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SOCIAL IDENTITY AND ITS REFLECTION IN COMMUNICATION

Jimmie Blacksmith in Thomas Keneally's Novel The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith

The language people use in interactions is primarily determined by their culture; here the patterns of thought and patterns of behaviour are probably the most important (cf. Allwood, 1990).

The success of an interaction depends on certain conditions, one of them being the participants' social identity. A broader definition of social identity says that "the actor makes who he or she is and what he or she is doing visible and recognizable. By appropriately behaving or otherwise indicating that one is a person of a particular sort, a person obliges and/or induces others to treat him or her as that sort of person". (Wieder, Pratt, 1990). The recognition from others is crucial. In other words, it is through communication that a person's social identity is revealed.

"There are, perhaps, in every language items reflecting social characteristics of the speaker, of the addressee and the relation between them. Speech which contains such items tells a hearer how the speaker sees those characteristics, and he will be considered to have infringed a norm that governs speech if he uses items which indicate their wrong characteristics." (Hudson, p. 120)

". . . any utterance, spoken or written, displays features which simultaneously identify it from a number of different points of view. Some features may reveal aspects of the social situation in which he is speaking, the kind of person to whom he is speaking, the capacity in which he is speaking. . ." (Crystal and Davy, p. 60)

This paper is an attempt to look at the identity problem in a half-caste through an analysis of selected speech acts¹ in Thomas Keneally's novel *The*

¹ The term was developed by J. L. Austin and J. R. Searle. Searle's starting point is the observation that when people utter sentences they also perform *acts* of various kinds, such as declaring, asking, requesting, commanding, promising and so on. Sometimes the kind of act is

Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith. The story is located in Australia at the break of the century. The extracts illustrate the influence of social setting on the language people use in interactions.

Before proceeding to the actual analysis, it would be perhaps appropriate to say a few words about the political situation in Australia about a hundred years ago. Darwinism was still slightly echoing; Australia was a racist country declaring "the white Australia policy" (1901) by which people of other races were not allowed to immigrate; indigenous people were expected to adopt the white people's way of life and values and gradually amalgamate. (They were not given citizen rights until 1967).

Holmes (p. 60), in the chapter on language maintenance and shift, says: "Most Aboriginal people in Australia and many Indian people in the US have lost their languages over four or five generations of colonial rule. The indigenous people were swamped by English, the language of the dominant group, and their numbers were decimated by warfare and disease. The result of colonial control was not diglossia with varying degrees of bilingualism, as found in many African, Asian and South American countries, but the more or less complete eradication of the many indigenous languages." The language of the dominant group is associated with power, status, prestige and social success. Beside power and status, this paper will also consider distance, which sometimes goes with dominance; and solidarity, all of which have their distinctive markers.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Australia became a melting-pot not only for convicts, ex-convicts, their descendants from various parts of England, and Ireland, but also for their language varieties. The new variety of English, the Australian variety, which developed over the years had its strongest roots in Cockney. "All the old Cockney codes and customs survived and were passed on to their non-Cockney fellows. None was more typical of this than the notion of mates" (McCrum et al., p. 292). Swearing and greetings were also taken over directly.

The contact between the Aborigine and the white man was intermittent. The Aborigines always resented to accept the white man's speech as their own and even today, "an accurate reproduction of Australian speech (i. e. Standard Australian, expl.) is profoundly unacceptable in the context of everyday Aboriginal society" (McCrum et al., p. 285).

The analysis of speech in the text is largely based on concepts introduced in Holmes (1992). The most frequently used *TERMS* are:

made obvious by the presence of *performative* verb as in the request "I *beg* you to come here". However, this is not usually the case: "Please come here" is as much a request as "I ask you to come here", and is more likely to occur in actual conversation. Speech acts, as this example shows, are in principle independent of syntactic and semantic categories; (Leech and Short, p. 290).

SOLIDARITY – DISTANCE

These terms are related to “the social distance between people, to how much experience they have shared, how many social characteristics they share (religion, sex, age, race, occupation, interests, etc.), how far they are prepared to share intimacies, and other factors.” (Hudson, p. 122)

SUPERIOR – SUBORDINATE

This is related to social status.

FORMAL LANGUAGE – INFORMAL

This factor is largely affected by the two above. In the analysed text the contrast between Standard and Substandard (creolized) is more frequent.

