

Shifting tactics of intersubjectivity to align indexicalities: A case of joking around in Swahinglish

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how a group of Tanzanian journalists employ various tactics of intersubjectivity to achieve mutual understanding during a conversation at work. The analysis focuses on one particularly challenging episode of talk wherein political figures and clothing styles from the early days of African independence are referenced, and an ensuing joke about body image is made using the phrase *kumaintain figure* ‘to maintain figure’ in reference to a male journalist. The joke arguably (re)appropriates the original meaning of the phrase and challenges the relevance of Western body aesthetics for Africans. All participants laugh at the joke, but the basis for their laughter is ambiguous. The participants’ interpretations of the joke are examined through ethnographic methods within the framework of (re)entextualization (Silverstein & Urban 1996). The analysis shows that the participants have produced somewhat different indexical orders (Silverstein 2003) for the phrase and, therefore, have different reasons for finding it humorous. (Intersubjectivity, reentextualization, language mixing, code-switching, gender, Swahili, humor)

INTRODUCTION

The situated and dynamic nature of context is well illustrated in multilingual settings, particularly those in the postcolonial world, where language alternation that involves indigenous and previously colonial languages often carries a variety of meanings. In urban Tanzania, the use of Swahili and English, or “Swahinglish,”¹ illustrates the varied meanings that language mixing creates quite well. For example, the juxtaposition of Swahili and English may be nothing out of the ordinary but rather may reveal the establishment of what Auer 1999 calls a FUSED LECT, a phenomenon also demonstrated by Blommaert 1992, 1999, Maschler 1998, and Swigart 1992. Among the same set of speakers, however, the use of these two languages in other interactional contexts may constitute what Auer 1999 terms CODESWITCHING if the switches can be seen to carry pragmatic meaning at the level of sequence (e.g., Alvarez-Caccamo 1998; Auer 1984, 1998;

Gafaranga 2000; Li Wei 2002). Such alternation in Tanzania may also carry macro-linguistic significance by recounting the history of British rule in East Africa; at other times, the mixture may relate more clearly to the globalizing forces of modernity. More often than not, though, the larger contexts triggered by the talk are not made audible within a conversation, for they are typically in the more abstract realm of DISCOURSE, the mostly unspoken “ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, believing and using symbols” that speakers integrate with language (Gee 1999:13). Because these unspoken contexts are potentially multiple and contradictory, they are an interactional challenge for listeners and speakers alike.

Although language mixing is a seemingly difficult interactional challenge, conversational participants clearly do find ways to make meaning with one another. To better understand the processes involved in achieving intersubjectivity, this article examines how a group of Tanzanian journalists find common ground in one particularly challenging episode of talk wherein a joke is made using Swahinglish. All of the participants laugh at the joke, but the basis for their shared laughter is ambiguous at best. The humor can be said to draw upon several different discourses in urban Tanzanian society, including those of Western imperialism, which are connected to the historical and political discourses of African socialism, and those of urban modernity, which are linked to contemporary discourses of globalization. The context in which the journalists interpret the humorous moment is further complicated by these speakers’ Swahili-English repertoires, which include uses of Swahinglish that are sometimes classifiable as a fused lect and other times as codeswitching. Therefore, it remains to be seen whether or to what degree the humor directly results from the juxtaposition of these languages.

TANZANIA, PAST AND PRESENT

In postcolonial² contexts such as Tanzania, there is great potential for language mixing to illuminate the current symbolic value of English and Swahili. Tanzania provides a particularly interesting case because of drastic changes in official policy and in public attitudes toward English and the West in the past 30 years. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1961, Tanzania has shifted from socialism, economic autonomy, and what can be broadly characterized as an anti-English language policy to capitalism, economic liberalization, and institutionalized Swahili-English bilingualism (Blommaert 1999:93–98). These economic, political, and linguistic shifts have significantly altered the sociopolitical context in which language mixing is produced and interpreted.

Previously ruled by the Germans, Tanzania (then Tanganyika) was handed over to the British in 1919 as a mandate territory under the League of Nations. English became the medium of instruction in secondary and tertiary education, as well as a language of parliament, high courts, and other contexts such as

hospitals (Mekacha 1993). In practice, though, English was accessible to only a minority of Tanzanians because of limited resources: fewer than 1,000 students were enrolled in secondary schools in 1950, and by 1959, only 245 Tanzanians held secondary school diplomas (Roy-Campbell 2001:47–49).

Though Swahili enjoyed widespread use in Tanzania prior to European rule as a result of caravan routes and the Arab slave trade (Mazrui & Mazrui 1999), it was officially installed by Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's first president after independence, as a language for unifying the 120 ethnolinguistic groups in the nation. In the 1960s Nyerere championed the use of Swahili in education, arguing that Swahili was a transmitter for Tanzanian and Pan-Africanist values that could allow the goals of African socialism to be met. Nyerere established *Ujamaa* 'familyhood', a plan that would economically transform the nation by basically withdrawing from the world market through establishing an economy of *kujitegemea* 'self-reliance', and through a villagization scheme that would create cooperative farming communities (Nyerere 1967). Nyerere was clearly inspired by Marxism-Leninism, but his version of socialism was based on traditional African practices of village life. The teaching of English was noticeably secondary to these goals, as it did not factor into the country's policies (Ngonyani 1995, Blommaert 1999).

Since the 1980s, however, the symbolic value of English has been steadily growing stronger, and currently English is seen as one of the primary means for achieving success in a globalizing world (Blommaert 1999, Higgins 2004, Neke 2003, Roy-Campbell 2001, Vavrus 2002). Increasing reliance on aid from Western donors has required the Tanzanian government to liberalize and privatize its many previously government-run industries, and these economic transformations have increased the perceived importance of English as a tool for success in the global marketplace (Neke 2003, Vavrus 2002). While only 5% of the school-aged Tanzanian population is currently enrolled in secondary schools (Neke 2003), many Tanzanians believe English to be crucial for educational and socio-economic advancement.³ This can be seen in the growth in number of (private) English-medium primary schools in the nation. Only 12 primary schools were registered in 1984, but by 2000, 77 schools were listed as English-medium (Neke 2003).

