

# Racism: Doing research “on”, “with” and “for” African second language learners in Australia

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# Background



- Paucity of sociolinguistic research on non Indo-European groups in Australia
- An African researching people of African backgrounds for authentic representation
- Current rhetoric on African migrants and settlement in Australia
- Personal experience of racism



# Aims of this paper

- Ideological underpinnings in the construction and co-construction of language learners
- Highlighting Africa's heterogeneity
- Identifying ideological stances when representing people – a way to combat/resist racism
- The way forward



# Theoretical concepts



- People are constructed/co-constructed in social interactions (e.g. Holstein & Gubrium 2007)
- Social construction is a process which involves the imposition of worldview or ideologies of interactants (e.g. Pavlenko 2005; Woolard & Schieffelin 1994)



# Theoretical concepts



- Race is a social not biological construct and is constructed through racism (e.g. Vasta 1996; Vasta & Castles 1996)
- Australia's nationhood is defined by 'otherising' non-core members (e.g. Nile 1991)
- L2 acquisition is constrained by external factors (McDermott 1993; McGroarty 1998)



# Defining settlement



- 'process of adjustment you experience as you become established and independent in Australia'
- Settlement factors
  - ability to speak English, health, visa category
  - prior visits/familiarity with Australia, work

<http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/settle-in-australia/settling/index.htm>



# Linguistic ability and settlement



- Prime Minister Howard -

The truth is that people come to this country because they want to be Australians. ...

It would however be a crushing mistake to downplay the hopes and the expectations of our national family. We expect all who come here to make an overriding commitment to Australia, its laws and its democratic values. We expect them to master the common language of English and we will help them to do so.”

<http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2006/speech1754.cfm>



# The Hon Kevin Andrews



‘Citizenship – committing to a way of life’  
Sydney, 31 July 2007

- “I believe the ability to speak English is important. It is essential if people are to participate fully [in] community life and if they are to make the most of the opportunities that Australia offers.”
- <http://www.minister.immi.gov.au/media/speeches/2007/ka06-31072007.htm>



# Comments to “Four-year wait to be Aussie” – *Daily Telegraph*



“how can Australians get along and be one big community if we can't even communicate with those who are too arrogant to learn the Australian language. This is when those who can't speak english make their own little communities only involving those of their decent leaving the rest of us out, this is a form of racism as they do not want anything to do with us Australians. They are also the ones who do not call themselves Australians. i as an individual do not want anyone in my country who i cannot same "howz it going mate" and not get a reply.”

Posted by: Nathan Frater of blacktown 7:02am September 15, 2006  
Comment 3 of 22



Posted by: About time of Sydney 6:47am  
September 15, 2006 Comment 2 of 22



- I have no problem whatsoever with these proposals and in fact , I think they are a good idea. Certainly, a demonstrable level of fluency in the English language should be proven before someone becomes a citizen. The ease with which citizenship is granted has been a joke for far too long. By all means, make citizenship harder to obtain so that when people finally qualify for it, they'll appreciate it more.
- <http://www.news.com.au/dailytelegraph/comments/0,22058,20413306-5009120,00.html>



# In the discourse so far



- Migrants who lack English must learn it to settle – fostering a *national identity*
- Ability to speak English is the *unmarked* sign of settlement – inability is *marked*
- English is *the* language Australians must speak – a *monolingual mindset* (Clyne 2005)
- Migrants who do not learn/speak English are arrogant – no acquisition *constraints*



# Global studies on language learners



## Language choice/use is complex

- Heller 2006 – Canada – Francophone minority in English predominant Ontario
- Woolard 1985 – Spain – Catalan vrs Castilian
- Kubota 2002 – Japan – EFL teaching
- Norton and Toohey (2001) 'Changing Perspectives on the Good Learner'  
*TESOL Quarterly*



# Language ideology and learner identity



- More needs to be done in terms of the issues of identifying:
    - ‘tensions and conflicts surrounding the use and learning of language’
    - ‘incentives and opportunities, or lack thereof, for the development of [English] proficiency’
- (McGroarty 1998, p. 612)



# Applying a constructionist perspective to language learning



- We need 'models and methods that incorporate the viewpoints of individual and groups as agents of learning and teaching and represent individual and group variations in detailed and principled fashion'
  - (McGroarty 1998, p. 593)



# Approach



- Constructionist approach to describe and explore

- Learner's social identity – e.g. fluidity
- Environments for learning – e.g. network
- Institutional constraints – e.g. job situations

