish and Japanese watched videos of two people popping balloons, breaking eggs and spilling drinks either intentionally or accidentally. Later everyone got a surprise memory test: For each event, can you remember who did it? She discovered a striking cross-linguistic difference in eyewitness memory. Spanish and Japanese speakers did not remember the agents of accidental events as well as did English speakers. Mind you, they remembered the agents of intentional events (for which their language would mention the agent) just fine. But for accidental events, when one wouldn’t normally mention the agent in Spanish or Japanese, they didn’t encode or remember the agent as well.

In another study, English speakers watched the video of Janet Jackson’s infamous “wardrobe malfunction” (a wonderful nonagentive coinage introduced into the English language by Justin Timberlake), accompanied by one of two written reports. The reports were identical except in the last sentence where one used the agentive phrase “ripped the costume” while the other said “the costume ripped.” Even though everyone watched the same video and witnessed the ripping with their own eyes, language mattered. Not only did people who read “ripped the costume” blame Justin Timberlake more, they also levied a whopping 53 percent more in fines.

Beyond space, time and causality, patterns in language have been shown to shape many other domains of thought. Russian speakers, who make an extra distinction between light and dark blues in their language, are better able to visually discriminate shades of blue. The Piraha, a tribe in the Amazon in Brazil, whose language eschews number words in favor of terms like few and many, are not able to keep track of exact quantities. And Shakespeare, it turns out, was wrong about roses: Roses by many other names (as told to blindfolded subjects) do not smell as sweet.

Patterns in language offer a window on a culture’s dispositions and priorities. For example, English sentence structures focus on agents, and in our criminal-justice system, justice has been done when

we’ve found the transgressor and punished him or her accordingly (rather than finding the victims and restituting appropriately, an alternative approach to justice). So does the language shape cultural values, or does the influence go the other way, or both?

Languages, of course, are human creations, tools we invent and hone to suit our needs. Simply showing that speakers of different languages think differently doesn’t tell us whether it’s language that shapes thought or the other way around. To demonstrate the causal role of language, what’s needed are studies that directly manipulate language and look for effects in cognition.

One of the key advances in recent years has been the demonstration of precisely this causal link. It turns out that if you change how people talk, that changes how they think. If people learn another language, they inadvertently also learn a new way of looking at the world. When bilingual people switch from one language to another, they start thinking differently, too. And if you take away people’s ability to use language in what should be a simple nonlinguistic task, their performance can change dramatically, sometimes making them look no smarter than rats or infants. (For example, in recent studies, MIT students were shown dots on a screen and asked to say how many there were. If they were allowed to count normally, they did great. If they simultaneously did a nonlinguistic task—like banging out rhythms—they still did great. But if they did a verbal task when shown the dots—like repeating the words spoken in a news report—their counting fell apart. In other words, they needed their language skills to count.)

All this new research shows us that the languages we speak not only reflect or express our thoughts, but also shape the very thoughts we wish to express. The structures that exist in our languages profoundly shape how we construct reality, and help make us as smart and sophisticated as we are.

Language is a uniquely human gift. When we study language, we are uncovering in part what makes us human, getting a peek at the very nature of human nature. As we uncover how languages and their speakers differ from one another, we discover that human natures too can differ dramatically, depending on the languages we speak. The next steps are to understand the mechanisms through which languages help us construct the incredibly complex knowledge systems we have. Understanding how knowledge is built will allow us to create ideas that go beyond the currently thinkable. This research cuts right to the fundamental questions we all ask about ourselves. How do we come to be the way we are? Why do we think the way we do? An important part of the answer, it turns out, is in the languages we speak.

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Shifting Norms of Linguistic and Cultural Respect: Hybrid Sociolinguistic Zulu Identities

Stephanie Inge Rudwick

Imagine you just arrived in Kwazulu-Natal as a Peace Corps volunteer. You arrive in your host village, where you are immediately expected to greet the elders. As you nervously walk toward their receiving line, your thoughts jump back to your college anthropology class. You are trying to remember what your professor said about establishing positive relationships in a new study community. All you can remember is something about respecting the elders, but that advice seems rather obvious as the distinguished old man seated in front of you reaches out his hand to welcome you.

Determined to err on the side of caution, you do everything you can to demonstrate your utmost respect. Your grandmother always taught you to look at people straight in the eyes when you speak, and to never sit down in front of an elder or boss until you are told to take a seat. So you look down into the eyes of that first elder, and you share a firm handshake and a smile. You remain standing as you wait for permission to take a seat, and then you see what you've feared all along. The eyes of that first elder tell you that you must have committed a serious offense. In an instant, a kind youngster grabs your hand and guides you to sit down. After redirecting your gaze away from the elders, your new best friend whispers some terrific advice: "In our village we show respect for elders by avoiding direct eye contact during conversation, and when we talk with elders we always sit down; it's impolite to make them look up to see you."