BILINGUAL HUMOR

Societies that have experienced tensions in the political economy of languages have provided rich contexts for sociolinguistic and linguistic anthropological studies to investigate the degree to which language mixing may reveal a marked usage of these languages (e.g., Heller 1994; Myers-Scotton 1983; Woolard 1989, 1999). One area of focus for the study of such markedness has been how language mixing relates to humor (e.g., Jaffe 2000, Tsang & Wong 2004, Woolard 1988). These studies demonstrate that the use of humor in bilingual talk can create "fundamentally UNDECIDABLE texts and messages" for various listeners

because of changes in the symbolic capital of these languages (Woolard 1999:21, emphasis mine). For example, Woolard 1999 contrasts language mixing by Catalan comedians who exploited the linguistic similarity of Catalan and Castilian in their acts as a means of creating comic absurdity in the early 1980s with the ways that some young people in Catalonia now interpret and use language mixing as an unmarked code. While such mixing has achieved a normative status among many, some who listen to comedians who mix Catalan and Castilian in these unmarked ways hear anti-Catalanist sentiments, while others hear “the celebration of the prototypical Catalan” (Woolard 1999:22). Similarly, Jaffe 2000 shows how comic radio performances in Corsica that blend Corsican and French lead to indeterminacy in interpretation. Through interviews with people who listened to comic performances on a radio show, Jaffe observed that, in spite of their shared knowledge of patterns of language alternation, some listeners chose to identify with, and others against, the identities these comic performances created. In addition, Tsang & Wong (2004:780) show how the Hong Kong comedian C. W. Wong’s stand-up routine uses English alongside Cantonese to create an ambivalent performance. They demonstrate how the language alternation can index affiliation and solidarity with those who have a “half-hearted approach to being Chinese in Hong Kong,” but they say that it may also be considered a distancing strategy that enables Wong to take on the role of social critic.

ESTABLISHING THE INDEXICALITY OF UNDECIDABLE MEANINGS

Although it is obvious that a given utterance might trigger multiple interpretations, researchers in linguistic anthropology have developed complex analytical machinery for investigating the nature of such interpretation. Silverstein 1993, 2003 has established the theoretical concept of INDEXICAL ORDER to relate what he calls the “micro-social” to the “macro-social” frames of analysis, through investigating how first-, second-, and *n*-th-order meanings dialectically constitute layered levels of meaning. Silverstein (2003:193) writes, “Any *n*-th order indexical presupposes that the context in which it is normatively used has a schematization of some particular sort, relative to which we can model the ‘appropriateness’ of its usage in that context.” Indexical orders are established through (perceived) ritualization, in which micro-contextual indexicality is warranted by recurrence of links with the macro-social.

Within this framework, Hill (2005:114) shows that the first-order indexicality of Mock Spanish is associated with qualities of Latino persons, but this jocular register used by Anglo speakers establishes a second-order indexicality of “an easygoing approach to life” through pejorative usage of the word *mañana* ‘tomorrow’. In a Google search restricted to English-language contexts, Hill found that *mañana* retained its first-order indexicality in reference to names of shops

and restaurants that specialize in Spanish and Mexican products. However, many examples of second-order usage were found in names for relaxing resorts, clearly meant for idle time, and popular songs such as Peggy Lee's "Mañana," which parodies shiftless laziness, sung by Lee with an attempted "Spanish" accent. Hill argues that the entailments of the second-order, and the interrelation of the second-order with the first-order, produce racist stereotypes of Spanish speakers, as the intertextuality of *mañana* with Spanish speakers indirectly links the concept of rest, relaxation, and laziness with behaving in a "Spanish" way.

A related concept for understanding how indexicality is established in ambiguous contexts is that of (RE)ENTEXTUALIZATION (Bauman & Briggs 1990, Blommaert 2005, Silverstein & Urban 1996).⁴ In the process of (re)entextualization, speakers may "take some fragment of discourse and quote it anew, making it seem to carry a meaning independent of its situation within two now distinct co(n)texts," or, alternatively, they can take a text and "reanimate it through a performance that, being a (mere) performance of THE text, suggests various dimensions of contextualized 'interpretive meaning' added on to those seemingly inherent in the text" (Silverstein & Urban 1996:2). The concept of (re)entextualization borrows theoretically from Bakhtin's (1981) notion of POLYPHONY, the idea that speakers use language for their own communicative purposes, but also that their utterances are never fully authored by themselves, as each word has its own social history, imbued with the many meanings acquired from previous speakers and listeners. Speakers (re)voice the words that they use from these social and historical contexts, altering them with their own voices: In producing and interpreting talk, then, conversational participants (re)entextualize utterances from one set of discourses to another in order to create meaning. This (re)entextualization may not alter the meaning of the utterance very much, as the utterance may be relocated into a new set of discourses that happen to overlap a great deal with the speaker's or another participant's set of discourses. Alternatively, the (re)entextualization may dramatically influence the way the utterance is interpreted, potentially leading to miscommunication.

(Re)entextualization is certainly linked to the concept of INTERTEXTUALITY (Bakhtin 1981, Kristeva 1986), but it goes beyond the textual level of examining how meanings are recycled and altered in and among texts, and, taking a genealogical approach, it focuses more on the processes by which discourses are associated with new contexts. Moreover, in contrast with studies of intertextuality, historical embeddings are more significant for (re)entextualization. For this reason, it has much in common with Silverstein's (2003) indexical order concept, which allows for indexicalities that are either coterminous, partially overlapping, or in competition with one another to develop over time through ritualizations of meaning. Within the transitional sociopolitical context of Tanzania, (re)entextualization practices are useful for understanding how language mixing may index shifts in language attitudes as speakers appropriate English to create new meanings in the twenty-first century.