(McGroarty, 1998, p. 597)

A research model that incorporates these three areas will lead to an empathic representation of learner needs



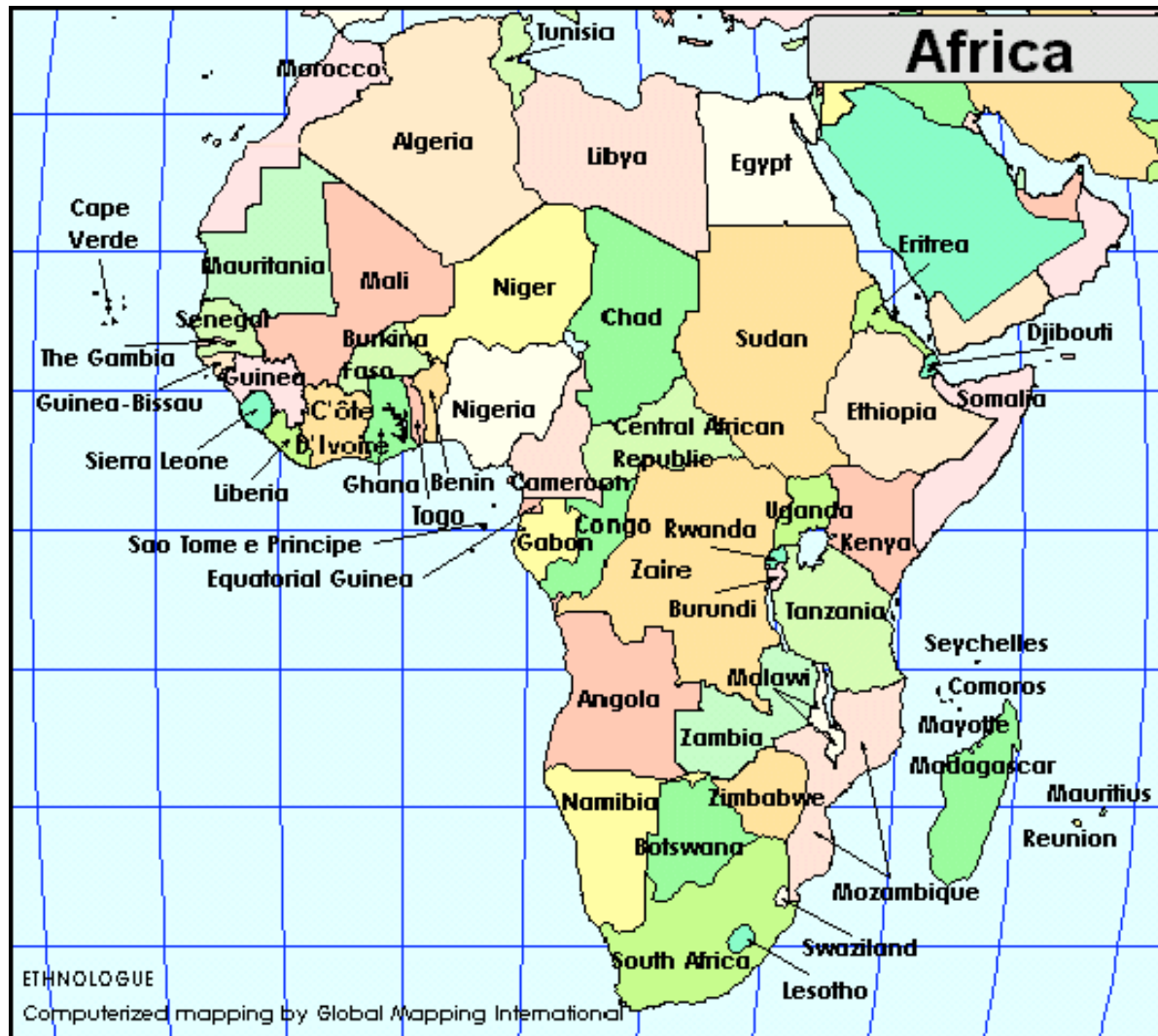
# Case study – settling Africans in Australia