CODE SWITCH

People may switch from informal to formal (substandard – standard) language due to changed situation (such as the arrival of a new person), or from one language to another to signal group membership or ethnicity.

TITLE–LAST NAME, T – TITLE (TLN–T); (see² on politeness)

FIRST NAME (FN)

It is often the way people address other people that signals their distance or solidarity, or whether they are superior or subordinate.

Positive politeness: solidarity oriented. Shared attitudes and values.

Negative politeness: pays people respect and avoids intruding on them. N. P. involves expressing oneself appropriately in terms of social distance and respecting status differences. (cf. Holmes pp. 284, 296)

Jimmie Blacksmith was educated at a missionary station and he puts all his ambitions in the values implanted in him by his teacher, the Rev. Mr. Neville.

The first chapter, from which the following extract is taken, presents Jimmie as a tribal boy.

After Jimmie’s tribal initiation ceremony (which is done in absolute secret with male tribal members), the following interaction with Mr. Neville takes place:

EXTRACT I

Rev. H. J. Neville:

“Blasted blacks!” (1) he told his wife. “The best of them are likely to vanish at any time”. (2)

..... “If a person could be certain”, he said, a little peevishly. “that he had imbued one of them with decent ambitions!” (3)

..... “Jimmie Blacksmith!” he called. His voice cut the shrilling off. When Jimmie broke off his path and came towards the missionary, his brother Morton staggered about with the hilarity of it. But But there was silence. Jimmie’s feet could be heard padding the earth in their light economic way.

“Where have you been, Master Blacksmith?” (4)

“Cathichin` possums.” (5)

² Being linguistically polite is often a matter of selecting linguistic forms which express the appropriate degree of social distance or which recognize relevant status differences. Rules for polite behaviour differ from one speech community to another. Linguistic politeness is culturally determined. Inappropriate linguistic choices may be considered rude.

Mr. Neville flinched. "I can't understand you. Didn't it occur to you you might be needed for higher things? The Easter choir perhaps." (6)

"How d'yer mean, Mr. Neville?" (7)

"You've missed a lot of school." (8)

"Yair, Mr. Neville." (9)

"Very well. You must come to my study, please." (10)

Mr. Neville's utterances clearly demonstrate dominance. Though his wife may not be the intended listener in the rather affective (1), the fact that he uses bad language in front of her shows their close relationship (solidarity). This is further supported by (2) and (3). (4) is an example of a code switch from the expected intimate "Jimmie" to a formal style which distances the speaker from the addressee and emphasises Mr. Neville's disapproval of Jimmie's absence. Reprimand is also in (6) and (8). (10) is a command. Jimmie's answers demonstrate distance by means of negative politeness², i. e. using the title and last name. By giving minimal answers J. signals that he is subordinate, but at the same time he is asserting his own independence by not letting Mr. Neville know the truth.

In the next chapter, Jimmie starts to question the Aboriginal tribal values, largely due to the influence of Mr. and Mrs. Neville:

EXTRACT II

"If you could ever find a nice girl off a farm to marry, your children would only be quarter caste then, and your grandchildren one-eighth caste, scarcely black at all". (11)

The Nevilles manifest their superiority by telling J. what he should do and standard English underlines their distance.

Repeated address (you, your) along with revealing the prospects shows Neville's sympathy for Jimmie (11).

Mr. Neville got a post in Muswellbrook and took Jimmie with him as a houseboy.

One day Jimmie meets Wongee Tom (an Aborigine) in the street:

EXTRACT III

Wongee Tom was sleeping off his happiness but had one eye out for friends, such as Jimmie. His cheeks folded themselves strangely into creases of apparent contentment.

"Hey, yer paley bastard!" he murmured (12).

"Hey, Wongee Tom." (13)

"Yair, that's who (14). How's that old sow Dulcie goin'?" (15)

"Dulcie's good. Wilf's drunk." It was a safe enough prediction. "Dottie's good, Mort's bloody good (16). Are you good?" (17)

"Yair, not workin' much." He chuckled at his own joke. They could get very superior, these travelled blacks who had seen the large towns.

"Are there other Emu-Wren here?" Jimmie asked in Mungindi (18).

