
READING TABLOIDS IN ZULU: A CASE STUDY OF *ISOLEZWE*

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ABSTRACT

This article revolves around an analysis of the relationship between Isolezwe newspaper, a South African mass-market tabloid, and its consumers who are mainly Zulu-speaking black readers. In view of the decline in newspaper readership in general, the phenomenal growth of Isolezwe in particular and the absence of scholarship that examines the relationship between Isolezwe and its consumers, the authors set out to explore why the newspaper has become and continues to be highly popular. To answer the question about the reason for its popularity, focus group interviews with readers were conducted to identify why readers chose to read the newspaper. The authors conclude that the comparative preference of Isolezwe over other newspapers in the market is influenced, in part, by mutually reinforcing factors such as social/cultural identity and cultural capital, semantic noise avoidance, language use, gratification of cognitive needs and the audience-centred definition of news.

Keywords: *Isolezwe*, tabloids, Zulu, news, newspapers, social/cultural identity, cultural capital, semantic noise avoidance, gratification of cognitive needs

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INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

South African press history, during colonialism and apartheid, focused largely on the commercial press aimed at and owned by white people (Switzer 2012). Histories written about the press aimed at the majority black population tended to focus on the “serious” press, e.g. the underground, so-called “alternative” press (cf. Switzer & Adhikari 2000) or newspapers with a political affiliation (e.g. Limb’s 2012 study of *Abantu-Batho* or Zug’s 2007 history of *The Guardian*). Some studies do pay passing attention to newspapers aimed at entertainment, for example Switzer and Switzer’s (1979) bibliographic guide to the black press in South Africa and Lesotho that included a section on General-Interest Publications, Sport and Entertainment. Bourgault’s (1995: 160) seminal overview of the mass media in Africa also includes some references to white-owned colonial press in South Africa that was specifically aimed at channelling “native thoughts away from politics and into safer pursuits”. Although it could be typified as using a non-political “sex-crime-sport formula” (Switzer 2012: xiii), Chapman’s (2001) account of the popular, white-owned magazine *Drum* aimed at black urban readers in the 1950s is at pains to emphasise a reading of the magazine as a symbol of the opposition to apartheid.

With the post-apartheid rise of mass-market tabloids aimed at a black readership in South Africa, the popular press can no longer escape serious scholarly attention. The introduction of the tabloids *Daily Sun*, *Son* and *Daily Voice* to the South African newspaper market has changed the media landscape irrevocably. Soon after the launch of *Daily Sun* it became the biggest daily newspaper in the country. It was followed by two Western Cape-based papers, *Daily Voice* and *Son*. The commercial success of these tabloids, as well as that of the Zulu-language tabloid, *Isolezwe*, is probably the reason behind the Pedi-language tabloid planned by the Independent News Media group, which recently changed ownership (Vecchiato 2013: 1). While tabloids have also made inroads in newspaper markets elsewhere in Africa, e.g. Nigeria and Zimbabwe (Beckett & Kyrke-Smith 2007: 55; Mabweazara & Strelitz 2009), the rise of the local ones has to be seen against the specific post-apartheid South African social context within which these media are consumed. These tabloids have responded to a demand for information and entertainment among the majority black population in the country whose interests were arguably still being marginalised by the mainstream print media (Wasserman 2010). The tabloids have created a mass readership out of the poor and working class (although upwardly mobile) black majority of the country. Because of their brash sensationalism and perceived disregard for mainstream professional journalistic values, the tabloids initially met with controversy and strong resistance from the professional journalistic establishment, although attitudes seem to have softened to the extent that there is now a category

in the premier national newspaper awards, the Standard Bank Sikuville Awards (previously the Mondi Awards) for “popular journalism” (PDMSA 2013).