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The idea of respecting your elders is not complicated, but translating that relatively universal idea into practice is another matter. In this selection, linguist Stephanie Inge Rudwick describes the cultural variability of showing respect with a compelling field study that compares the linguistic and social norms of respect among isi-Zulu speakers in urban KwaZulu-Natal.

As you read this selection, consider the following questions:

- What is the difference between *hlonipha* and *isi-Hlonipho*?
- Why do some urban isi-Zulu speaking women disregard some, but not all traditional *hlonipha* behaviors?
- How does *kuhlonipha* (act of showing respect) reinforce traditional Zulu values in terms of age, status and gender? *Hlonipha*
- How do the changing linguistic and social norms of "respect" among urban isi-Zulu speakers compare to the way you were taught to interact with elders?

The following terms discussed in this selection are included in the Glossary at the back of the book:

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| <i>code-switching</i> | <i>sociolinguistics</i> |
| <i>linguistic hybridity</i> | <i>speech event</i> |
| <i>linguistic register</i> | |

1. INTRODUCTION

Lack of respect, though less aggressive than an outright insult, can take an equally wounding form. No insult is offered another person, but neither is recognition extended; he or she is not *seen*—as a full being whose presence matters (Sennett 2003: 3).

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One of the most prolific social thinkers of our time, Richard Sennett, wonders why respect should be in short supply while it costs nothing and provides people with a sense of dignity and pride. Admittedly, Sennett's work has focused mainly on "western" and U.S. American models of thinking while norms of respect and the understanding of what precisely constitutes respectful social or linguistic behaviour varies greatly from one culture to another. Many traditional African societies prescribe great significance to respectful behavior towards males and elders. This is because many social practices and cultural customs in these societies are based on strict patriarchy and seniority principles. Sociolinguistic scholars, such as Mills (2003, 2004), for instance, have rightly argued that respect and politeness is fundamentally based on particular approaches to class, race and gender and warns that what is considered "respectful", "polite" and "courteous" is often mistakenly associated with the behavior of one particular class, more often than not that of the white middle class. This, of course, raises questions as regards the relevance and applicability of models of politeness, such as the influential, albeit dated, model by Brown and Levinson (1978) to work on Africa.¹

What I would like to argue here, however, is that Sennett's analysis of disrespected people² and what happens, if they as individuals are not felt accounted for as full and recognizable human beings, is universally relevant. In brief, an individual who feels disrespected may experience the complete loss of self-confidence and self-worth. Although the mechanism underlying the kind of disrespectful, unequal social power dynamic Sennett describes has primarily socio-economic foundations, the results of feeling disrespected may well occur due to a particular cultural set-up as well. It has long been acknowledged that "just as groups of people can be oppressed economically and politically, they can also be oppressed and humiliated culturally" and "that the concern for social justice needs to include not just economic but also cultural rights" (Parekh, 2000: 6).

One could argue that a certain standard of respect is laid down in the nuclear family while more general principles of respectful social and linguistic behavior are acquired in the immediate environment, the larger society and in private and public interaction. Hence, the understanding of what constitutes respectful behavior is embedded in one's culture, but also significantly in one's personal upbringing and socialization. There are doubtlessly many social and linguistic behavioral respect patterns which are culturally acquired and may trigger misunderstandings in intercultural encounters.³ The concerns of this paper are, however, not inter-cultural dynamics but intra-cultural ones. I discuss how contrastive and conflictual patterns

of respect emerge within one reasonably homogenous ethno- and sociolinguistic group, i.e. young (below the age of 30) Zulu people in urban KwaZulu-Natal (KZN).

There has been a recent debate in the South African media about the notion of the term "coconut". A possible definition of "coconut" is an urban "Eurocentric" African person who speaks what is perceived as an excessive amount of English with a "white" accent.⁴ While there are a number of criteria used in assigning people "coconut"-status⁵, the issue of language does seem to feature prominently in boundary constructions among isiZulu-speakers in South Africa. Considering that the vast socio-economic and political change in South Africa has resulted in increasingly complex and diverging identity formation patterns, norms of respects within particular ethnic, social, linguistic, cultural or religious communities also diverge and vary. Individuals may be perceived to be rude or to be acting disrespectful by members of their own "in-group" which could be based on ethnicity, linguistic background, religion or any other sociocultural affiliation. Furthermore, *age* is an important social variable when it comes to perceptions of "respect". In any society the older generation often has a different understanding of what constitutes respectful behavior than the young generation. Norms of respect are by no means static and bound; they are both fluid and fluctuating and, perhaps even more importantly, context-dependent. More over, in some instances, idiosyncratic differences in social respect patterns may transcend cultural or generational ones.⁶