"Emu-Wren? Bullshit." (19). But he gave in to the old language. "I've come a big walk from Brentwood. (20) Hardly a black man to offer me a roll of his wife. No Emu-Wren. (21) I don't know why I left the plains. The crayfish here are good. Nice red meat." (22)

"You got a job?" (23) Jimmie asked. In English, for in Mungindi there was no word for *job*.

"I catch' em possums. Sell' em skin. Thrippence a skin. Not much. Wish I had a gun. (24) Whitfeller don't like Wongee hangin' round homestead catchin' possums (25). *You bugger off blackie!* (26) Thrippence a skin, that's all." (27)

"Long time since yer skinned yer last possum", Jimmie Blacksmith teased him (28).

Wongee's greeting (12) is an expression of solidarity. "Bastard" here is affectionate, not really derogative, though "paley" signals that W. does not quite acknowledge Jimmie as a full member of his ethnic group. This concept is further supported by Wongee addressing Jimmie in English.

Jimmie answers in English (13), but the address indicates proximity and sympathy.

Wongee (14) is happy that Jimmie remembers his name, which signals that Jimmie has not cut the bonds with the tribe.

"Old sow" in (15) is not derogative, it is a caconymy and indicates close relationship to which Jimmie reacts by saying not only how his mother is but also mentions other members of his family (16). The attachment is further supported by the voiced interest in Wongee (17). The straightforward question and the switched code (18) are evident signals of shared ethnicity. Wongee uses English only to swear and switches into the Aboriginal language to refer to the domain of his culture³ (20–22). As the writer remarks, Jimmie switches the code to discuss a domain which is not part of the Aboriginal culture⁴ (23). Wongee, also in English, describes his work (24). He distances himself from his own person by referring to himself in the third person (25); by mentioning the maltreatment and cheating (26, 27) he wants to arouse empathy. The whole Wongee's utterance signals solidarity. Jimmie knows that Wongee does not speak the truth but does not want him to feel uncomfortable and therefore only gently voices his doubt, not distancing himself from Wongee (28).

A few minutes later Jimmie and Wongee see a pretty four-year old girl.

EXTRACT IV

Wongee smiled at her tolerantly. "Yer oughter come back twenty year's time, plant them blue eyes on Wongee. . ." (29)

The little girl ducked away from the proposal and into the draper's gloom, where her mother was testing the strength of a square of serge.

"Oughtn't say that sort of thing, Wongee. (30) Give us a bad name." (31)

H. M. S. Sugar and Spice dashed past them as her family left the store, the tough square mother bound flinty-eyed for her next shopping task.

"Would you like a white woman, Wongee?" (32) Jimmie Blacksmith asked Wongee – since Mrs. Neville had mentioned the possibility for him.

"Don't seem'ter make the cow-cookies happy, having white woman for 'is wife. Why else he come after black girls? Must be sum'pin to white women we ain't been told." (33)

A few more minutes later:

EXTRACT V

"I think I might git a job in the open-cut," (34) he said suddenly.

"Diggin' coal?" (35)

"Yair. I'll git a job there." (36)

"There's a woman here." Wongee Tom said in the tribal language. "She isn't Mungara. She yaws for men and not with her mouth. She weeps for men and not with her eyes. She drinks men

³ It was allegedly common for an Aborigine man to "lend" his wife for pleasure to another man as an expression of friendship.

⁴ The Aborigines, who were hunters and gatherers, believed that things were obtained through rituals.

down, she is a cave for men.” (37) He laughed. In English he said: “But she don’t keep the rain off. We git together in the paddock behind Caledonian. We git a young whitefeller buy us sherry. We gotter drink ‘im bloody fast because bloody p’lice come round every hour. But there’s lubras round all the time, but this special one, Lucy, see.” (38) Suddenly he sounded urgent. “Don’t git a job in the open-cut. Come round to the Caledonian Sat’dee night. Is all a poor black bastard got left.” (39)

Wongee wants to arouse empathy by referring to himself in the third person (29). Jimmie’s reproach is polite, probably for their age difference; FN shows solidarity; personal pronoun indicates association (solidarity). Encouraged by Wongee’s remark (29), Jimmie asks this straightforward question in standard English, by which he distances himself (32). In (33) Wongee is expressing doubt and confusion regarding the myth that a white woman is superior to a black one through the reference to white men’s attraction to black women. By giving an explanation he signals solidarity. Jimmie’s dissociation from the life of Aboriginal people for whom it was not common to have a regular job is in (34) and (36). Jimmie distances himself by not reverting to the previous topic of sexuality. Wongee, trying to be intimate, switches into the Aboriginal language (37). Another switch, this time into English to refer to situations where the whites are involved, and to extralingual realities which do not have expressions in his mother tongue. The invitation signals solidarity; by the synecdoche he makes it clear to Jimmie what his ethnic group is (39).