TACTICS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY

To understand how “decidable” the (re)entextualized meanings of mixed Swahili-English code are for Tanzanians, I turn to the concept of INTERSUBJECTIVITY, individuals’ ability to act in a common world and achieve mutual understanding. The talk among the Tanzanian journalists provides a context for investigating how they manage their intersubjective gaps because it contains references to historical and political events about which the participants have varying degrees of knowledge. Both the conversation and the resulting joke require these inter-actants to work especially hard to achieve intersubjectivity because they are drawing on many different linguistic and cultural discourses. To examine the processes by which speakers do (re)entextualize their talk, I turn to Bucholtz & Hall’s (2004) framework for investigating the journalists’ TACTICS OF INTERSUBJECTIVITY.

The term “tactics of intersubjectivity” refers to the ways in which speakers position themselves and others through establishing identity relations along a set of continua. Bucholtz & Hall (2004: 493) warn that these tactics are “not qualities that inhere in speakers or in social practices and ideologies, but rather are analytic tools to call attention to salient aspects of the discourse situation.” I use these tools to show how participants dialogically establish and then shift their own and others’ positioning. The data below illustrate a clear case of a speaker who shifts tactics in order to key a humorous moment; and because the data involve a mixed Swahili-English code, the issue of how decidable the meaning of the humor is, and for what reasons, becomes a key point of inquiry.

The first set of paired tactics that Bucholtz & Hall’s framework includes is ADEQUATION and DISTINCTION, processes in which subjects are constructed as being sufficiently similar to or substantially different from an object or other speaker(s). In adequation, a speaker may use language that erases any discordant elements, playing down any discrepancies. An example the authors give is Queen’s (1998) study of talk among a group of lesbians and gay men in which the participants’ various gender, occupational, and racial identities were minimized in order to highlight their shared identity of sexual orientation, thus creating an adequate sense of sameness. Conversely, distinction points up areas of difference. For example, a lower-middle-class transgendered population in India known as *kotis* distinguish themselves from lower-class *hijras* and from upper-middle-class urban gays and lesbians through parodying these other groups’ ways of speaking, thereby marking themselves as different (Hall 2005).

The second set of tactics is AUTHENTICATION and DENATURALIZATION, which respectively relate to the processes by which a “real” identity is claimed, or to the marking of imposture through ruptures in self-presentation (Bucholtz & Hall 2004:495–98). Hall’s (1995) research on phone sex workers illustrates authentication: It shows how workers who used gendered and ethnified language to portray themselves as extremely feminine, Asian, or African-American for the purposes of their phone calls did not claim these same identities during off hours.

On the opposite end of this continuum, denaturalization expresses language through which speakers signal imposture or falsity through ruptures of ongoing or assumed identities. Barrett's (1999) study of drag queens shows how the men-in-drag combine features of femininity with (homo)sexual desire, thereby denaturalizing their straightforward self-presentation as women.

AUTHORIZATION and ILLEGITIMATION make up the final set of tactics described. In authorization, speakers are said actively to legitimate particular social identities, thereby co-legitimating the larger institutional power structures that constrain which identities are culturally sanctioned for a society. Bucholtz & Hall cite Kitzinger's research on the production of heteronormativity in urgent phone calls to physicians on the behalf of their ailing friends, family, and lovers as an illustration of how heterosexual identities are authorized by the speakers in making their relationship with the patient known to the physicians. When the callers used heterosexual terms such as *husband* or *wife* with the physicians, no further elaboration was necessary; however, when relationships such as *boyfriend* or *neighbor* were used, lengthier turns involving more explanation of the relationship ensued. In contrast, in using the tactic of illegitimation, speakers actively suppress the expression of particular social identities, thereby making them non-choices. The authors cite Livia's (2002) study of personal ads for lesbians that explicitly rejected masculine lesbians.

The analysis below is chiefly framed by an examination of these tactics, but like many researchers who study both the micro-level and macro-level aspects of discourse (e.g., Blommaert 2005, Goodwin & Duranti 1992, Gumperz 1982, Hall 2005, Johnstone 2002, van Dijk 1997), I employ multiple methods in analyzing and interpreting speech events by starting with the talk and working outward, drawing on knowledge gained through ethnography. In addition to field notes and interview data, I use retrospective interviews (see Blom & Gumperz 1972, Erickson & Schultz 1982, Gumperz 1982, Rampton 1995, Tannen 1984, Woolard 1989) carried out with the participants to investigate which orders of indexicality inform their understandings of one another's talk.

THE STUDY

The data are from a larger, ethnographic study of Swahili-English conversations among workers employed at an English-medium newspaper office in Dar es Salaam, the largest city in Tanzania (Higgins 2004). The data for the larger study included video recordings of work conversations, audio recordings made during retrospective interviews, field notes, and other documents collected during a six-month period of fieldwork.⁵ To collect the conversational data, I placed a video camera in the corner of the newspaper office and moved to an adjacent room while the journalists carried on with their work. The total corpus contains over 50 hours of talk; I selected the data below for analysis because they contain an intriguing combination of a discussion of political figures, Swahili-English mixing, and



FIGURE 1: Baraba in his Kaunda suit.

humor (through the use of the phrase *anamaintain figa*, ‘s/he maintains figure’) that provides a rich context for examining how the participants manage to achieve intersubjectivity. Video recordings of the data were transcribed in accordance with conversation analytic conventions (Atkinson & Heritage 1984; see Appendix 1). Transcripts were produced and then cross-verified with the assistance of two educated Tanzanian assistants who live in Dar es Salaam and thus speak Swahili (and varieties of Swahili-English) regularly in their daily lives.

