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

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ABSTRACT

Most traditional African societies, due to strict patriarchy and seniority principles inherent in their cultural systems, prescribe great significance to respectful behaviour towards males and elders. *Hlonipha*, the cultural and linguistic system of respect which exists in most Southern Bantu-speaking African societies must be understood as a complex web of sociological and linguistic actions which prescribe deferential behaviour (Raum, 1973). This paper explores whether and to what extent linguistic and social norms of *hlonipha* are uniform and consistent within the members of a particular ethno-linguistic or social group in contemporary South Africa, i.e. isiZulu-speakers in urban KwaZulu-Natal. In order to find answers to this multifaceted research question, I draw from interdisciplinary empirical findings based on a large research project which investigates the role, function and status of *hlonipha*. Among other things, it is argued that there is a clear correlation between the construction of hybrid cultural and ethno-linguistic identities and an urban upward mobile lifestyle among young isiZulu-speakers.

Keywords: Zulu society, hlonipha custom, hybridity, identities.

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).

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 US-American models of thinking while norms of respect and the understanding of what precisely constitutes respectful social or

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linguistic behaviour varies greatly from one culture to another. Many traditional African societies prescribe great significance to respectful behaviour 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 behaviour 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 people[2] 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 behaviour are acquired in the immediate environment, the larger society and in private and public interaction. Hence, the understanding of what constitutes respectful behaviour 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 inter-cultural encounters.[3] The concerns of this

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[1] See De Kadt's (1998) critique of Politeness Theory as inadequate model for the analysis of African collectivist cultures.

[2] Richard Sennett describes how people in his Chicago childhood neighborhood in the 1940s called Cabrini Green experienced a severely wounding form of 'disrespect' due to the fact that their residential place was associated primarily with crime and socio-economic problems.

[3] For instance, while most people of European decent perceive it as disrespectful if their conversation partner does not establish eye contact, the avoidance of eye contact with people who need to be respected is characteristic for many traditionally raised isiZulu-speakers from rural South African areas. De Kadt (1995) further argues that isiZulu-speaking students at the former University of Natal do not only avoid to establish eye-contact but they also sit down without asking, which may well be perceived as disrespectful from a western perspective. The reason behind the student seating himself without being offered a seat lies in the discomfort with someone who is 'superior' in status but physically lower down. So, while to seat oneself

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'-status[5], the issue of language does seems 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 socio-cultural 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 behaviour then 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

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without being offered a seat may be perceived as rude and disrespectful among white individuals in South Africa, a Zulu student may perceive it as disrespectful to remain standing.

[4]   For more detail, see Rudwick (2008).

[5]   Eurocentrism, un-africaness, self-loathing and other subjective terms are used as attributes of 'coconutyness' in public discourse, see Ncobo 2008 for more detail.

[6]   In many European families it is considered acceptable today to call your mother and father by their first names, while in others it remains to be regarded disrespectful.

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 behaviour. 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% of the South African population (Census, 2001[7]) 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' behaviour 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 behavioural 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 behaviour 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 women[9]. 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

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[7]   Source: Census Database 2001: http://www.statssa.gov.za.

[8]   The term *isiHlonipho* is adopted with reference to K. Herbert (1990) who coined it in conjunction with *sabafazi* [women]: *Isihlonipho sabafazi* [women's language of respect].

[9]   See, for instance, Finlayson (1978, 1995, 2002) and Dowling (1988).

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 meaningful 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 views[10], most scholars working on theories of multiculturalism[11] argue that embeddedness in language and culture is a

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[10] Barry, as aptly criticized by De Schutter (20007: 42), mistakenly views language as purely instrumental, and hence characterized by replaceability. De Schutter argues that 'many people feel deeply attached to their native tongues and would feel humiliated were they to be asked to simply leave their original language behind in order to linguistically assimilate, be it with 'just another convention'' (ibid.). Indeed, how could language be purely instrumental if a people's mother tongue is often the very basis of their identity?

[11] For the purpose of this paper, I define multiculturalism as an ideology which provides different cultural groups in a nation state with equal status and opportunities.

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 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).

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[12]   Numerous other scholars have criticized Kymlicka's inadequate attention to the pluralist character of cultures; see Benhabib (2002), Parekh (2000), or Song (2005).

[13]   This, however, does not suggest that people at the grassroots level do not have primordial, essentialist or purist notions and understandings of their language, culture and identity. Especially in traditional or nationalist parts of Africa, the link between language, culture and identity is frequently perceived as cast in stone and immutable. Hence, theories on hybridity may not be applicable to the analysis of the understanding of culture as perceived by such people as there is no process of "translating and transvaluing cultural differences" within the same in-group (Bhabha 1994: 252).