This article emerges as part of a research project based on an empirical investigation of the contemporary linguistic and social norms of *hlonipha* [respect] among isiZulu-speakers in KwaZulu-Natal in rural-urban comparison but focuses only on the data collected among young (below the age of 30) urban participants. After providing some socio-historical background information on Zulu people in South Africa in general, I outline some of the traditional norms of respect significant for this ethnic group and distinguish between *hlonipha* as a cultural and social custom and *isiHlonipho* as a linguistic register. The following section discusses the theoretical approach of this paper and explains why cultural theories that are based on transgression concepts are particularly valuable in urban, post-apartheid South Africa. The research methodology, data analysis and discussion are presented in the next section which constitutes the backbone of the argument presented here. Many urban isiZulu-speakers critically evaluate traditionalist notions of *hlonipha*, revise them according to their needs and consequently construct hybrid cultural and sociolinguistic identities which take into account a variety of different reference points as regards

respectful social and linguistic behavior. This article concurs with the argument of Pavlenko and Blackledge (2003: 27) that “individuals are agentive beings who are constantly in search of new social and linguistic resources, which allow them to resist identities that position them in undesirable ways; produce new identities; and assign alternative meanings to the links between identities and linguistic varieties”.

2. BRIEF BACKGROUND TO ISIZULU-SPEAKERS

IsiZulu-speakers make up about 22 percent of the South African population (Census, 2001⁷) and the vast majority resides in the province KwaZulu-Natal where this research was conducted. Literally translated *hlonipha* means “respect” in isiZulu. Social *hlonipha* actions are fundamental to traditional Zulu life and what is considered “proper” behavior within the community. Among traditional Zulu people *ukuhlonipha* [to respect] as a social custom, reinforces a complex value system which is based on the social variables age, status and gender. *Hlonipha* actions entail conventions regulating and controlling posture, gesture, dress code and other behavioral patterns, but also align with status based on privileges of material nature. The most detailed study on Zulu *hlonipha* is arguably that by Raum (1973) who argues that one needs to distinguish two poles of sociological significance in *hlonipha* interactions, the *inferior status agent* and the *superior referent* (ibid.).

Higher status, seniority, and frequently also the male gender automatically qualify one as the referent of *hlonipha* actions. Furthermore, the significance of *amadlozi* [ancestors] is omnipresent in the execution of respectful behavior as it is in particular the ancestors and their names which need to be respected. The way in which names are given respect is by avoidance. *IsiHlonipho*⁸, also termed the “language of respect” is essentially based on verbal taboo and has been researched most extensively among Xhosa women⁹. The linguistic aspect of *hlonipha*, termed *isiHlonipho* in the literature, manifests itself in its most “proper” sense, in the avoidance of the usage of syllables occurring in the names of relatives of older and/or superior status and in reference to the names of ancestors. The “deep” variety of *isiHlonipho* comprises of a large corpus of lexical items which are synonyms for the expressions which carry syllables that need to be avoided. Finlayson (1978) documented what she termed an *isiHlonipho* core vocabulary. The “soft” variety of *isiHlonipho* can be understood as the simple avoidance of the names of individuals and ancestors who need to be respected through the usage of common *isiHlonipho* terms, based on neologisms, lexical borrowings, or circumlocutions.

3. TRANSGRESSION AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

The anthropological approach to “culture” long ago moved from the understanding of “culture” as a certain kind of monolithic construct which could be meaningfully described in terms of stable constituents to the insight that “culture” is inherently versatile, flexible, context-dependent and variably understood. Alexander (2002) suggests in the South African context that “culture” should be approached as something which is essentially in motion implying that what “culture” is to a group of people today may be different from how “culture” is understood by individuals in this group tomorrow. So-called “cultural groups” are not homogenous and individuals who perceive themselves as belonging to the same cultural group may have very different perceptions of what exactly it is that constitutes their “culture”. Furthermore, these perceptions may vary from one situation to another and are situational and highly context-dependent (Ferdman and Horenczyk, 2000).

Although it may be commonly acknowledged that culture gives meaning to people’s lives, many individuals and groups find it difficult to respect other peoples’ cultural customs and their practical manifestations. Parekh (2000: 176) aptly points out that full respect for a culture entails not only “respect for a community’s right to its culture” but also “for the content and character of that culture”. It is the latter aspect which is what creates great challenges for individuals and entire groups in South Africa. The former contention is based on the idea that human beings have a fundamental right to choose how they want to live and how they construct and communicate their sense of self and their identities in a way that “every community has as good a right to its culture as any other, and there is no basis for inequality” (ibid.). The latter dimension of the concept concerning the content and character of culture is more problematic as, to mention only two examples, feminists find it impossible to tolerate patriarchy and traditionalists detest modern and revised approaches to their traditions.