Academic studies of South African tabloids (cf. Strelitz & Steenveld 2005; Wasserman 2008; 2010) have however until now focused on those newspapers that are published in English and Afrikaans with a national footprint. During the same period, a Zulu-language tabloid, *Isolezwe*, read mostly in the KwaZulu-Natal province, showed phenomenal growth. The newspaper was launched in 2002, and showed year-on-year growth of 21% over the first five years of its existence – this while English daily newspaper circulation was stagnating nationally (Tolsi 2007). Equally spectacular was the rise of a Sunday edition of a much older Zulu-language newspaper, the 104-year old *Ilanga*, as *Ilanga langesonto*, in 2005, which initially showed growth of around 61% per year (Tolsi 2007), and outsold *Isolezwe*’s Sunday edition (Media Update 2009). *Isolezwe*’s weekday edition however beat its older rival in the province (Media Update 2009). The most recent Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) figures show a sustained rise for *Isolezwe*, while *Ilanga*’s circulation showed a slight decline (Moodie 2013). The national Sunday paper, *Sunday Times*, which experimented with a Zulu edition consisting mostly of selected translations from its English sister paper, closed down its Zulu edition in 2013 as it could not compete in the tabloid market with their localised copy that relate to specific audience interests (Moodie 2013).

The continued strong rise in popularity of Zulu-language newspapers, especially Zulu-language tabloids, in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa suggests a stronger relationship between these publications and their audiences that would be important to research in order to complement the existing work on the audience reception of tabloid newspapers. Such a study could furthermore contribute to the limited literature on indigenous language media in South Africa, and begin providing answers to the question of why (at least some) Zulu-language newspapers continue to be successful while newspapers in other indigenous languages like isiXhosa and Sesotho have died out (Salawu 2013:74). Although isiZulu is the largest mother tongue in South Africa (22.7 % of the population) according to the 2011 Census (followed by isiXhosa, 16%, and Afrikaans 13.5%) (Salawu 2013: 74), the margin between it and other indigenous language mother tongue speakers is not large enough to explain the success of newspapers in isiZulu. Nor can it merely be a case of appealing to readers who cannot access English-language publications, as *Isolezwe* seems to have lured readers away from English-language media (Salawu 2013: 89). The cultural assertiveness of isiZulu readers and their position in relation to power and resource allocation, as well as income levels, are additional factors for consideration when attempting to assess the success of isiZulu-language newspapers relative to other indigenous languages (Ndlovu 2011: 278).

Studies of tabloid newspapers in South Africa and elsewhere in the world (cf. Bird 1992; Conboy 2006) have repeatedly emphasised the importance of the relationship between tabloids and their community of readers as a factor of their commercial success. This relationship is largely predicated on language in the broader sense. Language actually constructs an ideal reader, as Conboy (2006: 14) points out

[l]anguage is employed across the tabloid paper in a systematic way to build a composite version of the vocabulary and style of their ideal average reader; a sort of vernacular ventriloquism.

When examining the success of *Isolezwe* in terms of its relationship with its audience, the fact that it is written in an indigenous language with unique purchase on its readers' cultural identity, as well as the rhetorical strategies and news discourses it employs to construct its ideal reader in relation to newspapers in other languages, should therefore form a central point of focus in a reception study.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article aims to explore the reasons for the phenomenal rise of the Zulu language-based *Isolezwe* in a slumping English and Afrikaans-language newspaper market. While a comprehensive explanation of all these reasons would fall outside the scope of a single article, the assumption that language use may be seen as a key reason for *Isolezwe*'s success, prompts an exploration of theories that integrate issues of media usage, reception and cultural identities. Harwood's (1997) integration of Uses and Gratifications (U&G) and Social Identity Theory (SIT) in the analysis of young adults' television viewing choices was found to provide a good theoretical starting point in this regard. Given that *Isolezwe* readers are equally a social/cultural category who select a particular (news) media type to gratify certain sets of needs or motivations, this theoretical framework is applicable in expounding their practice of *Isolezwe* selectivity in the sea of many other newspaper options available to them, especially in KwaZulu-Natal.

Harwood's conceptual postulation and empirical conclusions are that individuals unquestionably have many motivations for seeking out particular media messages. He argues that, though motivations for viewing particular media have been considered primarily at the individual level and the interpersonal level, they have rarely been considered at the collective level. To overcome this inadequacy, Harwood (1997: 1) integrates U&G and SIT to posit that "individuals seek out particular messages which support their social identities (i.e., provide positive social comparisons with out-groups) and avoid messages which do not support their identities". Harwood (1997) demonstrates how social identity mediates television-viewing choices. Whereas Harwood focuses on age as a demographic

mediator of social identity, this article draws on social identity, manifesting itself in the form of ethnicity/culture and social class, as primary driver for reader preference of *Isolezwe* over other newspapers.

