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# EDUCATION AND LITERACY AS METONYMS FOR ENGLISH: ADULT BASIC EDUCATION AND DOMESTIC WORKERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

Anna Kaiper-Marquez  
Associate Director/ Assistant Teaching Professor  
Pennsylvania State University  
Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy/Institute for the  
Study of Adult Literacy  
axk1222@psu.edu

## Abstract

This paper centers on the English language learning of South African domestic workers and compares how discourses of adult education parallel individual domestic workers' narratives of education, literacy and English. Namely, the author finds that within individual learner narratives and broader South African language policies, "education" and "literacy" become metonyms (or words that take on a different meaning than their written definition) for "*English* language education" and "*English* literacy." This is problematic for although South African domestic workers learning English can often read, write, and speak in multiple South African languages, they are socially identified, and often identify themselves, as "illiterate" and "uneducated," thus reproducing the symbolic power of English (inter)nationally. The author additionally contends that these metonyms not only reflect broader societal notions of these same terms, but also reconstruct the ways in which these women, and other adult English language learners globally, personally think about and use these terms. Findings from this research are linked to policy and practice implications surrounding language and literacy instruction for adult learners.

**Bongi<sup>1</sup>:** I want to go back to school. I want to know how to speak English.

**Kaiper-Marquez:** Why is that important?

**B:** If I talk to the white people, I want to talk nicely.

**KM:** Do you think if you knew more English, would the people treat you differently?

**B:** I think so.

**KM:** Why do you think that?

**B:** Because sometimes when I'm speaking, she (Bongi's employer) doesn't listen to me. She says to me "You must speak nicely. Go to school" (Interview, August 20, 2016).

The presence of English—and its link to education—is a worldwide phenomenon. Discourses about English are tied to everything done "in the name of education, all the exacerbations of inequality that go under the label of globalization, all the linguistic calumnies that denigrate other ways of speaking, all the shamefully racist institutional interactions that occur..." (Pennycook, 2017, p. xv). English's global presence as a lingua franca is a growing issue in policy and research, including adult education research, around the world. And yet, reasons for the global growth of English continue to change and expand based on context, space, and history.

Within this paper, I center my analysis and discussion on the English language learning of South African domestic workers to examine how English is prevalent in discourses connected to literacy and adult education in a South African context. Further, I focus on the individual narratives of these women as they play a crucial role in the history of South Africa and yet remain "among those who have had the least access to education" (Vanqa-Mgijima, Wiid, and duToit, 2013, p. 267). Drawing from the term *metonymy*, in which a word or term is understood to reference a meaning other than its stated definition, I contend that for South African domestic workers taking English language classes, "literacy" and "education" become metonyms for "English language education" and "English literacy." These direct links between being "literate," "educated," and knowing English become problematic for within this research, I reveal that although South African domestic workers often identify themselves as "illiterate" and "uneducated", they concurrently overlook their abilities to speak, read,

<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to protect privacy.

and write in their native languages. In other words, the strength of these women's multilingualistic repertoires becomes obsolete while the symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991) that English holds nationally is increasingly (re)produced in the personal and social spaces in which these women live and work.

### A Brief History of English in South Africa

Analyzing the history of English in South Africa is key to understanding the motivations of domestic workers learning English. English was first introduced to South Africa in 1795 when the British arrived in the Cape of Good Hope, now known as Cape Town, to overthrow Dutch rule and control the Cape sea route between Asia and Europe (Lass, 1995). From the end of the 18th century to the mid-20th century, English was used as the main language of education for both Bantu-speaking black South Africans and Dutch-speaking Afrikaners (white settlers and their descendants). In 1910, the Union of South Africa was formed along with a constitution that made both Dutch and English the official languages of the country (Thompson, 2000). In 1925, Afrikaans (a variation of Dutch, Bantu languages, and English) gained status as the other official language of South Africa besides English, and gradually replaced Dutch.