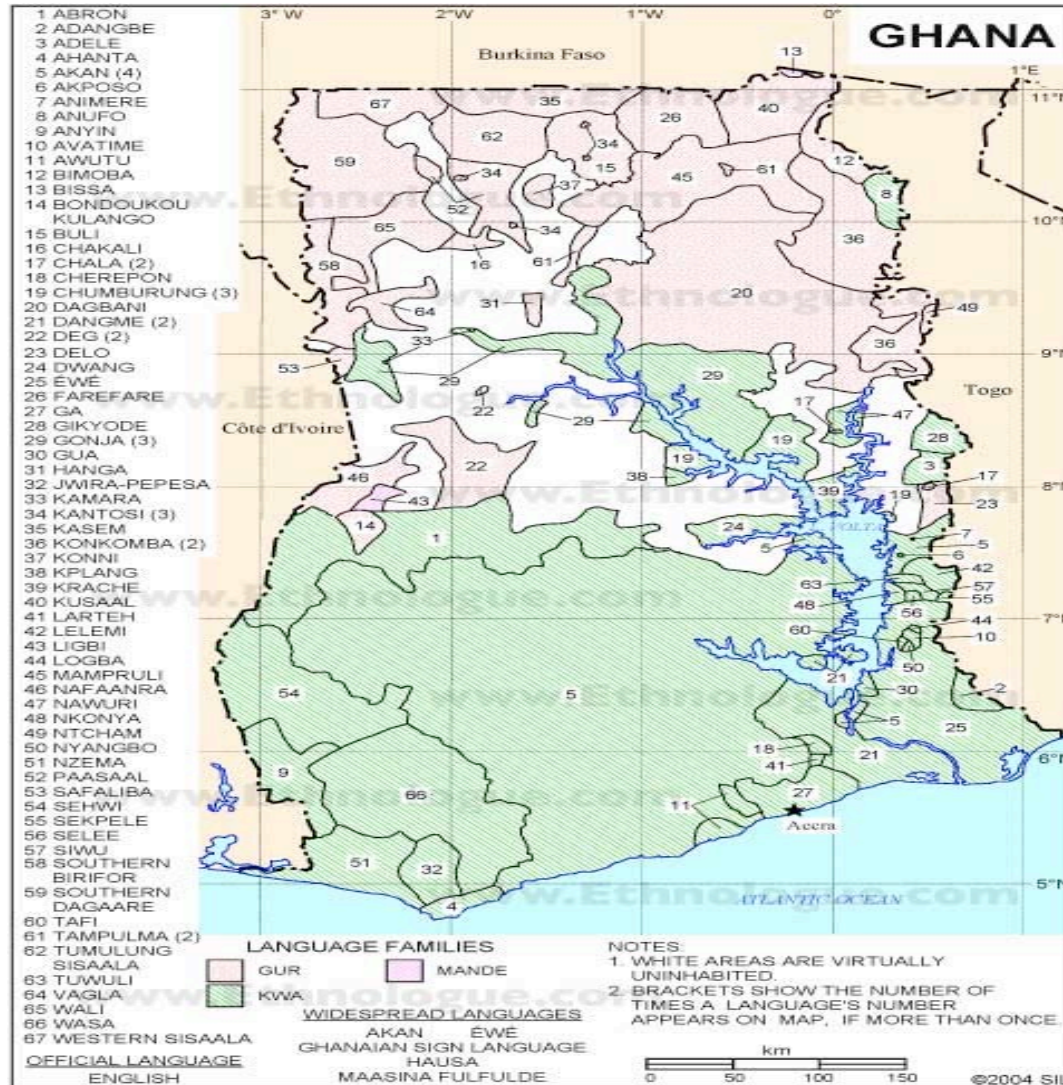
- Africa - Cultural and linguistically diverse  
e.g. - Ghana country and its languages
- Africans in Australia  
Statistics of Africans in Australia
- Constructing the African identity in Australia



# Figure 1 African Countries



# Figure 2 *Ethnologue* - Ghana



# Africa so far



- Diverse communities, diverse languages and diverse cultures – *Ethnologue*
- Bi/multilingual communities - Myers-Scotton (1993) *Social motivations for codeswitching: evidence from Africa*
- African identity is not fixed – Asante (1998) *The Afrocentric Idea*
- Variables – age, gender, class, religion ...



