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The Power Plays of Race and Language in “Egoli”

Draft 1

On a Facebook page dedicated to a now-defunct soap opera, Fan Anne Marie Botha writes: “I love this soapie, and cant[sic] imagine my half hour in the evenings without it.” Fellow countryman Steven Loubser ups the ante thusly: “Egoli made me proud to be a South African.” Avie Hill professes such fondness for the program that she has “watched Egoli from the very first episode & never missed one, xcept [sic] if there was a power failure.” A chorus of similarly affected fans waxes rhapsodic, too, only in the more common South African language of Afrikaans instead of English. The program being vaunted and mourned in these blog posts is “Egoli: Place of Gold,” South Africa’s long-running soap opera and the most successful television export in that country’s broadcast history. [cite] “Egoli” wrapped up production of its 4000-plus episodes over 18 seasons on March 31, 2010, and fans of South African television bade farewell to a cultural institution. Like many soaps (or “soapies,” as they are affectionately dubbed by South Africans), “Egoli”’s fans are loyal and outspoken. They have laughed with, cried with, hated and loved its dozens of characters through the typically soap-operatic twists and turns of narrative threads through this South African media phenomenon.

Clips from all 18 seasons of “Egoli” have been made generously available by the South African network M-Net on “Egoli”’s official website (<http://beta.mnet.co.za/fanclub/?clubId=62>), and anyone unfamiliar with the program can get an immediate sense of the way the show has explored issues such as: race relations, gender relations, mental illness, mental retardation, issues of gender identity, issues of national identity, issues of socioeconomic status, political unrest, domestic violence, sexual violence, and the gambit. If “Egoli” merely arouses awareness of contemporary South African issues, rather than take a stand on any, the presentation alone of these issues has made “Egoli” revolutionary in its right. After all, frank depictions of South African life were rare before the end of the Apartheid government in 1994. A show with as rich and varied a history as “Egoli,” and within a cultural context as unique as South Africa, is rich with topics for academic discourse. For the purposes of this paper, however, I shall explore a fascinating and specific bit of linguistic subtext within “Egoli,” a subtext that has endured throughout the show’s near-two-decade run: of the eleven official languages the government of South Africa recognizes, only two are spoken heavily on the show, and they are spoken by characters of every major South African ethnic group on the show. Those two languages, of course, are the two chief “white” languages of South Africa, Afrikaans and English. I shall argue, throughout this essay, that the process of “codeswitching” between English and Afrikaans reflects: 1. A sociolinguistic hierarchy that recognizes English as the language that represents supreme economic and political power, 2. The use of Afrikaans as a language of informality, familiarity, and social comfort, and 3. A recognition that English is becoming the lingua franca of post-Apartheid South Africa among all ethnic groups, including the newly-enfranchised blacks.

In order to appreciate the significance of the use of English versus Afrikaans on “Egoli: Place of Gold,” some historical context is needed. First off, whether or not the minority white population in South Africa can be considered “truly African” [cite] is an issue that has stirred controversy, particularly since the abolition of Apartheid in 1994, and this debate has recently exploded out of the realm of civil discourse and into the criminal justice system. In 2008, for example, the murder of several white farmers by furious black neighbors made international headlines. [cite] Beneath the surface of this literally black and white scenario, however, lies a more complex reality. The story begins (in one version) in the late 17th century, the Dutch East Indies Trading Company settled in what is now South Africa. Although relations between the white Dutch (called Boers) and the native blacks (Zulu and other tribes) were hardly harmonious, they later found a common enemy in the British during the two Boer Wars of

(roughly) 1880-1902. The British Empire was at the height of its economic and military power in the late 19th century, and it spent much of that era dominating southern Africa to secure its newly discovered diamond mines. During the First Boer War, the British killed thousands of black natives and forced the rest beyond Britain's claimed territory. During the Second Boer War, the British set their sights on the Boer Dutch, who were crushed by the seemingly invincible British Army. When the British began to force captured Boers into concentration camps of appalling conditions, a tenuous comradery was established between uprooted South African blacks and the now-subjugated Dutch Boers. It is because of this temporary alliance against the British to defend "their" shared land, that the white Boers of South Africa have claimed legitimacy to the appellation "South African" or specifically, "white South African."

