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Language contact meets slang in Soweto – UCT study

The way people communicate is ever evolving and this is nowhere more true than in the cultural hub of Soweto. Research conducted by Dr Pierre Aycard at the University of Cape Town sheds light on the use of Iscamtho, an urban slang that is used in any of the local languages, particularly isiZulu and seSotho, and which is an iconic part of local identities and of the local mixed language born from Soweto's linguistic diversity.

His thesis, "The use of Iscamtho by children in White City, Soweto: Slang and language contact in an African context", analyses how children in the city use Iscamtho, and what kind of mixed language has emerged, stabilised and become the native variety of local children. This mixed variety also features mixed structures that invalidate previous assumptions as to the structure of mixed language.

Dr Aycard, who is now based in France, found that Iscamtho is a low register of White City's mixed language variety, and that it is known by all children, male and female. It is not an adult male "street language" as is commonly thought. Children use it in informal settings, preferably on the street and when communicating with their peers, but it is also spoken in the home, and it does not lead to corrections from adults.

He concluded that girls and boys use Iscamtho in different ways and that the locally-used variety is stable, although still changing. It has its own norms that differ strongly from standard languages, but is the natural language of all children and their families. It still co-exists with three varieties: isiZulu and seSotho as primary languages, in their urban mixed forms, and English as a secondary language. But as these languages are all mixed, they draw on local mixed ways, as the local mixed variety draws on these languages.

Dr Aycard got to know Soweto in 2003/2004 while he stayed in Johannesburg to complete an internship at the French Institute of South Africa. In 2007 he returned to South Africa to conduct research as part of his M.Phil in African Studies at the University of Leiden and to study young adults' perceptions about Iscamtho and multilingualism. "It was only natural following this experience to keep investigating language practices in White City through long-term anthropological fieldwork, and to focus on children's speech" he said.

END

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