British rule in South Africa was brought to an end in 1948 with the beginning of *apartheid*, a social system of racial segregation. It concurrently brought an end to the dominance of the British colonial legacy of English as one of the official languages of the country. During apartheid, a primary way for Afrikaner leaders to oppress black Africans was through policies on language of instruction. One policy in which this was most evident was with the *Bantu Education Act of 1953*. The main components of the act promoted Afrikaans, reduced the influence of English in schools, and used mother-tongue education to support apartheid's racial and linguistic separatism (Taylor, 2002). As a response to this linguistic oppression, English became the language of protest and freedom against apartheid, while the use of African languages in an educational context began to diminish. And yet, although English was viewed as the language of anti-apartheid protest, it was still associated with British rule and colonization, making its presence in South African education complex (Kamwangamalu, 2002).

The 1994 democratic elections brought the apartheid regime to an end and two years later the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa was implemented. The Constitution supported new policies promoting equality for all South Africans. This included the recognition of 11 official languages including nine native African languages, Afrikaans, and English. And yet, after over 20 years of official policies promoting multilingualism in education, a drift to English-medium education persists (Ferguson, 2013).

### Literature Review

Although the history of English in South Africa is important in understanding motivations for adult learners, and in this case, domestic workers, to learn English, just as vital is an awareness of larger theories of English language learning that frame these motivations and history. There are numerous theoretical frameworks for understanding motivations for adults learning English, however, this paper draws primarily from poststructural theories of language identity and power.

While the term 'poststructuralist' does not have one fixed meaning and is applied to a range of theoretical ideas and positions, a common factor in poststructuralist analyses of social systems, individual consciousness, and power, is the concept of language. Though not consistently claimed as a poststructuralist scholar, Bourdieu (1991) asserted that symbolic power is not the power that is often recognizable, but instead, it is a transformed and unrecognizable power that is often legitimated by and carried into other forms of power. One way in which this power becomes recognized is through the legitimation of dominant languages in education.

As Bourdieu (1991) contended, the sociology of language is inseparable from the sociology of education, and "the educational market is strictly dominated by the linguistic products of the dominant class" (p. 62). This linguistic dominance led to Bourdieu's notion of linguistic capital as constituted by a linguistic market, which creates the conditions through which legitimization can function. Linguistic capital produces what Bourdieu termed a "profit of distinction" (p. 55), which results from the scarcity of the product. In this case, the profit of distinction is the English language, and is realized with social and verbal exchange. Furthermore, Bourdieu asserted that those least able to accept and adopt the language of school and society are those who

have already faced, and will continue to face, social and educational disparities. In a South African context, while the country recognizes 11 official languages, and promotes policies supporting students' language of choice, English continues to rule South African education and politics, thus acting as the language of legitimation that Bourdieu described. Hence, English becomes a source of symbolic power for both youth and adults, and gives social power that domestic workers are often denied.

Weedon (1997) used similar conceptions of language and power as linked to the construction of identity when discussing feminist poststructuralism. However, while Bourdieu (1991) concentrated primarily on economic class as the site of a language-induced power struggle, Weedon focused on the ways in which poststructuralism can further understandings of how gender is used to construct identities and subjectivities in patriarchal contexts. She found that individuals are the objects of language and a discursive struggle for identity but they are also the site of this same struggle as it takes place within the consciousness and self-making practices of each individual. Therefore, it is the language of conflicting discourses that constitutes individuals, and particularly women, as conscious-thinking beings who give meaning to the world while continuously transforming it.

Drawing from both Bourdieu and Weedon as guides, Norton (1997; 2013) centered her qualitative research on immigrant female domestic workers taking English language classes in both Canada and the United States. She found that female learners' investments in English language learning were complex and must be understood with reference to the construction of identity. For example, when describing one learner who came from an upper-class background in Peru, Norton (2013) found that when the learner's identity as a wealthy educated Peruvian woman was validated, she felt comfortable speaking English in class. Conversely, when she was positioned as an immigrant, she was silenced. Moreover, drawing on Bourdieu's (1991) notion of legitimate language and symbolic power, Norton contended that these women's language learning experiences outside of class were often alienating, as they had difficulty commanding attention of English-speaking listeners and were often regarded as not worthy to speak. Norton concluded her research by asserting that English language learning must be understood in the context of learners' changing identities across time and space.