Despite some opposing views¹⁰, most scholars working on theories of multiculturalism¹¹ argue that embeddedness in language and culture is a constitutive factor of people’s identity. Kymlicka (2007), in particular, stresses the inherent human need for a cultural and linguistic context of choice which gives meaning to people’s lives and allows for a sense of freedom. While De Schutter (2007: 46) acknowledges the importance of Kymlicka’s emphasis on cultural freedom, he justifiably rejects the scholar’s monolithic approach to language and culture.¹² This criticism echoes well in the context of contemporary South Africa, as specifically

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in urban areas of the country individuals derive their linguistic and cultural embeddedness not only from one single monolithic source but from many different contexts. In an increasingly urbanized and globalized world, the notions of culture and identity become highly complex and multifaceted. Most individuals have more than just a single cultural reference point adopting hybrid cultural identities. Urban spaces in South Africa are no exception to this development as will be seen below.

Cultural Hybridity as understood by Homi Bhabha (1994, 1999) involves human beings as the creators, not the bearers of culture. Due to the individuality and the innovativeness of each human being it also follows that any particular culture cannot be concretely described in terms of its specific contents and constituents.¹³ Clearly, there is not just one single point of reference for the construction of sociolinguistic or socio-cultural identities. This is particularly true with regard to individuals challenged to create identities in radically multilingual and multicultural spaces such as those that typify much of South Africa. Even in KZN, a province characterized by considerable homogeneity in terms of its black ethno-linguistic landscape, there are multiple and differing reference points for people as will be seen below.¹⁴ Recent research in the KwaZulu-Natal township Umlazi suggests that the Zulu-speaking township youths negotiate their identities in various patterns, some more local, others more national (Rudwick 2004). These findings demonstrate that strong identification with Zulu ethnicity and simultaneous embracing of western norms and values, including the English language, are by no means contradictory for an individual. Total language-shift from isiZulu to English, however, is widely seen as betrayal of language, culture and tradition and gives rise to tensions in the Zulu community. Generally, these empirical findings provide further evidence that there is an increasing diversification of patterns which construct identities within what are traditionally regarded as homogenous groups (Tierney, 2007). From this perspective it needs to be stressed that a monolithic approach to culture and identity is deeply antiquated and requires rethinking. More specifically, these findings also account for the diversity amongst cultural customs of respect. Individuals may adopt certain respect patterns from groups outside their own cultural "in-group". It is on these grounds, that many young educated isiZulu-speakers have started to question and scrutinize respect patterns in their own traditional communities.

The notion of "de-linking, de-constructing of culture, place and identity" (Frello, 2006) derives from Hall's (1990, 1997) conceptualization of hybridity as "displacement" rather than as mere "blending" and "mixture" which is particularly useful for the purpose

of this study. It draws on an approach to cultural identity as something "that belongs to the future as much as to the past" (1990: 225). In this sense, cultural identities, albeit inspired by history, transform constantly and are context-dependent. The hybrid individual (and this paper provides a platform for documenting the voices of such individuals), is capable of critically interrogating dominant and hegemonic formations by integrating "otherness" within the dominant center (Frello, 2006). Displaced categories are not conceptualized as "culturally different" but as "excluded" in the culture. This kind of approach allows the researcher to focus on the very complex struggles over power, identity and legitimate speech positions which are involved in isiZulu-speakers' critical engagement with *hlonipha* as a custom and speech form.

4. THE STUDY

While the larger project, from which this paper emerges, is based on an urban-rural comparison, this paper focuses exclusively on the sociolinguistic data elicited from young (30 years and younger) urban Zulu participants in the *eThekweni* (Durban city) region in KZN. I chose a multi-methods paradigm comprised of questionnaires (50 participants), interviews (18 participants) and participant observation in private homes. Participants were given the choice of filling in the questionnaires or being interviewed in English and/or isiZulu. The questionnaire¹⁵ included a table with 47 lexical items based on what has been identified as core *hlonipha* vocabulary by Finlayson (1978). Participants were asked to fill in the appropriate *hlonipha* item for each isiZulu stimulus. The design of the interviews was based on a narrative approach (Mayring, 1996: 55) and yielded information on a variety of linguistic and social topics around the custom of *hlonipha*. Participant observation in different households has proven very valuable in complementing the interviews and in order to present a holistic and authentic picture of the sociolinguistic dynamics at work here. Speech situations and speech events were explored and language choices of individuals were systematically observed and contextualized. While it may be suggested that the "best" and most "valuable" data is linked to recorded speech, it must be stressed that it is engagement with and knowledge about the socio-cultural world in which speech occurs that ultimately leads sociolinguists to their findings (Johnstone, 2000: 84).