[14]   According to the most recent census data available almost 80% of the residents in the province of KwaZulu-Natal are isiZulu mother-tongue speakers (Census 2001).

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 *eThekwini* (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 questionnaire[15] 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 contextualised. While it may be suggested that

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[15]   For more detail, please see English version of the questionnaire in appendix.

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 *eThekwini* 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% 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% rated *isiHlonipho* as 'very important' (1–3).

The low rating of the linguistic aspect is, however, not surprising as very few participants (8%) 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 behaviour 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.

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[16]   Although a presentation of the rural data is beyond the scope of this paper, I would like to mention that the number of lexical items known in the under 30 years, rural group is more than twice as high as that of the urban one.

Regarding the lexical analysis, it is noteworthy that the urban participants, on average, only knew roughly 32% 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 *isiHlonipo* 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 behaviour 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.

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17   This stands in sharp contrast to the rural participants who knew 66 % of the stimuli.

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

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[18]   The participants are all given pseudonyms in order to assure their anonymity.

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.

7.   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 dis-empowering 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 intimated 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 behaviour which appear fundamentally 'warped' from a gender-equality perspective feature in numerous interviews with male Zulu participants. One man, for

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19   For more detail on *isiTsotsi*, see Rudwick (2005).

instance, explained that he beats his wife for what he perceives as inadequate and improper respectful behaviour, 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 dress-code, 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).

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 behaviour 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 area. 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 behaviour 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 behaviour 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 behaviour 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 behaviour 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* behaviour 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 westernising 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 hybridity[20] 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,

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[20] South Africa also offers other social forms of hybridity such as syncretism, the fusion of religion. Shembe, Zionist and Nazareth churches, for example, merge traditional Christian elements with traditional African belief systems. Vilakazi (1958: 311) argues that the clashing of traditional Zulu customs and European, Christian values created a substantial level of fusion and syncretism, but also lead to disputes about Christian faith and traditional value systems based on the belief in ancestors.

[21] For more detail, see Bond (1990).

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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[22]   See, for example, Makhudu (1995, 2002), Msimang (1987) and Ntshangase (1993), Molamu (2003) or Rudwick (2005).

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APPENDIX:

Questionnaire

Personal Details:

1. Male ☐   Female ☐

2. Age: _____

3. Place of birth: _____

4. Place of residence: _____

Which other places have you lived and for how long?

4.1. Place _____   Time–period _____

4.2. Place _____   Time–period _____

4.3. Place _____   Time–period _____

5. Profession (what do you do for living?): _____

_____

6. Income: Less than R 1000,–   ☐

       Between R 1000, – 3000,–   ☐

       Between R 3000, – 5000,–   ☐

       Between R 5000, – 8000,–   ☐

       Between R 8000, – 10 000   ☐

       More than R 10 000   ☐

7. What is your home language? _____

_____

8. Which other language(s) do you speak? _____

_____

Further questions:

9. Of all the languages you speak, which one do you feel most attached to (i.e. you have the strongest feelings for)? _____

_____

Please give reasons for your answer to (9) _____

_____

_____

_____

_____
_____
_____
_____

10. How important is for you *ukuhlonipha* and *isiHlonipho*? Please indicate on the scale.

ukuhlonipha: **very important   1——2——3——4——5——6——7——8——9——10   not important**

isiHlonipho: **very important   1——2——3——4——5——6——7——8——9——10   not important**

Please give reasons for your answer to (10) _____

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Below is a list of isiZulu words and their English translation. We ask you to please provide a hlonipha term for these words in case you know one.

isiZulu	**isiHlonipho**	isiNgisi
ukudla		food
isitya (Xhosa)		bowl
ibhodwe		pot
umese		knife
ukhezo		spoon
isinkwa		bread
ubhontshisi		beans
izambane		potato
iqanda		egg
inyama		meat
ushukela		sugar
itiye		tea
ikhofi		coffee
amanzi		water
ubisi		milk
amasi		sour milk
utshwala		beer (alcohol)
inkomo		cow
ithole (Xhosa)		calf
inja		dog
ihhashi		horse
ingulube		pig
umfana		boy
intombi		girl
indoda		man
umlungu		white person
ingane		child
umuntu umdala		old person
ikhanda		head
amehlo		eyes
ingalo (Xhosa)		arm
isifuba (Xhosa)		chest
idolo		knee
umlenze		leg
indlu		house/hut
umlilo		fire
isibuku		mirror
indlela		path
inyanga		healer
ilanga		sun
izulu		sky/weather
isitulo		chair
isicabha		door
amabele		breast
ukusenga		milking
phandle		outside

Thank you very much