Employing similar concepts of language and power with a feminist poststructuralist framework, North (2013) focused her research on two female migrant domestic workers taking English literacy classes in England and observed complex relationships between literacy, language, and status in the learners' lives. Further, like Weedon (1997) she discovered literacy practices to be gendered, exhibited by how learners' gender relations at home constrained their abilities to further develop their literacy skills. North's research suggested that literacy learning has the potential for increased economic capital as well as learner empowerment, however, structural inequalities beyond literacy greatly impact these outcomes. Drawing from this scholarship in my own research, I employed qualitative research methods, and particular Critical Ethnographic Narrative Analysis (CENA), to examine the English language learning of South African domestic workers.

### Methodology

This section describes the context of my research, the participants, the methodological choices I made to analyze the data and my own history, and thus, positionality, conducting research with South African domestic workers.

### Context and Participants

The main sources of data for this paper derived from my pre-dissertation and dissertation research<sup>2</sup>, conducted in Johannesburg from 2015 to 2016, that centered on the English language learning of South African domestic workers. Domestic workers, or "the largest single sector of women's employment in South Africa" (Ally, 2011, p. 2), are often black South African women who work for and live with their wealthier, and often white, employers. They have historically been disregarded in discussions regarding South African education, but many women who I met were taking English languages classes in and around Johannesburg.

Within my research, I was interested in a particular conundrum: although eleven official languages were implemented in the post-apartheid democratic constitution, despite the growing role of native language education in South African education, and notwithstanding

<sup>2</sup> Both my pre-dissertation in 2015 and my dissertation research in 2016 received IRB approval.



the fact that these women both live and work in environments in which English language literacy is not always necessary<sup>3</sup>, many domestic workers continue spending their limited free time attending English language literacy classes. As my broader findings revealed, domestic workers' stories of English language learning, of domestic work during and post-apartheid, and of their educational identities, are complex and nuanced; and yet, these stories are often overlooked in discussions regarding the future of South African education and in broader rhetoric on the role of English language learning on an international scale. My research sought (and continues to seek) to bring to the fore the stories of education and language learning for this influential but often marginalized group of women.

I became interested in the complexity of South African domestic workers' educational and linguistic practices in 2014 while I was staying in Johannesburg to learn isiZulu. While there, I met Emmanuel, a college lecturer and volunteer English language teacher who taught English classes to South African domestic workers in an affluent area outside of Johannesburg, an area where these women worked and lived. He invited me to observe a class and, after meeting the women, I became intrigued with their seemingly complex reasons for learning English. I returned to the class several more times to observe and work with some of the learners on English language concepts. I continued these observations in 2015 when I revisited Johannesburg for another two months and conducted pre-dissertation focus groups, informal interviews, and two recorded semi-structured interviews with two of the learners (Kaiper-Marquez, 2018). I returned to Johannesburg for a third time in 2016 and stayed for five and a half months to continue with my isiZulu language classes while conducting my dissertation research. Thus, the primary data within this research took place in 2015 and 2016 and consisted of: interviews, which often morphed into larger life narratives, with 28 domestic workers (five of whom are highlighted in this paper<sup>4</sup>); observations from the English language courses that these women took part in and that I, at times, helped

<sup>3</sup> Although many of the women in this study lived with families who spoke English, most of these women had effectively communicated with their employers for five to 20+ years. Moreover, some employers spoke languages such as Afrikaans, German, and Greek in the home and thus, a greater knowledge of English was not always necessary in these spaces of work.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix: Table of Research Participants for descriptions of these five women.

teach; and, written observations while talking with, staying with, and helping tutor these women.

### Critical Ethnographic Narrative Analysis (CENA)

Throughout my research in South Africa, I noticed certain phrases that the participants frequently employed when discussing their educational and linguistic narratives. For example, many women would often tell me how they were not "educated" and would express discomfort with their lack of "literacy." They would explain how their English was not "proper" which, in their view, led to an inability to be "successful" and also made people see them as "stupid." These words would come up in the classroom, in the car, over lunch, and when discussing their life stories, and what became evident from both these conversations and from the data was that they were being used in ways different from their written definitions. "Education" no longer meant the time spent in school, but the ability to speak English. "Literacy" did not connote being literate in any language, but specifically being literate in English. Moreover, as is demonstrated in narratives below, a lack of English language fluency equated a lack of "intelligence."