5. QUESTIONNAIRES

The questionnaires were distributed among 50 participants (equal distribution of males and females: 25/25)

under the age of 30 residing in the *eThekweni* region. The majority were university students, about 10 participants were employed in various professions and a few were unemployed. While the questionnaires primarily aimed to elicit the lexical knowledge of an *isiHlonipho* core vocabulary (consisting of 47 lexical items) it also included a number of open-ended questions and tasks, two of which are particularly relevant for this paper. The first required the participants to rate the significance and value of *ukuhlonipha* [lit. translated as “showing respect”] as a social custom, the second required the same in reference to *isiHlonipho* [the language of respect] as a linguistic custom. An adapted Likert scale from 1–10 (1 = very important, 10 = not important) gave insight into the significance participants prescribed *ukuhlonipha* as a social custom and *isiHlonipho* as a linguistic variety. The analysis of the questionnaires suggests that the vast majority of participants rated the social value of *hlonipha* much more highly than the linguistic aspects of the custom. 82 percent of the participants gave *hlonipha* as a social custom a rating between 1–3, on the scale and hence identified it as “very important”, while only 34 percent rated *isiHlonipho* as “very important” (1–3).

The low rating of the linguistic aspect is, however, not surprising as very few participants (8 percent) were able to identify more than half (at least 24 out of 47) of the *isiHlonipho* lexical items on the table in the questionnaire, showing that the knowledge of the core vocabulary is rather poor in the investigated urban group.¹⁶ This suggests that the linguistic aspect of the *hlonipha* custom is not central and not particularly significant in the life experiences of the questionnaire participants. In contrast, the social behavior codex inherent in the custom [*ukuhlonipha*] continues to be valued although it should be noted that perceptions of what exactly characterizes *ukuhlonipha* may vary from one participant to the next. While the questionnaires do provide a first insight into the contrast between the social and linguistic embeddedness of participants’ constructions of identities regarding *hlonipha*, they do not provide detailed information regarding subjective notions of what kind of *ukuhlonipha*, or respectful behavior was meant.

Regarding the lexical analysis, it is noteworthy that the urban participants, on average, only knew roughly 32 percent of the lexical items provided in the table.¹⁷ While some individuals were able to fill in more than half of the table, others only knew 3 or 4 words. In a few questionnaires the participant identified lexical item as *isiHlonipho* terms derived from the English language, for example *umeleko* [milk], *izindishi* [dishes] and *isipuni* [spoon]. Although the questionnaire was designed in a way that there was additional space for elaboration and further comments only few participants used the opportunity to give explanations

for their responses. The lengthy one to two hour interviews with individual participants provided a much more accurate picture of the reasoning behind certain perceptions and attitudes. For this paper, I chose three themes that emerged from the interviews in order to portray how young urban Zulu people construct hybrid identities which mediate between tradition and modernity on the issue of *hlonipha*.

6. SELECTION OF SIGNIFICANT COMPONENTS IN HLONIPHA

What emerged from all interviews was a profound sense of the general significance of “social respect” [*ukuhlonipha*] among the young Zulu participants. While this consensus is noteworthy it only indicates participants’ general agreement on the importance of the social custom not necessarily a unified and consensual understanding of the exact rules and facets of *ukuhlonipha* per se. Some interviewees juxtaposed the social with the linguistic aspects of *hlonipha* and highlighted, in line with the questionnaire ratings, *isiHlonipho* “proper” as marginally or only partially important. What this means for an *isiZulu*-speaker, is that the names of ancestors and living people that need to be respected would have to be avoided but the syllables that occur in these names could be pronounced without showing disrespect. The extract below exemplifies this:

Respect is the most important thing, *ukuhlonipha* makes you who you are, also in the way you are and how you speak. I will teach my child a part of it, because in our days it is not necessary to use the specific words . . . (Nqobile, 24, Umlazi).

This young female student emphasizes the existential significance of *ukuhlonipha* as a social behavior of respect for her as a Zulu woman. For her, it is a matter of identity, of how you present yourself to the world, also on a linguistic level, but not primarily. What the quote above confirms is that the part of *hlonipha* which is still being passed on by urban Zulu people does not necessarily include the knowledge of specific *hlonipha* lexical items such as those in the core vocabulary table.

Respect for seniority is still rated very high among the interviewees. The same individual [quoted above] refers to the paramount importance of respect for older people at a later point in the interview. Another female interviewee explains that although friends respect each other, the respect one shows towards your relatives, in particular those that are older or of higher status, is substantially more profound and significant. Kinship and status relations, for instance, trump the variable age and fundamentally govern who is the agent and

who is the referent in the respect dynamic. Cousins that are older need to be respected because of their seniority but if, for example, an aunt is younger than her nephew it is the nephew that needs to show respect towards the aunt because of her higher status in terms of kinship relations. One participant mentioned that he would never enter one of his family member's houses or huts without taking off his hat but he might keep it on when walking into his friend's place. Numerous seemingly mundane but evidently significant patterns of respect are mentioned repeatedly by participants, such as the fact that it is gravely disrespectful to pass something (any thing) on with the left hand and even more so when it is done behind one's back. It was argued that "there are some things Zulus just don't do" (Ndumiso, 27).