Jimmie becomes a misfit both among the Aborigines and among the settlers by whom he seeks, and sometimes finds, employment. The following example is one of many in the book which illustrate the dominant attitude of the whites towards Jimmie, no matter how much Jimmie claims his white heritage and stresses that his wife is white.

EXTRACT VI

(Mr. Newby): “. . . Yer reckon yer wife’s white?” (40)

“White’s white, boss. No blackie in her.” (41)

“What about the little blackie yer started in her? Eh, Jimmie, yer filthy bastard?” (42)

“It happens more’n yer think, boss.” (43)

“Don’t tell me what happens. I know what bloody happens.” (44)

Newby wants confirmation from Jimmie since it was unusual for a white woman to marry a man who would not be of purely white origin (40). Jimmie is pleased by the voiced interest in his personal life from a white and reassures Newby about the whiteness of his wife; acknowledges the inferiority of the black race by using a diminutive derogatively (euphemism) (41). The reaction from Newby to the last part of Jimmie’s statement, now taken literally, along with the insulting name, signal Newby’s dominance (42). Jimmie recognizes Newby’s dominance by attempting to give an explanation and title (43). Newby does not want to continue and cuts the dialogue off, which again signals dominance (44).

Jimmie, after having been cheated by his wife and employers, casts aside his “white” ambitions, and then expresses his rage in killing his present employer’s

family. On the run with his half-brother Mort he commits a series of murders. They take a male school-teacher as hostage.

EXTRACT VII:

Spreading a groundsheet. Jimmie saw Mort gathering kindling wood.

"No fire," Jimmie said, "They'll be lookin' fer fires." (45)

"Who'll be fuckin' lookin'?' The schoolie needs a cup." (46)

"Don't be such a bloody ole lubra (47). He's here fer us. We're not here fer bloody him." (48)

"Mort wants one too." (49)

"Fuckin' ole women's church turn-out." (50)

Jimmie is now in the dominant position. He says what should be done, but the explanation that follows lowers the degree of distance. There is no suggestion of ethnic solidarity, because Jimmie and M. could converse in the tribal language, but they don't (45). Mort's uses a swear word to express his being annoyed. This signals solidarity. The reasoning of the next sentence softens the offensive tone of the preceding question and is an appeal to Jimmie's humane side and a request for consideration (46). Jimmie in (47) is dominant and affective. (48) The explanation and reference to the plural "we" brings his dominance close to solidarity though he is still dominant of the situation. He wants to make it clear that there will be no sympathy for the teacher or solidarity. Mort (49) by referring to himself in the third person puts himself on the same level with the teacher. At the same time he appeals to Jimmie's kinship bonds. The emotional (50) signals defeat. On the scale of distance and dominance this means solidarity and subjugation.

The originally offensive tone by which Jimmie aimed to show how much he despised the white race represented for him now by the teacher gradually changes. The teacher is the only white who does not have an ethnocentric view.

EXTRACT VIII

"You must leave Mort, Jimmie. You can see that." (51)

"Mort's been in on all I done." (52)

"He wounded a woman, but she's getting better." (53)

"He shot Toban. I need Mort. Mort needs me." (54)

"Would you say so, Jimmie? Would you?" (55)

"You ought to bugger off, Jimmie, and give him a chance. Yer ought to leave us." (56)

"Why in hell?" (57)

"The boy isn't really your brother. He is an Aborigine, Jimmie. Not like you. There is too much Christian in you, Jimmie, and it'll only bugger him up. Like it's bugged you." (58)

Jimmie should have been angry, but shrugged.