The anxiety felt by Dutch-descended Afrikaanders (so named because of the language they share, i.e. the Dutch-derived Afrikaans) toward British imperialism is as ingrained in South African culture almost as much the infamously contentious race relations between whites and blacks in that country due to state-sponsored segregation for most of the 20th century. "Egoli" creator Franz Marx candidly explains that the target audience of the program consists of (largely female) Afrikaanders, so it is no surprise that the show's stories and characters often reflect Afrikaanders' apprehension to perceived English hegemony. In "Egoli" there is a marked contrast between how white characters of British/English descent are portrayed versus their Afrikaander counterparts. In keeping with the Afrikaanders'/Boers' feeling of subjugation by the English (native English-speakers are known colloquially as "the English" in South Africa), a plotline from "Egoli"'s 1996 season features an English-led hostile takeover of an Afrikaner family's company:

Another significant change is the company Walco that initially belonged to the Afrikaans Vorster family now belongs to the English Chris Edwards. While capital moved from the Afrikaans family to the English family, a new Afrikaans company Niekor simultaneously arose that competed with the established English company Walco. Keeping in mind that *Egoli* caters for a predominant Afrikaans audience, the fact that the Afrikaans company is now the underdog, yet still successful, is indicative on a symbolic level of the threat the Afrikaans community feel towards English capital. (Oosthusyen, 1997)

Another example of the English language representing socioeconomic superiority is seen in a 2004 episode, when Afrikaander Jane [?] is embarrassed by a confrontation with her English supervisor at her new job at Walco. At the beginning of the scene, Jane arrives to sign an employment contract, handed to her by a smartly-dressed and sophisticated English woman. Jane, looking eager to earn the acceptance of the powerful English woman, accepts the contract and the two speak in Afrikaans with each other. "Before you go," the English supervisor then reminds Jane, in English, "Walco's corporate image is very important. There is a dress code." The next scene appears to be from a later day, as Jane's outfit has changed. In this scene, Jane's hair is worn in a ponytail. Her open-collared shirt, revealing her midriff stands in stark contrast to the English supervisor's business suit. In Afrikaans, the English woman quizzes the new employee on material in the Walco employee policy manual. In strained English, Jane recites, "A Walco PA will always look presentable... They must exude professionalism." The supervisor replies in her smoothly accented English, "Exactly. You don't." Jane, humiliated by her failure to meet English standards of professionalism, breaks into tears and runs out of the room. To be fair, the character of the English female supervisor expresses remorse at having hurt the feelings of the (presumably lower class) Afrikaander girl, but the implication of this scene is clear: the English set the standards for success, for style, and for a host of other cultural signposts. The Afrikaanders find themselves in the position of having to meet these standards. In other words, the Afrikaanders are takers of social norms in today's South Africa, not givers.

If English is the language of dominance and power in “Egoli,” then Afrikaans is the language of comfort and safety. It is the language friends and family use amongst themselves. It is spoken when characters confide to or “level” with each other. In keeping with Marx’s stated aim to appeal mainly to Afrikaaners, characters frequently switch from speaking in English to Afrikaans in more informal or intimate settings. To refer to an earlier example, when the Afrikaaner Jane leaves the office of her English supervisor, humiliated, she is consoled by the head of Walco, Chris Edwards. Although Chris is English he communicates sympathy and friendliness by conversing with the embarrassed Afrikaaner girl entirely in Afrikaans. In another episode late in the series, an Afrikaaner man introduces his new English wife and her family to his own family. The conflict of the scene is evident when the young Afrikaaner introduces his parents who are revealed to be two gay men. Even though it has already been made evident before this scene that the English family also speaks Afrikaans (it appears that most characters on the show are English-Afrikaans bilingual), the formalized social exchange of introducing family members to others is conducted entirely in English. The Afrikaaner son quickly excuses himself to have a word alone with his two fathers. In a scene strongly reminiscent of *The Bird Cage* (original French title?), the son admonishes the fey husband of his biological father to behave more “butch.” This intimate scene between family members takes place in Afrikaans, although interestingly, the word “butch” is used in its English form. The implications from this narrative sequence are twofold: first, Afrikaans is again used as the language of informality and intimacy. Secondly, we may read some cultural significance in the fact that the English family of the bride—with all the English connotations of paternalistic dominance—must not perceive the more flamboyant father of the groom as effeminate, and hence weak, or easily dominated.

If strained relations between white Afrikaaners and white English are reflected in “Egoli,” conflict between blacks and whites is far less evident. It is likely that creator Franz Marx felt that dealing with South Africa’s most inflammatory issue would appear to force a political issue into a program that focused on domestic issues. Against the backdrop of a long tradition of state censorship of media in South Africa, an unfamiliar viewer might assume the show to be intentionally provocative. Marx has insisted that this is not the case. Indeed, although Franz Marx never admitted a specific political agenda attached to “Egoli,” his desire to create stories and characters to whom his target audience could relate necessitated that he push the boundaries of what was then considered appropriate public discourse early on. Thus:

In an interview with Schoombie (1992: 65), Franz Marx states that the stories used in Egoli were ones the target audience could relate to, including abortion, living together outside of marriage and premarital sex. Franz Marx (Schoombie, 1992: 65) said that an AIDS-story, for example, would not evoke identification with the audience as they will experience it from a distance. Domestic issues were preferred, although these were politicised in the form of interracial romantic relationships. [cite]

Although “Egoli”’s writers introduced black characters in the wake of the end of Apartheid in 1994, these characters did not resonate with fans, some of whom felt that the introduction of the black characters felt forced. [cite] For several years, black characters, where there were any, played relatively inconsequential roles. This changed in 2008 with the introduction of a powerful black woman; a successful entrepreneur who, notably, speaks mostly in English. Where previous black characters had comparatively inconsequential roles on “Egoli,” Season 17 saw the introduction of TJ Mokoena, a new power player in business world of “Egoli.” The official “Egoli” fan site describes TJ Mokoena this way:

“The ice-queen of Mokoena Investments (the holding company of Vuyatela) rules with an iron fist and does not suffer fools lightly. A constant thorn in the sides of Liam and Lara and a complete bafflement to her brother Tebogo, TJ is quickly asserting her position of status and class.”

The introduction of a black character of such power and consequence is telling from a white Afrikaaner’s point of view. Policies of affirmative action by the post-Apartheid National Unity government, led to a steady rise in the standard of living for many South African blacks. Since 1994, however, many white Afrikaaners have suffered unemployment, and some have seen their standard of living drop from what they enjoyed during Apartheid. [cite] Unsurprisingly, these trends have generated resentment from many white Afrikaaners, and notably, upwardly mobile blacks in South African society choose English as their preferred language of public discourse. (It is worth noting here, that neither Afrikaans nor English are majority languages. The native languages of Zulu and Xhosa are the two most commonly spoken languages in South African households, comprising at least 40% of South African citizens. <http://www.southafrica.info/about/people/language.htm>) It is telling that in one scene between TJ and a white business rival,—conducted in English, “Egoli”’s favored language to express material power and ambition—the white businessman tempts TJ with a lucrative business arrangement that would benefit both of them. “Come on, TJ,” he goads. “Be honest. People like us will never have enough money. We will always want more.”

That South Africa has a complex social power structure, built largely along lines of race and language, is evident to any outsider, but the binary relationships of black v. white and English v. Afrikaans fail to consider a third racial category in South African society: the “coloureds.” “Coloured” people have long comprised their own unique identity in South Africa. They are not black, nor are they white. Some are mulatto, but many more represent entirely different ethnic groups like Indians, Filipinos, or other non-negroid races native to Africa. During Apartheid, “coloureds” had their own set of rules, restrictions, and privileges. Generally, however, “coloured” people intermingled more with the whites than did the blacks and were given more freedoms. In South Africa “coloured” people tend to speak Afrikaans in their homes, and have thus formed closer social ties with white Afrikaaners than with white English. Hence, on “Egoli,” “coloured” characters are usually seen as sympathetic to white Afrikaaners. Most of the interracial couplings on “Egoli” are between white Afrikaaners and “coloured” Afrikaaners. One of “Egoli’s” most beloved characters, is a “coloured” Afrikaaner. Nenna, played by [?] remained on the show during its entire 18-year-run.

In the early 1960s, when South Africa was granted independence from Great Britain, members of South Africa’s government—entirely comprised of the minority white population—debated whether to introduce television to South Africa. South African’s ruling whites, however, particularly the more conservative Afrikaaners, were skeptical to embrace televisual broadcast technology to point of paranoia. Dr. Albert Herzog [who?] famously announced that television would come to South Africa “under his dead body.” He also argued that “South Africa would have to import films showing race mixing; and advertising would make (non-white) Africans dissatisfied with their lot.” Television would not be introduced to South Africa until 1971.

It wasn’t until 1992, amidst the throes of a seismic political shift toward democracy and away from state sponsored racism, that producer Franz Marx launched “Egoli: Place of Gold” in South Africa’s economic capital of Johannesburg. (Egoli is the Zulu name for Johannesburg.) Franz Marx has insisted that his program is merely entertainment; he claimed in a 1996 interview that soap opera is literally the personalisation of “strooivermaak” (chaff entertainment) with no specific underlying message. Perhaps Marx was too modest. When Marx made the move to M-Net, South Africa’s first—and at that point, only—privately owned network to produce “Egoli: Place of Gold,” he rejoiced, “I am no more kept in check by political conventions. No one watches over my shoulder.” (Schoombie, 1992: 65) 18 years later, the political landscape of South Africa has changed drastically, but for South Africans, and for viewers in 42 other countries, including as far off as Venezuela, it’s unlikely that another scripted

show will come along that will influence the way South Africans have come to feel about their country during the great transition from a minority-rule near-dictatorship to racial integration and social liberalization.