Several young men made a sharp distinction between a Zulu person who knows how to "properly" *hlonipha* and one who doesn't and concluded, with one exception (1 of 8 interviewees) that such a person is not a "good" or "proper" Zulu. A young Masters student, Vusi, put it the following way: "Remember that I am Zulu so if you don't conform to this value and ethics of the *hlonipha* thing you are somehow modernized or westernized in a way that is not Zulu of course". However, this rigid belief in the significance of *hlonipha* generally focuses on the sociological aspect of the custom, not the linguistic register. Regarding the issue of language in general, an *isiHlonipho* in particular, Vusi had the following to say:

I am a traditionalist but I am more flexible . . . like for instance with language issues, even with *isiHlonipho* I am not a language purist because you find that most traditionalists are language purists . . . they only want the high variety of the language . . . I take it that I am open to the growth of the language [. . .]. So I am that kind of traditionalist (Vusi, 23)¹⁸.

The quote above suggests the hybrid nature of the interviewee's "traditionalism" when it comes to language issues. He continues to say that "as much as we become more individualistic [. . .] still we have the tradition". Numerous other interviewees indicated that they are a certain kind of "traditionalist" who is different from the norm, someone who is more "modern" and less "purist". Most participants welcome English lexical borrowings in isiZulu and propose further developments of the language that are practical for the modern world. Young Zulu people who grow up in KZN urban areas permanently exposed to a multilingual and multicultural environment engage in extensive lexical borrowing and code-switching behaviours. Furthermore, the urban mixed code Tsotsitaal, or rather its KZN equivalent, *isiTsotsi*, is the language medium in which many, predominately

township youth, communicate. In *isiTsotsi*, the matrix language and main lexifier is isiZulu, and the mixed-code is, hence, similar to what Ntshangase (1993, 1995; 2002) referred to as Iscamtho, a Gauteng based urban variety. Tsotsitaal, in contrast, makes use of a predominately Afrikaans lexicon. IsiTsotsi is today first and foremost associated with an informal context of "youth discourse", an urban or township setting and a personal level of communication in KZN.¹⁹ It needs to be noted, however, that these hybrid linguistic phenomena occur much less frequently and sometimes not at all in rural areas of the province.

J7. GENDER DYNAMICS CRITICALLY INTERROGATED

A detailed look at Raum's (1973) voluminous study leaves no doubt that the Zulu traditionalist *hlonipha* framework is highly gendered and exhibits, at least from a western perspective, numerous disempowering or even oppressive elements for females. This, however, is not surprising as "Zulu society has always been largely patriarchal" (Magwaza, 2001: 25). How *hlonipha* discourse can be misused and misinterpreted in order to oppress women has aptly been described in Thetela (2002).

Numerous interviewees, both male and female, spoke about the gender dynamic involved in *hlonipha*. A few of the individuals pointed out that gender equality in Zulu society is only just beginning to be established in the urban areas and that rural men often feel intimidated by urban educated females. This also creates conflicts and at times leads to violence against women. Numerous interviewees refer to incidents in urban and township areas where females experience assault or even abuse because the perpetrators accuse them of behaving disrespectfully, linguistically as well as socially. One only needs to consider the Noord Street incident in February 2008 where taxi drivers stripped and sexually assaulted an African female by the name of Nwabisa Ngcukana because she wore a miniskirt, to see how bizarre gender dynamics are played out in South Africa in reference to *respect*. A recent Mail & Guardian (M&G) article offers extracts of some of the interviews journalists conducted with individual taxi drivers in the taxi rank mentioned above. Almost justifying the incident one of the males said " . . . it's about respect. I was taught by my parents that a woman's skirt should be below the knees and that is how my wife and I have raised my daughters" (Ndlovo and Mhlana, 2008: 6). Similar constructions and perceptions of what characterizes respectful or disrespectful behavior which appear fundamentally

“warped” from a gender-equality perspective feature in numerous interviews with male Zulu participants. One man, for instance, explained that he beats his wife for what he perceives as inadequate and improper respectful behavior, such as voicing criticism towards him.