"I'll ask him." (59)

"Don't ask him. He'll stay with you because he is an Aborigine, and loyalty's in it." (60)

McCreadie shivered from the intensity of debate. "You have to just bugger off. At night." (61)

"I'm taking for granted," McCreadie said, "that you love Mort." (62)

Mr. Jimmie Blacksmith said softly, "Yer better wrap yerself in a blanket, mister, and jest shut up." (63)

Now it is the teacher who is dominant. He urges Jimmie; the request is soft, FN and appeal to Jimmie's own reasoning do not leave much space for distance. Jimmie's answers are referential and short which signals subordination (52, 54). The teacher makes it clear that he questions what Jimmie has said. The positive

rhetorical question is actually a strong negative assertion (cf. Quirk, Greenbaum, p. 200) (55). His request is polite, he does not want Jimmie to feel uncomfortable. This along with FN address signals solidarity. (56) Jimmie's reaction is affective – he distances himself from the teacher. He senses he is not the leader of the group any more (57). The teacher ignores Jimmie's reaction and the fact that he goes on with his explanation signals dominance (58). Dominance is also in (60) which is a straightforward command, first softened by an explanation, but made stronger in the next sentence with an exact instruction (61). In (62) the teacher demonstrates superiority as he is sure of Jimmie's respect for him "*I am taking. . .*". It is difficult for Jimmie to acknowledge the changed situation. He attempts to exert dominance by cutting off the dialogue and by giving a command, but the soft tone and the recognized social distance ("mister") suggest subordination (63).

Coming back to the above introduced categories, we can see that the participants manifested their attitudes and relationships through a range of linguistic means, from individual lexical units, especially swear words⁵, which marked the otherwise neutral speech, to complete speech acts. It is necessary to bear in mind that the categories have dimensions that may overlap and that their boundaries are not clear cut.

To show the DOMINANT RELATIONSHIP, the speaker in the analysed text would: use the imperative, both explicit and implicit; interrogation; standard language; swear words; code switch; cut off the conversation; call others by their FN; voice disapproval.

In the SUBORDINATE RELATIONSHIP, the speaker would: address the other person by TLN, or T at least; give short affirmative answers; put a request; be negatively polite.

To demonstrate DISTANCE:

TLN, T; standard language, code switch; politeness;

There were also cases of personal distancing: derogative name in reference, reference to oneself in the third person.

To demonstrate SOLIDARITY:

Caonymy; personal pronouns; FN; emotive emphasis: exclamations, interjections, expletives and intensifiers; code switch; rhetorical question; request; explanations.

The category of DOMINANCE is often accompanied by DISTANCE. In the encounters with the whites, Jimmie acknowledges their distance and dominance by TLN or T, and affirmative answers. It is not him who starts the conversation or asks questions.

⁵ With swearing, there is a distinction between obscenity and vulgarity. There are distinct rules about what is "acceptable" and what is not. In Australian English, "*arse*", "*sod*", "*bleeding*", and "*bugger*" are almost universally acceptable. "*Fuck*" is not. (cf. McCrum et al. p. 283)

On the other hand, in the contact with the Aborigines, it would be him who would manifest his dominance by asking questions, giving commands, reproaching and cutting off the topic of conversation, by switching the code and by using swear words as insults.

In the category of social *DISTANCE* and *SOLIDARITY*, Jimmie recognizes the social distance between him and the whites by addressing them TLN or T, he speaks relatively standard language and he does not oppose insults. When communicating with the Aborigines he distances himself by switching from the Aboriginal language into English and from creolized into standard English. He uses derogatives in reference to the Aborigines. In general, however, he manifests much more *SOLIDARITY* by switching from English into the Aboriginal language, from standard to creolized English, uses FN, and “we” in reference to himself and another Aborigine, and swears to express his emotions but also manifests positive politeness.

CONCLUSION

The analysis makes it obvious that Jimmie’s ethnic identity is Aboriginal throughout the whole story. The fundamental condition for his belonging to the white ethnic group is never fulfilled: the whites never recognize Jimmie as one of them. The ethnocentric (racist) view is too strongly ingrained in them. And Jimmie, nearly always signalling subordination and inferiority, unknowingly supports them in their attitude.

:

I am aware of different possible interpretations of some of the speech acts. “Style is relatively *transparent* or *opaque*: transparency implies paraphrasability; opacity implies that a text cannot be adequately paraphrased, and that interpretation of the text depends greatly on the creative imagination of the reader.” (Leech, Short, p. 39)

The extracts come from Thomas Keneally: *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, Penguin, 1973

Extr. I – pp. 3, 6; II – p. 7; III – p. 10, IV – p. 11; V – p. 12; VI – pp. 51/52; VII – p. 139; VIII – 151.

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