Building on Harwood's observations, the authors' conceptual premise is that individuals' conscious and voluntary associations with imagined *in-groups* – via choosing specific media (in this case a newspaper) – are socially and historically constructed. A preference for a particular newspaper, which distinguishes itself on the basis of language, can therefore be seen as a manifestation of a *lived* social/cultural identity. Readers' associations with *in-groups* and disassociations with *out-groups* could mirror ethnic, gender, racial and class identity struggles historically produced by a particular sociocultural environment. The sociocultural environment of post-apartheid South Africa can condition newspaper readers to select and consume texts within a particular horizon of expectations.

This argument does not ignore *Isolezwe* readers' individual agency regarding media choice, nor does it subdue choice and consumption to only the social structures of socialisation and identity construction. Readers make choices actively, but do so within a limited range of options that are socially and historically constructed. The choice of a particular medium is made within readers' frames of reference, which are socially-historically produced. In other words, *Isolezwe* readers choose and consume newspapers not as empty vessels or culturally/socially isolated beings, but as culturally embedded social subjects. As such, they are beings with identity, who have over time acquired cognitions, attitudes and behaviours relating to their political and cultural environment (Atkin & Gantz 1978: 184).

Apart from the reception of *Isolezwe* via lenses of cultural identity and gratification of personal cognitive needs, the choice of *Isolezwe* is mediated by readers' conceptions of class status or social position in a manner that is particular to South African history. This assumption then prompts us to ask: What is it about *Isolezwe* that makes it the most preferred newspaper by a particular cultural group? Conversely, what is it about this group of readers that it has its needs gratified by *Isolezwe*?

These questions are asked not only in terms of how *Isolezwe* compares to other English and Afrikaans-language tabloids, but also in comparison to other Zulu-language newspapers that used to be or still are in the market: *Ilanga*, *Sunday Times Zulu Edition*, and *UmAfrika*. To this extent, focus group participants (see below) were asked to talk about their choices not only in relation to *Isolezwe*, but to the non-preference of other newspapers, English, Afrikaans and Zulu.

The questions regarding the choice of *Isolezwe* are not merely to do with consumer options exercised in a market environment. Choosing and reading a newspaper is a social signifying act, and these acts have implications for the

circulation of meanings in society. As Fiske (2001: 248) notes: "... distribution of power in society is paralleled by the distribution of meanings in texts (choice), and struggles for social power are paralleled by semiotic struggles for meanings". This understanding underpins the methodology followed to answer the research questions.

METHODOLOGY

For this exploratory study, 33 focus group participants were selected using snowball sampling. These participants were spread over five groups. Given that one of the authors of this article is a first-language Zulu speaker, a subscriber to *Isolezwe*, familiar with the cultural and political dynamics of KwaZulu-Natal, and has research contacts in the province, three *Isolezwe* readers were identified so as to recruit other readers of Zulu newspapers, particularly those of *Isolezwe*. Because other recruiters would rely on local social networks to generate more respondents, snowball sampling became an appropriate choice for this aspect. Two groups were recruited from the Durban University of Technology (DUT), consisting of students and cleaners. Recruiters went on to recruit participant educators at Edgewood College, and other recruiters went from house to house in the village of Kwanyuswa.

In the conceptualisation of the study, the authors were conscious of the fact that certain forms of social identity (language and ethnicity) could hide other forms of social identity (class). Recruiters were selected on the basis that they could bring in readers who not only spoke Zulu, but also represented specific social classes. The authors used academic qualification, place of abode, and type of occupation loosely as proxy for measuring the location of participants in the South African socio-economic strata. Snowball sampling is a subset of purposive sampling, and in the case of this study the purpose was to select focus group participants who were Zulu-speaking; *Isolezwe*-reading; lived in rural, township and suburban geographical spaces; male and female; and who were from diverse social classes and LSMs best fitting the profile of an *Isolezwe* reader.

Focus groups were conducted in May 2012. The first group was made up of nine young adult males, aged between 25 and 30. One worked as an assistant motor mechanic, two were taxi drivers, one was a taxi owner, one a spaza shop owner, one a security guard, two unemployed, and one was a manual labourer in a fencing firm. These participants lived in the rural/semi-rural area of Kwanyuswa. Attempts were made to balance the gender split in this group, but they failed on grounds of household responsibilities. The authors compensated for this in other groups. Constituting the second group were eight professional educators based at the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Edgewood College. The five females and three males were aged between 30 and 45. Two were doctoral candidates, three held

Master's degrees and three higher diplomas. Constituting the third group were middle-aged members of the cleaning staff at the Durban University of Technology (DUT). There were seven women and one man. None of the group members had a post-matric qualification. The fourth group consisted of eight DUT students, four males and four females, aged 19 to 23. These students were pursuing different degrees across university faculties.