In order to closely examine these obvious conceptual links in what the participants verbalized, I used what I am calling Critical Ethnographic Narrative Analysis (CENA) (Kaiper-Marquez, 2019). CENA derives from the methodology of Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) (Souto-Manning, 2014) in which Narrative Inquiry (NI) and Critical Discourses Analysis (CDA) are combined to support the essential nature of exploring individual narratives while also drawing from the more macro critical perspectives of power and language found in CDA. However, I contend that CNA can overlook how the role of the ethnographer inevitably impacts, forms, and (re)shapes these narratives and thus, a more explicit focus on ethnography within this methodology is crucial.

Taking my role as the ethnographer into account when critically analyzing the narratives of South African domestic workers and the broader discourses of language and education within South African policy, I used CENA as my primary tool for examination of these women's narratives. After initially analyzing my data, I began to explore the existence of metonymy in these narratives as I examined how the terms "education" and "literacy" became metonyms for English language education and literacy for the participants. Within

this examination, I found that with the use of these metonyms came delegitimization of the learners' own linguistic knowledge that they already possessed, thus re-creating both the symbolic and tangible power of the English language.

### Findings

#### “Education” and “Literacy”

**Kaiper-Marquez:** Do you consider English a sign of education? Like if someone speaks English well then they're more educated, and if someone doesn't speak English then they're not as educated?

**Zothile:** Yeah, because the people who know English very well, they think the people that don't know English very well- they think they're stupid. They think that she is a useless one because she don't know English (Interview, August 15, 2020).

A main question of this study, a question that is reflected in Brock-Utne's (2001) article “Education for All- In Whose Language?,” is which languages are considered legitimate in the process of becoming an educated being? This question stems from various social and political discourses that suggest an inherent link between education, literacy, and the English language. Similar links were exhibited in many of the interviews with and narratives of the women in this study. Although many whom I interviewed did not have access to formal education, as several had to leave school to begin working at very early ages, even those such as Zothile who did graduate from high school considered themselves uneducated because of their discomfort with speaking English. Moreover, while all of the participants spoke numerous languages, and many could read and write in these languages, they considered themselves “illiterate” if they couldn't read and write in English. Consequently, I found that for these women, being “educated” no longer signified going to school or even matriculating. Instead, it implied being exclusively educated in English. Similarly, “literacy” no longer connoted being able to read and write in any language but referred to reading and writing solely in English. In other words, the terms “education” and “literacy” began taking on a metonymical place in the discourse of these women. In this way, notions of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1991), and in particular, the symbolic power of English, impacted my participants' views of the

necessity of English and consequently led to experiences in which a lack of English fluency equated a lack of intelligence.

#### “They will call you stupid, and that word stupid, it hurts a lot.”

Verbal and written knowledge of English was closely connected to the participants' notions of “intelligence” and of “stupidity” as well as the direct links they experienced between knowing English and being considered a “smart” human being. In interviews and conversations, participants described frequent links that were made by their employers and by South Africans in general between a lack of English language literacy and notions of “stupidity.” For example, in the following two excerpts, Pula and Margaret describe to me ways in which they have felt a lack of respect because of their emerging English language abilities:

**Kaiper-Marquez:** Do people treat you differently if you don't know English?

**Pula:** Yeah because English, we don't speak perfect in English because it's not our language. Sometimes when you speak to people, they look at you like- maybe you speak to them they don't understand you. They look at you like you are stupid. You feel that thing because you can't speak properly because it's not your language. We don't feel comfortable to speak English, but as I said, it's the language that we are using in Joburg. We have to accept that. You can't do anything (Interview, September 7, 2016).

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**Kaiper-Marquez:** And do you think that she (Margaret's employer) would respect you more if you- like do you think that the more you learn English, do you think that she would treat you better?

**Margaret:** When I can speak English better than this, maybe she will- yes, she will respect me. She will give me respect. I think because maybe I'm thinking this- maybe she's not giving me respect just because she think-she thinks maybe I don't know anything. If I don't know English, she thinks maybe I don't know anything (Interview, September 9, 2016).