Contextualizing the data

The data below primarily involve four participants⁶: Mbwilo, who is a senior journalist; Noreen, a junior journalist; Almasi, a short-term journalist who is still working toward his degree; and Baraba, the editor of the Sunday edition of the newspaper. Others present are Frankie, another junior journalist, and Ndindi, the sports editor, whose attention is directed toward a phone call. Excluding Almasi, all participants know one another quite well. Based on my observations and interviews, Mbwilo and Noreen enjoy teasing Baraba regularly, though always with a great deal of respect, most likely because he is approximately 70 years old and is considered an esteemed elder. In an interview with another journalist, I was told, “Mbwilo likes to kid around. Both Mbwilo and Noreen like to kid Mr. Baraba. They’re used to each other, like he’s their grandfather.”

As the transcript begins, Baraba (see Figure 1) is passing through to get to this office. He is wearing a tight, short-sleeved shirt jacket of a type that was fashionable in the 1960s, when Marien Ngouabi, the Marxist leader of Congo-



FIGURE 2: Kenneth Kaunda, the first president of Zambia, wearing his adaptation of the Mao suit (photo reprinted with permission from Dr. Donal Brody).

Brazzaville, was in power. Ngouabi was the second leader of Congo-Brazzaville after its independence who, in 1969, changed the name from The Republic of the Congo to The People's Republic of Congo and declared it the first Marxist-Leninist state in Africa (Appiah & Gates 1999:509). This information becomes relevant when Mbwilo makes a comparison between the Ngouabi and Baraba. Ngouabi, like many other African socialist leaders, often wore the Mao suit – a Mandarin-collared, fitted jacket with matching trousers – and later, a Kaunda suit (made popular by Zambia's first president, Kenneth Kaunda; see Figure 2), a variant of the utilitarian Mao suit but with a Western collar. Most of Baraba's wardrobe is from this era, and in the excerpt below, Noreen and Mbwilo tease him about his clothing. The excerpt is first presented in full, followed by a discussion of relevant lines below.

(1) ((Baraba passes through on his way to his office))

- 1 Mbwilo: *Mister Baraba.*
- 2 Noreen: *Halafu a-na-vaa shirt tight.*
and.then he-pres-wear shirt tight
'Now, he's wearing a tight shirt'
- 3 Mbwilo: *U-na-ni-kumbusha Marien Ngouabi.*
you-pres-me-remind Marien Ngouabi
'You remind me of Marien Ngouabi'

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- 25 Noreen: Ha HA [ha ha ha ha ha ((puts head down in hands, body shakes with laughter))]
 26 Almasi: [ha ha ha ha ha ((continues to smile widely)))
 27 Frankie: [ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

(Re)entextualizing the talk through the tactics of adequation and distinction

The interaction begins when Baraba walks past Mbwilo and the other journalists on his way to his office. In line 1, Mbwilo calls after Baraba, addressing him as his primary recipient, though given the small workspace in which four others are seated nearby, it is clear that everyone will become overhearers, ratified or not (Goffman 1981). Noreen's line 2 reveals her self-positioning as a ratified overhearer, since her comment on Baraba's shirt is occasioned by Mbwilo's line 1. This summons is an example of both adequation and distinction, as it is the beginning of an exchange in which Mbwilo positions himself and Baraba as people who have first-hand knowledge of the days of socialism. Moreover, it begins a dialogue in which Noreen, Frankie, and Almasi are positioned as people without such knowledge.

- (2) ((Baraba passes through on his way to his office))

- 1 Mbwilo: *Mister Baraba.*
 2 Noreen: *Halafu a-na-vaa shirt tight.*
 'Now, he's wearing a tight shirt'

In line 3, Mbwilo (re)entextualizes Baraba's clothing with references to Ngouabi because it dates from the era when Ngouabi was in power: 'You remind me of Marien Ngouabi.' Through adequation, this statement positions Baraba as someone who also knows about Ngouabi, for the name is given without any identifying markers such as "Congo-Brazzaville's Ngouabi" or "that Marxist Ngouabi." Additionally, the selection of 'you remind me' positions Mbwilo as someone who knew of Ngouabi when he was alive, probably through newspapers and current events, and as someone who can be reminded of a firsthand experience.

- (3)

- 3 Mbwilo: *U-na-ni-kumbusha Marien Ngouabi.*
 'You remind me of Marien Ngouabi'

Mbwilo's line 3 conjures up historical information about African socialism in the 1960s, and his talk characterizes Baraba and himself as the only participants who can appreciate the historical information without further explanation.

The talk about clothing allows us to see how the various participants' differing levels of historical knowledge (and their differing indexical orders) are operationalized via adequation or distinction. In line 5, Noreen displays her identity through the tactic of distinction by discounting Mbwilo's comparison of Baraba with Ngouabi. Her turn has the effect of (re)entextualizing her to the other participants as a young adult who does not have first-hand memories of African socialism. In part, she achieves this through her verb tense; instead of referring

to historical figures or the 1960s, she uses present tense to declare that Baraba is wearing a tight shirt:

(4)

- 5 Noreen: *A-na-vaa shirt tight.*
he-pres-wear shirt tight

Since Baraba has reached the back office and is no longer in earshot, Mbwilo turns his attention to Almasi. Lines 6–7 establish Mbwilo's identity claim to being a member of the era of African socialism, and they position Almasi as someone who does not have this membership. This distinction is maintained through Mbwilo's 'Do you know about Ngouabi?' followed by Almasi's lateral headshake, and his steady gaze on Mbwilo. The tactic of distinction here emerges through Mbwilo's discourse identity as a knower, someone with knowledge to share with his younger colleagues.