As briefly noted in the theoretical section above, different newspapers distributed in the province of KwaZulu-Natal were brought to the discussions to prompt participants to answer the question why and how they read *Isolezwe*, how this tabloid was viewed in relation to other newspapers, and why particular preferences existed.

For data analysis, a process of coding and development of category names was followed (Glaser & Strauss 1967). This involved perusing line by line, sentence by sentence, and paragraph by paragraph already transcribed voice recordings of focus groups. Once each set of data from the transcriptions had been segmented through marking it with a colour-coded highlighter, the segmented data was transformed into analytical units or category names. This process continued until saturation was reached and there was no need to continue (Glaser & Strauss 1967). The category names or themes that emerged out of this traditional way of coding are presented below.

DISCUSSION

As the authors set out to explore why the newspaper was and continued to be highly popular, participants needed to respond to the question why they thought *Isolezwe* is popular among its readers and why they specifically choose it. The set of answers that participants provided pointed to the degree to which the newspaper resonates with and reinforces their internalised lived cultural identity in terms of ethnicity and language. One young male participant from Kwanyuswa pointed this out when he reasoned that

... 'if we look at ethnic groups in South Africa, the group that is proud of its culture is Zulus ... the language cannot be separated from culture. If I want know about the affairs of the Zulu monarch, I don't think *Sunday Times* can feature the monarch on the front page. If it (*Sunday Times*) wants to write about monarch, it will write a small story on the back page. I want to know that since he is our King how does he think, what does he want to do. These are some of the things why isiZulu (language) and Zulu newspapers are so successful in KZN.

Not only has the reader quoted above constructed a sense of self via ethnicity in comparison to other *out-groups* (ethnic groups) (see Harwood above), but ethnic identity is further manifested through conscious discrimination against *Sunday*

Times in preference of *Isolezwe* on the following basis that also speak to, in this context, the link between cultural identity and U&G (see theory above). *Sunday Times*, from the above, is perceived to be capable of gratifying this reader's quest for a particular kind of news story/content: affairs of the Zulu monarch that he has a particular cultural affinity to ("since he is our king"). In this reader's sense of cultural being, *Sunday Times*, however, cannot be selected for consumption as it may be produced in the Zulu language, but its content is not an extension of Zuluness in the manner *Isolezwe* is. (We may be cautious of generalising from this single view as representative of the larger attitude towards the *Sunday Times Zulu Edition*, but it eventually closed down.) Furthermore, the reader in the quotation conceives the popularity of the newspaper on the basis of Zulu pride, not necessarily on the possibility, say, of the newspaper's superior marketing strategies.

The centrality and intensity of cultural identity in the popularity of *Isolezwe*, noted above, is accentuated by one of the following participants who made reference to the fact that even those readers who are of relative high social status or middle class do not lose their sense of being Zulu. This older male participant from Edgewood College argued that

... even that section of the population that is educated – doctors, professors, etc. they never lose that they are Zulus by birth and are proud of their culture. The more educated you are, the more you become proud of your culture.

Isolezwe then becomes, among other things, the theatre in which being "proud of your culture" is acted out. The necessity to be "proud of your culture" is not only a historical imposition on a particular social subject, but also gratifies one's desire to maintain particular kinds of cultural and social relations. It is a sense of wanting to be "seen as", a politics of belonging that also marks identification with media in other African contexts (Nyamnjoh 2005). The role *Isolezwe* plays in this regard could not only be noted among the older generation (such as the respondent quoted above), but also among young adults who were interviewed at DUT and who had gone to previously "white" Model C schools. They displayed a yearning to (re)connect with and assert their cultural identity:

I think that if you read in isiZulu you learn words which you didn't know, in a way it improves your isiZulu vocabulary, rather than reading something which you already knew since you have been learning in English in school; it makes sense to know about your own language (Young female, DUT).