Throughout my conversations with Pula, Margaret, and many other women I interviewed and observed, there was a direct association made between knowing English and being considered smart, or

conversely, not knowing English and being “stupid”. Many women had experienced moments in which people associated their lack of verbal and written English language abilities as a direct metonym for stupidity. It did not seem to matter to their employers that participants could speak numerous other languages. It was insignificant within the social spaces in which they lived and worked that they knew a great deal about politics and world issues.<sup>5</sup> It was not important to their social status that they had utilized multiple forms of intelligence to survive in their personal lives and in their careers. Instead, what mattered within their social spaces in the construction of an intelligent person was their knowledge of English. This link English and “intelligence” emerged from differing spaces where these women lived and worked and was established in numerous ways. For Pula, as mentioned above, the link between English and intelligence emerged in social spaces as she felt that when she spoke in English, many South Africans would “look at her like (she) is stupid.” For Margaret, as she describes above, she most strongly felt associations between English and intelligence made by her employer with the lack of respect she felt from her.

Associations between adult illiteracy and feelings of “being stupid” have previously been explored in adult literacy and language research. For example, in a case study with adult Haitian learners of English, Auerbach et al. (2013) found that many of the learners felt that illiteracy was connected to feelings of stupidity and social disrespect. Similarly, Payne’s (2006) work on “functional illiteracy” demonstrated that notions of illiteracy often connoted ignorance, lack of education, and stupidity for those who are literate and even for those who are not—a connotation he finds inherently problematic and entirely untrue. However, while Auerbach et al. and Payne’s research revealed the many ways that literacy is connected with learners’ sense of intelligence and legitimacy, this research also assumed that “literacy” referred to English language literacy, again supporting the metonymic significance of this connection. Moreover, research centering on links between English, literacy, and intelligence often does not touch upon the ironies

<sup>5</sup> During the United States Presidential election of 2016, a group of women at the English Literacy Programme had an hour-long conversation on Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. I was impressed with their knowledge of American politics and the ways in which they were able to connect American politics to current South African politics.

of these connections in a country, such as South Africa, where English is not the sole official language.

Pennycook (2017) argued that “English remains a massively dominant language of global relations that continues to threaten other languages, cultures and forms of knowledge, to disrupt the educational aspirations of many and to contribute to the reproduction of many global inequalities” (p. viii). In South Africa, while the democratic constitution in conjunction with adult education and language policies appear to support notions of multilingual literacies, the participants in my research continued to feel stupid despite their ability to speak multiple languages and notwithstanding their literacy skills in their native tongues. This feeling of being stupid without English language literacy undeniably affected their feelings surrounding the capability to achieve “success” and to gain accessibility to jobs and social practices steeped in English language literacy.

### Success and Accessibility

**Ruby:** I’m a failure

**Kaiper-Marquez:** You’re a failure?

**R:** Yes, because I can’t speak proper English. But I can come to you and say I need job. My sisters they can’t do that because they don’t know even one word of English.

**KM:** So if you can read and write in Tsonga<sup>6</sup>, why do you still feel like a failure? Because if you already know Tsonga and you can read and write and Tsonga, then why is that not enough?

**R:** Because when I come to you and ask for a job you can’t hear me. When I say something in Tsonga you can’t hear me. So that’s why I’m saying English is the best (Interview, August 7, 2016).

As Ruby suggested, English in South Africa has become essential for notions of success for accessibility to jobs. While the metonyms of “education” and “literacy” lead to feelings of “stupidity” and “failure” discussed by the participants, these feelings were not merely embedded in the symbolic power of English. They were also embedded in certain day-to-day practices that these women could not access and

<sup>6</sup> While we are using the term “Tsonga” to refer to Ruby’s language, previously I use the term Xitsonga as “xi” is a common prefix used in combination with Tsonga.

possibilities for financial gain that they were unable to reach. The women were living in a multilingual country in which eleven official languages are being supported by the constitution, and additionally encouraged by policies supposedly endorsing multilingualism in practice. And yet, English has become a necessity for these women to both survive and to succeed.