(5)

- 6 Mbwilo: *U-na-m-fahamu Ngouabi.* ((to Almasi))
'Do you know about Ngouabi?'
7 Almasi: ((shakes head, smiling))

In lines 8–10, Baraba enters the room but changes the topic, complaining about a piece of cake that he was not invited to share with Mbwilo. In line 11, Noreen takes the opportunity to summon Baraba, using the respect form *mzee* 'elder'. Baraba responds, giving Noreen the floor. She begins her turn on line 13, and the uneven beginning of her utterance seems to alert Baraba to an upcoming tease. He interrupts her ongoing turn to reveal his own understanding of the context:

(6)

- 11 Noreen: *Mzee Bar[↑]aba.*
'Elder ((address form)) Baraba'
12 Baraba: *Naam mama.*
'Yes ma'am'
13 Noreen: *Hiyo [nanii]: hh.,*
'That um'
14 Baraba: *[Ni-li-jua u-ta-dakia.*
'I knew you would have something to say' ((teasing tone))

In response to Baraba's savvy prediction, Noreen laughs (line 15), aligning herself with the positioning that Baraba has just provided: someone who is about to say something nonserious. She manages to finish her thought, declaring that the shirt he is wearing is tight. This prompts Almasi to laugh, a response in which he establishes himself as someone who finds humor in the tight-fitting shirt as well:

(7)

- 15 Noreen: ha ha *i-na- hh. i-na-tight .hh [hilo shat. hh.*
((laughs)) 'it's, that shirt is really tight'
16 Almasi: *[hee hee hee hee hee hee* ((high pitched))

Next, Mbwilo turns his attention to Almasi, who is still in the dark about Ngouabi. Mbwilo begins by referencing the clothing on line 17, and then appears to get stuck, perhaps realizing that describing the shirts themselves is not the best way to acquaint Almasi with this indexical order. Noreen takes the opportunity in line 18 to (re)entextualize the end of Mbwilo's previous turn through a repetition of his own words, *hayo makoti* 'those coats', but this time, she follows up with a fashion critique. In other words, Noreen (re)entextualizes the talk about the clothing within the realm of fashion rather than in the realm of political history.

(8)

- 17 Mbwilo: *Marien Ngouabi ndiyo hayo ma-koti nanii;* ((to Almasi))
'Marien Ngouabi, those were the coats, um'
- 18 Noreen: *Hayo ma-koti a-na-yo-vaa juu Mzee Bar(aba.) Sasa ndiyo hivyo-hivyo-*
'Those coats that Mr. Baraba wears, now it is really exactly the same way'
- 19 Mbwilo: *[Baada ya Ngouabi i-ka-ja Kaunda.*
'After Ngouabi came Kaunda'
(Almasi nods, and then returns to his typing)

In spite of this competing indexical order, Mbwilo proceeds with his original entextualization as he connects Ngouabi with Kenneth Kaunda,⁷ Zambia's first leader after independence, as a means of creating intersubjectivity with Almasi (line 19). The statement 'After Ngouabi came Kaunda' is delivered with noticeable pauses and a sing-song intonation, and through the utterance, Mbwilo takes on a didactic quality. This utterance positions Almasi as someone who might have learned about the leaders of African socialism in a detached manner, perhaps in a chronological order from books or history lessons in school. Mbwilo's efforts to create shared understanding here utilize the tactic of adequation, in that Ngouabi is identified with Kaunda in order to make him recognizable to the other participants. Baraba is wearing what became known as the Kaunda suit, which was worn by people like Ngouabi, Kaunda, and Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's first president. Mbwilo does not state it directly, but it is likely that his own indexical order for interpreting Baraba's clothing is shaped by memories of these political figures. Everyone in the office (and in Tanzania) is highly knowledgeable about Nyerere's political and economic contributions to the development of Tanzania. He is known as *Baba wa Taifa* 'father of the nation', and photos of him wearing the Kaunda suit can be found hanging on the walls of nearly every office in Dar es Salaam. Nyerere is particularly relevant to the lives of the journalists, since he was the founding editor of the newspaper they write for, which bears the traces of socialism through its status as a government-run publication. Ngouabi and Kaunda are less familiar to younger people such as Almasi and Noreen, but through contextualizing Baraba's clothing with African leaders of the 1960s, Mbwilo tries to establish ritualized links among them through indexical iconicity (Silverstein 2003:203).

In truth, Ngouabi and Kaunda may have less in common than is apparent in the conversation: Ngouabi was a much more radical socialist, and his country,

Congo-Brazzaville, was ruled not by the English but by the French. In spite of these facts, however, Mbwilo treats Almasi's recognition of Kaunda as adequate for bringing the topic to a close. Almasi returns to his work, and he appears satisfied with the information supplied by Mbwilo thus far.

A failure to achieve intersubjectivity

Although Mbwilo's explanation involving historical figures may appear to provide sufficiently overlapping indexical orders for Almasi and himself in making sense of the talk produced so far, Noreen's continued participation indicates that she is sensitive to a different set of discourses. She is not satisfied with (nor does she appear interested in) a comparison of past political leaders. In line 20, she asks Mbwilo why the coat has to be so form-fitting. Her use of present tense and her disregard for the historical details provided by Mbwilo show her perspective to be that of someone with a very contemporary vantage point. In his response, Mbwilo remains located in the past through his past-tense verbs and the emphatic *ndivyo* 'indeed' in *ndivyo ilivyokuwa* 'that's really how they were'. His words characterize him as someone who actively participated in the Kaunda-suit generation (he was in his twenties during that time), and as someone for whom 1960s fashion is unremarkable.

(9)

- 20 Noreen: *Kwa-ni hiyo lazima i-ban-e? Si lazima i-w-e tight.*
 'Why does it have to be so tight? It doesn't have to be tight'
 21 Mbwilo: *Ndiyo i-li-vyo-kuwa haya eh(.) I-na-bana.*
 'That's really how they were, you know. It's tight'

Noreen's interests remain located in the present, however, and in lines 22–23, she implies that Baraba's shirt is tight because he has likely gained some weight. This comment reveals the larger assumptions that all the while were driving her interest in Baraba's clothing, as previously expressed by her turns in lines 2, 5 and 15. Her tone in lines 22–23 expresses disbelief through sarcasm as she questions the likelihood of Baraba's ability to maintain the same weight over a period of 40 years.

(10)

- 22 Noreen: *I-na maana Mzee Baraba toka enzi hizo mpaka sasa*
 'That means that Elder Baraba, from those times until now'
 23 *ha-ja-ongeze-ka kidogo.*
 'hasn't gained (weight), even a little bit'

Noreen's use of *hajaongezeka* 'he hasn't gained (weight)' underscores her concern with Baraba's present condition rather than with historical fashions. The verb is in its stative form, a verb tense that can relate only to a present state of being.