Overall, numerous urban female interviewees pointed out the discrepancy between urban and rural Zulu society in reference to gender equity. The quote below exemplifies the female perception that many men, especially in rural KZN areas, see themselves as superior to women and perpetuate a patriarchal system:

In rural areas there is still a male dominated society only the men having the say of whatever . . . the males are saying without questioning. But the thing is, they need to be questioned now because we can't just do things just because it has always been done this way [. . .] *Mina* [I], I don't think that's right *ukuthi* [that] in our culture, that's everything [. . .], they tell you, do this, do that (Buhle, 28).

Towards the end of this comment the participant refers to “they” without clearly stating the antecedent but one can safely assume that she refers either to Zulu rural men or rural, traditional people in general, in other words, people who can be considered stakeholders of Zulu cultural practices and traditions. This individual clearly interrogates dominant formations in her society and constructs a hybrid identity which provides her with more power and agency. The quote below shows how a young married Umlazi township woman refuses to do what she considers as the “real” *hlonipha* stuff:

Hey, *mina*, I know that I am married, but I don't have to do the real *hlonipha* stuff [. . .], because in rural areas if you are married you have to behave in very certain ways, talk in certain ways, dress in certain ways [. . .], unlike me, I am living my life as I was living it before (Nomusa, 27).

Nomusa claims that she has not changed the way she lives her life since she got married which is indeed in stark contrast to rural married women who move to their husband's homestead and live very restricted lives.

In South Africa the urban-rural dichotomy is to a large extent synonymous with modernity and tradition. The majority of the participants portrayed themselves as members of the new and modern South African society which is different from that of the past. Nonetheless several interviewees repeatedly referred to themselves as “Zulu women/girls” or a “Zulu men/boys” which suggests that they are not indifferent to their ethnicity. But within these constructions of ethnic identity one notices a revised interpretation of what it means to be a Zulu man or a Zulu woman. One

married 26-year old female, for instance, described how she experiences the mourning behaviour her mother had to endure after the death of her husband, the interviewee's father, as oppressive. Traditional female *ukuzila* [mourning] behaviour requires a restrictive dresscode, various rituals and, either silence or a restrictive *isiHlonipho* code, all of which the participant perceives as strongly oppressive for women. Therefore, she argues that

[. . .] there are conflicts of tradition, they [the traditionalists] don't want to move on, but with me [. . .], my husband know, if he would die today, me doing the mourning stuff it wouldn't make sense [. . .](Bongi, 26).

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Implicit in this statement is that her husband has “moved away” from a traditional approach to their marriage, at least when it comes to the issue of what characterizes respectful behavior among widows. The quote also demonstrates the empowered status of this female and the agency by which she constructs reality for herself and her husband. In other words, she dropped something out of the traditional basket of Zulu *hlonipha* behaviour because it doesn't “make sense” in her current life.

When it comes to *isiHlonipho* as a linguistic politeness register a number of males claimed that it was largely up to them whether their wives used *isiHlonipho* or not. The argument for a “soft” variety of *isiHlonipho*, which only demands the avoidance of the names of male relatives, was voiced repeatedly. The comment below exemplifies male agency in this matter:

“if my father is *Nkomo* and I don't want her to use the word *nkomo*, I am the one who is supposed to allow it [. . .]. It is me who is going to make this decision, so in the society they will not ask her, they will ask me [. . .]” (Vusi, 23).

Overall, there is little doubt that males enjoy superior status, even in urban and township areas. Despite these prevailing male-dominated dynamics in KZN, at least some women display a certain level of agency regarding their own individual re-interpretations of *hlonipha* and gender equality. It is evident, as Selikov et al. (2002) argue, that South African women are not merely powerless beings but that they are able to be their own agents and have ways to assert themselves, at least in urban settings.

8. “TORN BETWEEN TWO WORLDS”: CONTEXT AND AGENCY

Although respectful behavior in general is on some level context dependent, the above mentioned dichotomy between urban versus rural as well as modern versus traditional is particularly pronounced in

contemporary Zulu society. I would like to argue, in fact, that one could replace the term *modern* with *hybrid* in many instances. The two interview extracts below exemplify how, in particular, females in Zulu society feel torn between two worlds, the traditional and the modern, hybrid one.

I feel very often torn between two worlds. Obviously one that is very much dominated by a western perception of what respect is [. . .] like looking people in the eyes, holding your head up high [. . .] and then going to a traditional council and downcast eyes and not looking people in the face, not talking (Nompilo, 31, Eshowe)

These participant constructs an identity which captures the theoretical notion of identification in Bhabha's (1990) sense, as "a process of identifying with and through another object, an object of otherness, at which point the agency of identification—the subject—is itself always ambivalent, because of the intervention of that otherness" (Bhabha 1990: 211). "The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and recognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation" (ibid.).