# Africans in Australia



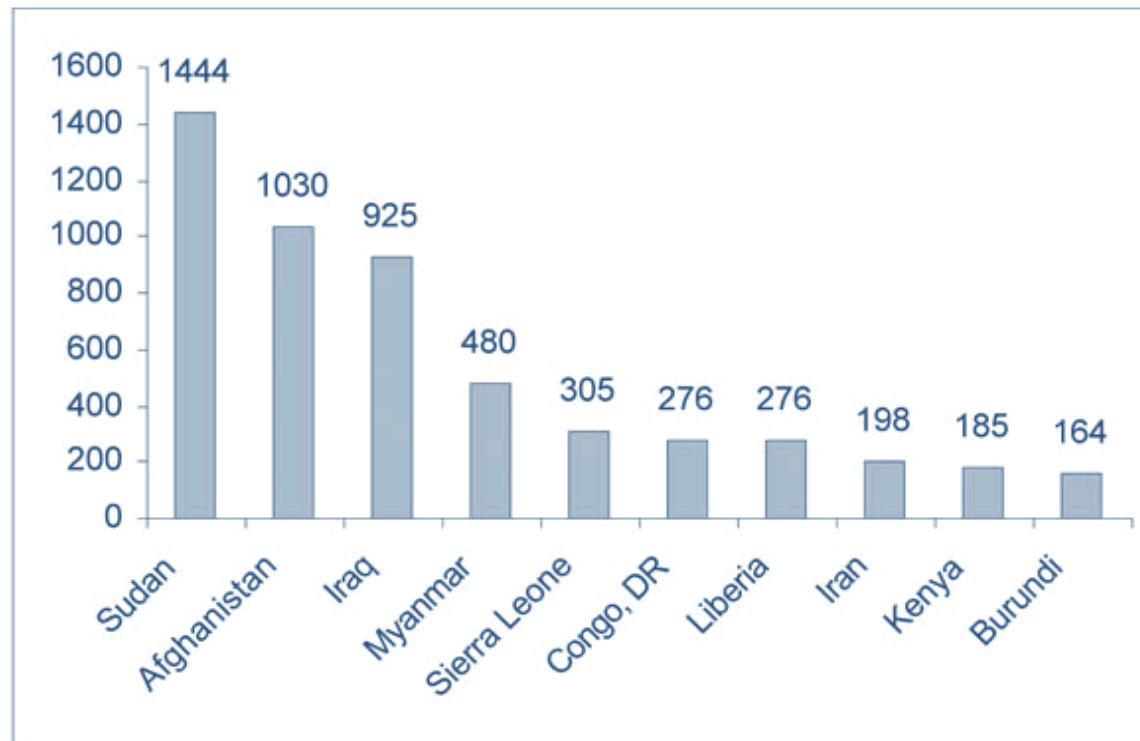
- A comparison of 1996 and 2001 census data – African languages/countries show growth
- e.g.
  - Shona – Zimbabwe – 149 percent
  - Somali – Somalia – 107 percent
  - Oromo – Ethiopia – 103 percent
  - Akan – Ghana – 70 percent
- [http://www.crc.nsw.gov.au/statistics/Sect1/Chart\\_1p06\\_Aust.pdf](http://www.crc.nsw.gov.au/statistics/Sect1/Chart_1p06_Aust.pdf)



Figure 3 Humanitarian Settlement Target Group arrivals to Australia July – December 2006 by top 10 countries of birth



MACQUARIE  
UNIVERSITY ~ SYDNEY



- Source: [http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/government-programs/settlement-planning/\\_pdf/STG\\_arrivals/STG\\_arrivals\\_2006aus.pdf](http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/delivering-assistance/government-programs/settlement-planning/_pdf/STG_arrivals/STG_arrivals_2006aus.pdf)



# Constructing Africans in Australia



## Compare Text A and Text B



# Perspective A



‘Many of the young men have an excellent grasp of spoken English but is usually somewhat **archaic**, for they have studied from old textbooks. ...They may also find imaginative writing something of a pointless exercise, as their world up to now has been concrete in nature and fighting for survival does not allow one the luxury of giving reign to the imagination’

Hillier (2002) “The Southern Sudanese in Western Australia: Worlds Apart”



## Perspective B



- ‘Settlement support services are longer-term and more generous in Australia, but refugees inevitably suffer from significant psychological distress. ...But the evidence suggests that refugees from different nations adopt different strategies to cope with life in Australia and consequently fare quite differently from each other.’

Browne (2006 pp. 70-71) *The Longest Journey: Resettling Refugees from Africa*



# Inability to learn English



- Which construction?
- Which representation?
  
- Learners as social deviants – deficient
- Learners as previous learners – capable but limitations exist



# Where to from here



- ‘Africans, as any other people for that matter, are not passively shaped by their cultures. Instead they skilfully and creatively construct their identity borrowing from insights from whatever resources they have available to them’ (Kenzo 2004, p. 267).
- Why can't they speak English?