Achieving intersubjectivity through the tactic of shifting subjectivities

Up until this point in the talk, Mbwilo had been attending to historical information in order to bring about a shared context in the structure of a history lesson. However, in line 24, Mbwilo abandons his use of adequation and distinction tactics involving the indexical order of historical political figures, and he takes a new approach. Through taking up the tactic of denaturalization, he skillfully activates the more contemporary discourses of watching one's weight to explain Baraba's clothing.

(11)

- 24 Mbwilo: *Baraba (.) a-na-maintain sana (.) figure yake.*
‘Mr. Baraba really maintains his figure’
- 25 Noreen: Ha HA [ha ha ha ha ha ((puts head down in hands, body shakes with laughter))
- 26 Almasi: [ha ha ha ha ha ((continues to smile widely))
- 27 Frankie: [ha ha ha ha ha ha ha

Using Swahinglish, Mbwilo's (re)entextualization of the topic of Baraba's clothing into the realm of weight consciousness is an illustration of denaturalization, for it is an act of dissonance that creates a rupture in Baraba's ongoing identity. The joke relates well to the case of denaturalization found in Barrett's (1999) study of African American drag queens, where the drag performers established their identities by juxtaposing stereotypically feminine behavior such as demure politeness with the use of expletives and explicitly sexual talk, thus fracturing their “female” personas. Similarly, Mbwilo creates a rupture in the talk about Baraba, removing him from a discourse dependent on serious, male-dominated political life and (re)entextualizing him into a more superficial discourse that centers on (female) body image. This (re)entextualization is humorous because it requires that Baraba be treated as a person who watches his weight, a relatively new practice that is growing in popularity among young women in Dar es Salaam. While the discourse of body image is relatively new to Africans in general (Zikalala 1994, Caradas, Lambert & Charlton 2001), in urban Tanzania I observed that the majority of people still find a few extra pounds attractive. In fact, the comment *umenenepa* ‘you have gotten fatter’ is freely spoken to women and men because it is treated as a compliment rather than a criticism.

The joke also reveals how the interactive nature of deixis can alter “relevancy structure” (Hanks 2005) for interactants, thus inspiring them to shift tactics to achieve intersubjectivity. Until line 24, Mbwilo's relevancy structure for which referents did and did not matter for making sense of Baraba's shirt were constrained by his indexical order related to African political history. However, because he failed to achieve any reciprocity of perspectives with his younger colleagues, he seems to have been motivated to shift tactics to take on the relevancy structures they were assuming. It is imaginable that in other contexts where reciprocity is not desired by one or more participants, speakers would adhere to

their original and competing tactics, or they might even shift to a different tactic in order to invoke a discordant relevancy structure.

The link between indexical orders and language mixing

My own impression of the joke on line 24 was that the humorous effect came from the English in Mbwilo's utterance. As a nonnative of Tanzania, I always notice language alternation because I learned Swahili in a foreign-language classroom, where the use of English was evaluated as a sign of linguistic incompetence. Consequently, although I have learned that language alternation among Tanzanians is not always meaningful in itself, my first reaction as an analyst is to attribute meaning to it. When I transcribed the data, I too thought that the joke was funny, and I assumed that the use of *ana-maintain figure* inspired the laughter because this mostly English expression is associated with women, at least in my American home culture. As I saw later in retrospective interviews, my interpretation was on the right track; however, these interviews uncovered additional explanations for the comedic effect of Mbwilo's utterance.

These sessions revealed that for Mbwilo, socialism, recollections of the early days of independence in Africa, and gender differences in attitudes about one's weight were all indexed through the joke (i.e., *n* + first-order indexicality was created), but not necessarily because of the use of English on its own. For Norleen, Almasi, and Frankie, a different, albeit overlapping, indexical order was relevant. Their retrospective interviews revealed that their response came from a first-order indexicality stemming from more modern developments in Tanzania.

From Mbwilo, I learned that the English usage was not particularly noticeable because of the medium of expression; in Dar es Salaam, the use of *ana-maintain figure* is the only available expression that relates to the practice of watching one's weight. I discovered that a purely Swahili expression was not part of the linguistic repertoire of Dar es Salaam residents⁸:

(12)

- (1) Mbwilo: *Anahifadhi umbo lake* (lit. ‘he-protects shape/figure his’) doesn’t roll off the tongue, I mean, the Swahili here in Dar es Salaam, I don’t know, now maybe for a person who is from Mwanza or someplace it’s possible. (But) here in Dar es Salaam, people don’t like to speak like a **textbook**, like you. Like, **what a hick!**

Mbwilo's comment that *umbo* ‘figure, shape’ is not used in Dar es Salaam demonstrates that for speakers residing in the large urban area, the Swahinglish phrase is a choice that marks those who are cosmopolitan from those who are not. Mwanza is Tanzania's second largest city, but often people from that region are still considered *washamba* ‘hillbillies’ by residents of Dar es Salaam. In comparing my own “pure” Swahili to the speech of Tanzanians from Mwanza, Mbwilo's comment that unmixed Swahili sounds like “a hick” reveals the demographic and socioeconomic factors underlying Swahili-English mixing. His comment cast doubt on my initial understanding of the role of gender in the humor. Since the

typical way to say ‘to watch one’s weight’ in Dar es Salaam is to use the mixed expression *ku-maintain figure*, the use of English words did not index gender in and of itself. Instead, it was the practice of watching one’s weight that was gendered.