Although it is primarily the social aspect of *hlonipha* which retains significance for the bulk of the participants, numerous interviewees also ascribed meaning and significance to the linguistic register on a symbolic level: You know *isiHlonipho* helps you to know about your background [. . .] it helps you to know about the origin of your language" (Buhle, 28), "*isiHlonipho* was your everything [. . .] I dig to know it" (Zandile, 26). The quotes are indicative of the fact that many urban women still treasure *isiHlonipho* as a linguistic custom without actually having proper knowledge of the register. Some even seem to regret the fact that they did not grow up learning to speak it properly. IsiZulu speakers are known for what I would like to term "cultural consciousnesses" and this does not exclude young Zulu people in urban and township areas. There is a strong sense of having to "know one's roots" and "one's belonging". Interestingly, many of the participants, particularly those who spoke English without a trace of an African accent, emphasize that they "do know their roots". The majority of the interviewees have a fairly concrete idea about what respectful behavior means to them today and to what extent Zulu *hlonipha* rules still apply to them. For many Zulu females, for instance, to refrain from wearing pants or short skirts is still expression of proper *hlonipha* behaviour in traditional settings. There is a sense that being disrespectful will take a "wounding form" in Sennett's (2003) terms. There is little doubt that the individuals who participated in this study will maintain certain, albeit hybrid, interpretations of *hlonipha* and *isiHlonipho*. In

the interviews, several participants regretfully argued that they feel as if Zulu people have lost something and need to "go back" to find it again. As one interviewee put it: "To respect today means really going back to our culture" (Sfiso, 30).

9. CONCLUSION

While "respect" and the *hlonipha* custom is variably understood by the young, urban Zulu society in KZN and interpretations of social and linguistic behavior vary considerably, the interviewees of this study unanimously agreed that *hlonipha* with respect to age, seniority and particularly male relatives is still part and parcel of good behavior in the Zulu community. In terms of the linguistic aspect, however, the participants of this study confirmed the finding noting that the usage of *isiHlonipho* has become very much context-dependent and rather insignificant in the urban context. Dowling (1988) and Finlayson (1995) both argued that contemporary *hlonipha* behavior in urban Xhosa society is dependent on place, setting and interlocutors. It is not surprising that the same holds true for contemporary Zulu society. This study does, however, suggest that the contrast between the different contexts has deepened in recent times. As has been noted elsewhere, many Zulu-speaking urban individuals and communities seem to be increasingly westernizing while rural individuals and their communities, preserve spaces for the maintenance of Zulu culture (Appalraju and de Kadt 2002).

A new finding of this study and an issue which has not been discussed adequately in existing *hlonipha* literature is that many young urban women and, to a lesser degree, urban men, have started to critically engage with patriarchal aspects or interpretations of *hlonipha*. It is important to mention that not only females but also some men question the male-dominated biases of the custom. Many individuals seem to "pick and choose" whatever they want to have inside their *hlonipha* basket. This includes in many cases a very "soft" linguistic approach, in other words, *isiHlonipho* in its traditionalist and deep sense is replaced with a soft variety of the linguistic register, entailing, for example, the avoidance of the use of the names of ancestors and male relatives. While the significance of traditional *isiHlonipho* is undoubtedly decreasing in urban areas, the appreciation of *hlonipha* as an important social behavioral codex persists. Importantly, however, the exact *hlonipha* constituents for the construction of hybrid Zulu identities are not fixed and stable but vary in their specificities from one individual to another.

Although the linguistic variety *isiHlonipho* is in its original complexity not a significant part of the “self” concept of the young urban isiZulu speakers who were the participants of this study, the register per se is still regarded as an important linguistic symbol of an associated cultural concept. Furthermore, as mentioned, certain social behavioural patterns linked to *hlonipha* are still maintained and treasured. Hybridity entails creative engagement not only in cultural exchange (Kalra et al. 2005: 73) but also in linguistic exchange. South Africa exhibits numerous examples of linguistic hybridity²⁰ such as pidgins and creoles, urban mixed-codes and extensive code-switching. The pidgin language Fanagalo which, despite its stigma as a “rude” and “deteriorated” form of isiZulu, is still used as a lingua franca, in particular among South African Indians in communication with Zulu people and is a South African linguistic product of hybridity.²¹ Furthermore, there are the different varieties of urban-mixed and hybrid codes mentioned earlier, such as Tsotsitaal, isiTsotsi, and Iscamtho, which have attracted increasing attention from sociolinguistic researchers in recent years.²² Similarly, code-switching is a hybrid linguistic phenomenon and exceedingly common among African language speakers and has been a prominent scholarly topic.²³ Surprisingly, however, the sociolinguistic functions of these linguistic varieties and the study of the identities of their speakers, has thus far not been linked to any sociological and anthropological transgression theories. I have attempted to make the first step by linking transgression theories to the sociolinguistic study of *hlonipha* in the hope that this may trigger further research into the field.

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