



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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Afrophobia: Language used to discriminate against African immigrants

Research by University of Cape Town (UCT) lecturer Mr Ivan Katsere has found that language can be used to discriminate against African immigrants. His research into the “politics of language” has alerted the Department of Psychology lecturer to language’s potential to entrench a harmful “us and them” scenario.

Katsere’s work is focused on African immigrant families in South Africa, examining how their identities are impacted as they move through informal spaces such as taxis and shops, as well as more formal spaces like hospitals and schools. His research spans Johannesburg and Cape Town, and concentrates on middle-class, multiracial communities.

“Language does the dirty work of boundary creation and maintenance,” he said, quoting Nira Yuval-Davis, honorary director of the Research Centre on Migration, Refugees and Belonging at the University of East London, UK. “And while there is a sense of pride in language, it has the ability to create an ‘us’ and ‘them’.”

In his research, he interacted with black African immigrant women, finally documenting the experiences. “When you open your mouth, I can instantly locate you. That is one of the most important qualities of language.” Avenues for ‘othering’ can happen in a simple greeting. When a South African greets a black African immigrant in isiXhosa, there is a lot happening at that moment, Katsere explained. “It’s not only a ‘How are you doing?’. It’s packaged with ‘where are you from, identify yourself, can we proceed further, can we open the gates to our community or do we have to close them?’”

But it also occurs frequently in more serious situations. Interviewees told Katsere of incidents with the police and in public hospitals where language was a clear determinant of the treatment they received. Public hospitals emerged as a problematic space for black African immigrants.

One interviewee recalled being in labour being ignored by the nurses who made it clear that this was because she spoke English. She was only helped when a sympathetic doctor stepped in. The women all said they would no longer visit public hospitals, or at least not alone, for fear of further violence. Similar unpleasant instances occurred with police, including the immigrants being asked for their permit or identification document and being questioned in isiZulu to expose their status. “They are just trying to identify you as the ‘other’, not to identify if you are legal or illegal,” said Katsere.

Katsere, who is Zimbabwean-born, began working with his focus group of black Zimbabwean families in 2016 while pursuing his master's at the University of the Witwatersrand. These initial conversations highlighted the plight of women and children in terms of their vulnerability to Afrophobic violence, so he chose to spotlight them specifically.

As he investigated the role of children as language brokers for their Zimbabwean families, Katsere made the significant observation that children use language to protect and survive. "Language brokering is them translating, mediating and intervening when their parents are occupying spaces in South Africa," he explained. In trying to answer the reason behind this, he found answers that lay in issues of identity, the politics of language and how language leads to Afrophobic violence – physical or otherwise.

Initially, he believed the resistance from South Africans to black African immigrants speaking English was about the preservation of language. After all, English is widely regarded as the killer of indigenous languages. But rather than the issue being about hearing the language, he suggested that it's because "language is the easiest marker of identity".

Taxis and taxi ranks are equally problematic. Katsere's own experiences have led him to avoid travelling by taxi "at all costs". Should that be impossible, he refuses to answer his phone inside the taxi for fear of revealing his immigrant status.

Katsere found that media and politicians have a significant role to play in bridging the gap between prejudice and discrimination. What they say can reaffirm negative stereotypes about foreign nationals, prompting locals to act violently on their prejudices. Examples include media referring to Zimbabweans entering South Africa as a "flock of immigrants" or focusing on stories of Nigerians only as drug lords, or when politicians suggest foreign nationals own too many shops.

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Thami Nkwanyane

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5672
Cell: (072) 563 9500
Email: thami.nkwanyane@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za