The idea that an African man such as Baraba might maintain his figure was also described as funny by Noreen and Frankie, but they gave different reasons for the humor. Noreen expressed that old men cannot have “figures,” an idea new to me:

(13)

- (2) Noreen: It seems Baraba hasn’t gained any weight at all because he is wearing clothes from a long time ago, so Mbwilo says *anamaintain sana figure yake*. So, normally, people who care about their weight are girls. For an adult like him, we say that he is ‘**figureless**.’
- C: Do you think that the word ‘**figure**’ is for young people, despite gender? Or is it something that concerns only females?
- Noreen: Well, [he used] *anamaintain figure* because we say that for example, women **maintain** their **figures**. For example, you, you don’t want to get fat, you want your **figure** to stay the way it is. It’s something women care about. Many women, not men.

Frankie’s comments demonstrate an indexical linkage between watching one’s weight and the practice of beauty pageants. He explained that the practice of actively maintaining one’s weight was related to something else relatively new in Tanzania – beauty pageants:

(14)

- (3) C: Do you think it’s funnier because he didn’t say, uh,
- Frankie: *Hataki kuwa mnene?* (‘He doesn’t want to be fat’). **It is funny because especially girls who get in contests and women are mostly concerned about their weight. Men in Africa don’t care so much about their weight. But you see our girls maintaining figures after beauty contests were allowed in the country. But you know for an African man, maintaining their figure sounds awkward.** *Najaribu ku-maintain figure* (‘I am trying to watch my weight’). **People would turn and look at you, what’s wrong with you, that’s not proper, that’s for girls. So, its funny.**

Revealing the pageant world as the first indexical-order for *ku-maintain figure* illustrates even more clearly how the comedic effect has been brought about. The utterance elicits laughter because it attempts to (re)entexualize Baraba’s actions into a world that could not be further from Baraba’s actual practices.

In uttering his line 24, Mbwilo evokes the myriad of cultural transformations that Tanzanians have been experiencing from the onset of colonization to the present stage of globalization. The success of Mbwilo’s joke makes it clear that the younger participants are very familiar with the text of maintaining one’s figure and all the discourses that are evoked through uttering the Swahili-English phrase.

Additional interview data with the journalists made it clear that Baraba was considered to be someone affiliated with the colonial era as well as the ensuing

period of socialism in Tanzania. Among all the 50 or so journalists, Baraba is indeed the eldest, and he is unique for having experienced primary school prior to independence and prior to the promotion of Swahili as the national language of primary education. Interviews with the journalists revealed that nearly all of them believed that English had lost its association with the colonial period; however, it was remarkable how often people would tell me to talk to Baraba about the issue because he would be in the best position to answer my questions. June, a journalist in her twenties, indicated that Baraba had experienced colonization at a personal level:

(15)

- (4) June: I didn't encounter colonization, but maybe you should talk to Baraba because he understands how the colonial period was. But I see English as the international language, because if you go outside the neighboring countries, even to Uganda, there aren't many people who speak Swahili.

On the whole, the journalists' comments framed Baraba as someone associated with old-fashioned ideas, which corresponds with his out-of-date clothing. Several journalists told me that Baraba is sentimental about the days of colonialism, which they illustrated by telling me about his dismay when a long-standing rule to speak only English in the newspaper office was no longer enforced by a new editor in the 1990s. When I asked Baraba about the use of English in the office, he reported that he thought most of the journalists' English was too poor to be the medium of communication in the office, resulting in the mixing of Swahili and English, a circumstance he lamented.

The journalists' views of Baraba provide additional insights into the humor in Mbwilo's statement. Baraba's lack of change contrasts directly with the phenomenon of maintaining one's figure, a phenomenon fairly new to Tanzania that embodies change. In a parallel fashion, the hybrid Swahili-English expression blends languages in a way that Baraba disdains.

Indexing resistance to discourses of Western modernity

The practice of dieting has become popular quite recently, as the growing number of advertisements for "slimming [sic] food" attest (Blommaert 2005:212). However, it is important to point out that the imported ideology of slim body size remains contested in Tanzania, despite its apparent hegemony among the younger generation. In the journalists' articles covering beauty pageants, the young women's successes were portrayed as triumphs and as opportunities to pay for higher education and receive job training. However, the conversation among the journalists and the retrospective interviews helped me to see Mbwilo's use of *ana-maintain figure* as a possible critique of this cultural development. In the context of discussing Baraba, the phrase creates a rupture in the practice of watching one's weight (and all the other discourses tied to this practice) as a "common sense" activity. Through the tactic of denaturalization, the incongruity of Baraba with the female gender (first-order indexicality) is transposed dialectically onto



FIGURE 3: Mswahili anapoamua ‘kumenten figa’ *When a Swahili decides ‘to maintain figure’*, in *Kingo*, (January, 2003). Reprinted with permission of Gaba Ltd.

the incongruity of the Western practice of watching one’s weight and participating in beauty contests for cash, prizes, and fame among Tanzanians. Thus, through this *n*-th order + first-order indexicality, these Western practices become equally denaturalized.

The conversational data led me to seek out other texts that contained references to body size, beauty pageants, and gendered practices of watching one’s weight. I was curious to know if additional critical perspectives toward beauty pageants and the practices of losing weight were available as texts to residents of Dar es Salaam. I found that the phrase *ku-maintain figure* (and all its spelling variants) was not uncommon, as the cartoon in Figure 3 shows. The caption reads, ‘When a Swahili decides to maintain figure,’ and in the cartoon, the woman on the right is saying, *Mwenzio nimeamua ‘kumenten figa’ au viper shoga* ‘My friend, I’ve decided to maintain my figure, what do you think?’ This cartoon was published in a popular monthly magazine, *Kingo*, whose livelihood depends on entertaining its young adult readers, and therefore it is useful to see what larger discourses these readers are expected to link the cartoon with in order to find it humorous.