Since the creation of the 1996 Constitution, numerous authors have written about the role of English in South Africa and about the ways in which policy and practice do not align. For example, Orman (2008) found that policy documents supporting multilingual and cultural diversity are only available in English. This is evident in *1997 Policy Document on Adult Basic Education and Training* (Department of Education, 1997b), which can only be accessed in English, as well as in the *Language in Education Policy* (Department of Education, 1997a), also only accessible in English. Similarly, Tshotsho (2013) contended that “one of the major constraints on the implementation of the Language Policy is the unavailability of resources including human resources, funding, facilities, materials and books” (p. 43) paralleling assertions such as Ruby’s that English is directly connected to resources and jobs.

Various participants in my research discussed the need for English to apply for jobs, to fill out forms, to apply for insurance policies, and even to go to hospitals. Without the ability to read and write in English, these processes became much more difficult and led to women like Ruby “feeling like a failure.” In other words, Ruby’s emerging English skills led to little accessibility for job mobility, thus leading to feelings of economic and symbolic power being inaccessible.

### Discussion

As I described within this paper, the women who participated in this research made metonymic links between notions of both literacy and education, with the ability to speak, read, and write in English. These links were often incited and further exacerbated by their employers, their peers, and by practices, such as job applications, that further intimated the necessity of English. Consequently, the South African domestic workers in my research were living in a discursive framework that ultimately shaped how they were viewed in social and work environments and also impacted how they viewed themselves.

While all of the participants demonstrated multiple forms of linguistic knowledge, and many of them had at least some history of formal education, they remained constrained within metonyms that overlook these histories.

It is vital to continue explore the use of metonymy in the South African educational and linguistic context and in these contexts internationally. Although the South African democratic constitution supports multilingualism, and even though the importance of multilingual literacy is reinforced through numerous educational and language policies, adult learners throughout South Africa, including the participants in this study, continue to make links between being “literate,” being “educated,” and knowing English and conversely feel that a lack of English equates a lack of intelligence. These links are only further supported with jobs, forms, and policies themselves that are only accessible in English. Hence, the desire for these women to learn English continues. And yet, “English-only” notions of literacy and education can be changed.

### Implications for Policy and Practice

As Janks’ (2013) notes in her work on critical literacy, “both the word and the world embody human choice, (and) it becomes possible to choose differently and to effect change” (p. 227). By closely examining the problematic linkages between “literacy,” “education,” and “English,” we as researchers, policy makers, and practitioners can achieve more nuanced understandings of the purposes and motivations that adults bring to learning English while further recognizing the legitimacy in learners’ multilingual and/or non-English literacy capabilities. For practitioners, this can be done by examining how terms are used in classroom spaces by both instructors and learners that might connote specific languages or legitimize one language over another. For example, when discussing the literacy levels of learners, instructors can reflect on whether these levels relate to literacy in any language, or if they are referring to English literacy levels explicitly.

For policy makers, change can occur by recognizing how “literacy” is conceived of within educational policies and reconstructing definitions to include multiple language. For instance, when analyzing a Minnesota Adult Basic Education (ABE) policy, Vanek, Cushing-



Leubner, Engman, and Kaiper (2018) found that the policy restricted the use of ABE learners' native languages in support of English language and literacy instruction instead. Moreover, section 463.30 of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) uses "literacy" to imply English language learning and literacy programs while overlooking the role of multilingualism in these programs.

Even more, both practitioners and policy makers must recognize the diversity of reasons that adults pursue further education. While adult education and English language learning are often connected to better jobs, greater financial capital, and higher degrees, a focus on these outcomes often overlooks the complex symbolic reasons for learning, such as learner empowerment, prestige, and identity (re)construction. By practitioners and policy makers recognizing that English is only one language in which education and literacy can be enacted and supported, and further, that multilingual literacies are not a hinderance to one's learning but a benefit, learners such as those in this study might perhaps also begin to recognize their multilingual capabilities as strengths.

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Appendix

Table of Research Participants

Name of Participant	Age	Home Language(s)	Other Languages Spoken	Passed Matriculation Exam	Years in Domestic Work
Bongi	45	seSotho	English, isiZulu, Afrikaans	No	15+ years
Margaret	55	isiZulu	English	No	30+ years
Pula	45	sePedi	English, isiZulu	Took it twice but never passed	16 years
Ruby	43	xiTsonga	seSotho, tshiVenda, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, and a little Afrikaans	Yes	13 years
Zothile	37	isiZulu	English, isiZulu	Yes	20 years