According to the cartoonist himself,⁹ the humor here is meant to be ironic because the full-figured woman is telling her slim friend that she is planning to maintain her figure, but in the sense of keeping her weight at its present level. While the cartoons in *Kingo* often poke fun at the behavior of the Swahili peo-



FIGURE 4: *Yupi ndiye Misi Tanzania? 'Which one is Miss Tanzania?'* From *Kingo*, January 2003. Reprinted with permission of Gaba Ltd.

ple, this cartoon displays a rejection of Western values that have been imposed on African standards of beauty. In conversations about this cartoon that I had with a variety of Tanzanians, the ironic humor was always identified, and in many cases, the cartoon motivated my informants to tell me about the existence of *Jimama* ‘large woman’, a beauty pageant whose purpose was to praise the beauty of what they called “authentic” Tanzanian women, those whose full figures challenge the typical beauty-pageant aesthetic. It was clear from these conversations that *Jimama* was a response to the onslaught of American-style beauty pageants in Tanzania, and from this comparison, I was able to see what orders of indexicality they had created to interpret the cartoon as well. Through the tactic of distinction, both *Jimama* and the cartoon mock discourses from the West that promote slim figures as beautiful.

The cartoon in Figure 4, also from *Kingo*, illustrates this modern/traditional dichotomy while simultaneously displaying a rejection of the modern and a preference for the traditional. Again through the tactic of distinction, the cartoon clearly demonstrates a preference for traditional ideologies of female beauty. A dichotomy is established through hairstyles (braided vs. straightened), clothing (traditional *kanga* vs. bathing suit), skin color (darker vs. perhaps chemically altered light skin), and footwear (barefoot vs. high heels). The different ideologies of physical beauty are also apparent in the physical positioning of the women.

The full-figured woman's backside is the focus of attention, while the slender woman is presented frontally. The men in the audience are clearly drawn to the woman who embodies the traditions, and her full figure is one of the factors that make her more desirable. This image, together with the other texts that rely on the phrase *ku-maintain figure*, reveals that Western values and ideologies are present but are not always successful among Tanzanians. All of these data show how the tactics of distinction and denaturalization can be powerful means for enacting the tactic of authorization, thus establishing legitimacy. Through contesting the "natural" order of Westernization by distinguishing Western and African cultural forms, and through denaturalizing Western practices, these texts display a "use of power to legitimate certain social identities as culturally intelligible" (Bucholtz & Hall 2004:503).

CONCLUSION

The analysis of conversation provides insights into the (re)entextualization processes speakers use to attain intersubjectivity with their co-conversationists. The example of Mbwilo's joke reveals how speakers continually attend to one another's utterances, and in order to achieve shared meaning, one tactic they can use is to shift their own subjectivities so that they overlap with those of their co-participants. In the above data, we see that Mbwilo skillfully shifts tactics to overlap with the discourses available to the younger generation, thereby creating the opportunity for mutual understanding. Of course, not all participants are equally willing to shift their own subjectivities to accommodate others; while Mbwilo's conversational moves transformed the talk to an interaction that might include Noreen's indexical orders, Noreen's tactics remained largely fixed.

Finally, this article has implications for research on English in a postcolonial context, where (re)entextualizations are historically linked to discourses of the Other (Said 1978, Spivak 1987). The journalists' orientations to the concept of watching one's weight reveal the ongoing tensions between tradition and globalizing modernity, as the phrase *ku-maintain figure* is linked to new conceptions of appealing body size for women. However, this linkage does not necessarily indicate that English is a language that marks an allegiance of any kind to these modernizing forces, brought by the British colonizers and/or the dominant culture of the West. Instead, the data demonstrate that the participants are able to hybridize the language of the Other to resist these forces in a manner that is reflexive of the difference that English and its Western discourses have brought. In appropriating English in this way, the journalists (re)entextualize what *ku-maintain figure* means through tactics that resist and even mock Western aesthetics as "common sense." Through their intersubjective understandings of the many layers of meaning, the journalists actively relocate the very categories that have historically yielded Otherness, for them, appropriating English along the way.

APPENDIX

Transcription symbols

.	falling intonation
,	continuing intonation
?	rising intonation
<u>underline</u>	emphasis
↑	rise in pitch
[overlapping talk
:	sound stretch
hh.	outbreath
.hh	inbreath
(.)	micropause
talk-	cut-off
TALK	loud volume
((comments))	transcriber's description of events
bold	English in original

Abbreviations

cns	consecutive marker
fut	future tense
neg	negative marker
pl	plural marker
pres	present tense
pst	past tense
subj	subjunctive mood
stv	stative verb tense

NOTES

¹ *Swahinglish* is an emic term used by many urban Tanzanians as an umbrella term to describe a variety of Swahili-English phenomena, including codeswitching, language mixing, and the development of a fused lect (see Auer 1999).

² The term *postcolonial* has many meanings. I use it in a way similar to Hall (1996), who maintains that postcoloniality should be read as a transnational and transcultural global process that considers the narratives of colonization as central to cultural change, but not as the only narratives that can be told. Zeleza's (2003:243) perspective is also insightful: "It seems to me the question is not so much about whether these societies had and continue to have linkages, but the nature of those linkages, the hierarchies and relations of domination embedded in and reproduced by the linkages."

³ According to the World Bank, in 2003 only 18.8% of those who finished primary school continued to secondary school (<http://devdata.worldbank.org>).

⁴ Linell (1998:145) refers to this process as "recontextualization," or "the extrication of some part or aspect from a text or discourse, to form a genre of texts or discourses, and the fitting of this part of aspect into another context, i.e., another text or discourse (or discourse genre) and its use and environment."

⁵ All interviews were carried out in Swahili by myself and were transcribed with the assistance of two Tanzanian assistants.

⁶ All names are pseudonyms.

⁷ Kaunda's political life preceded Ngouabi's by a number of years. Kaunda was active in forming the African National Congress in the 1950s, and by 1964 he was elected prime minister of Zambia. Ngouabi came to power in 1968 as the result of a coup (Appiah & Gates 1999).

⁸ The English elements in these otherwise Swahili interviews are indicated by boldface.

⁹ In 2005 I had the opportunity to interview James Gayo, the chief cartoonist and publisher of *Kingo* cartoons. I also showed the cartoon to more than 20 Tanzanians of various ages who reside in Dar es Salaam to gauge their interpretations of the reasons for the humor.

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