The foregoing would not be necessary in a cultural, social and historical environment where a particular kind of identity, specifically Zulu identity, has

no value (Carton, Laband & Sithole 2009). Zuluness is lived and given value in KwaZulu-Natal, not only by the intention of the University of KwaZulu-Natal to make isiZulu one of its languages of instruction, but also by an annual Zulu stand-up comedy festival. The Zulu-language Ukhozi FM is the largest radio station in the country, and another radio station, P4 (aimed at younger listeners) had to change its language policy from English-only to include Zulu. Zuluness of forms is a product of cultivation of ubuZulu or “Zuluness” (sense, characteristics and positive consciousness of being Zulu) over the years, for diverse cultural and political reasons (Carton *et al.* 2009). The latter includes the political campaign for President Jacob Zuma in which he was branded as a “100% Zulu Boy”.

From the responses from the focus groups the sense is created that Zulu as a language and a sense of being is thriving in the cultural and political fields where it has high cultural capital value. Speaking isiZulu and identifying with being Zulu enables one to become part of a social and political *in-group*. This contemporary “need to know Zulu” and maintain cultural relations with Zulus is manifested even among non-Zulu readers who read *Isolezwe* as the following reader, who is originally from Swaziland, shows:

I read *Isolezwe* especially because I am Swati and speak siSwati whereas all the people around me speak isiZulu. I use *Isolezwe*, my family (kids) also reads it. Sometimes they come to me asking for meaning of some terms. So I can say that even though *Isolezwe* is in isiZulu, it is readable (Older female, Edgewood).

The respondent’s reference to the use of *Isolezwe* to teach her children the language is an indication of the role of socialising agencies like families and schools in popularising Zulu, and by extension, *Isolezwe*:

In this university we emphasise the issue of mother tongue in grade 1. From grade 1 to grade 3 they should be taught in mother tongue. Those kids will be encouraged to read in isiZulu. So, I think all of that will motivate people to use isiZulu. My daughter is learning isiZulu at school. So, sometimes she asks me to give her a part of a newspaper to read in class (Older female, Edgewood).

Isolezwe then, as other Zulu media, derives its popularity partly from the cultural environment in which it is embedded and where the Zulu language and sense of being Zulu are valued. But the popularity of the newspaper cannot only be explained in terms of ethnicity. The social class of the readers also comes into play.

Cultural solidarity and social fissures

The choice of *Isolezwe*, in the context of both cultural identity and social class, is produced by the comparative evaluation of Zulu and English in terms of their empowering and redemptive capacity. It is here that one begins to see different motivations for consuming *Isolezwe*. For the set of readers who conceive of themselves as not “educated enough” to “know English”, *Isolezwe* is perceived as empowering and redemptive in relation to the gratification of cognitive needs:

Another thing brother is that not all of us got a chance to go to school². There are people who don't understand English. An old lady who likes reading a newspaper, she won't buy an English newspaper because she won't understand what is at all about - but isiZulu is easier so it helps even those who didn't go to school (Young male, Kwanyuswa).

Not only is English, in the South African context, associated with being educated, but English newspapers are also associated with a particular group of people in terms of both class and race. The image of social mobility afforded by English is also one of the reasons offered by the (now late) publisher of *Daily Sun*, Deon du Plessis, for restricting the content of that tabloid to English (Wasserman 2010). In the light of the dominance of English in the media, the choice of a Zulu newspaper then becomes an association with an in-group (in a particular province where Zuluness can still provide some advantage over and above English) against the out-group. It is an act of joining an imagined community (Anderson 1991) of “us”, or what Straubhaar (1991) referred to as “cultural proximity” as a factor in the preference for local media content in the context of media globalisation.

In the quotation immediately above, the young black male's perception of the accommodative nature of Zulu newspapers and the articulation of it in solidarity with the other members of the “imagined community” who “can't speak English” speaks volumes of the orientation to these newspapers and attitude towards indigenous language media. Coincidentally, young black males in a previous study on television news (Ndlovu 2011) consciously chose news on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), as opposed to E.TV news, on the grounds that SABC accommodated African languages.

These responses illustrate how media perform cultural and communitarian functions that extend their use as mere conduits for current affairs. IsiZulu newspapers are seen in solidarity with “us”, the in-group versus the out-group.

Despite a shared cultural identification with the language, Zulu readers should not be seen as a monolithic group. Differences in this group are articulated not only in terms of social class, as shown above, but also in terms of “taste”, “sensibilities” and “(political) ideology”. For example, readers' reaction were explored to a

section of *Ilanga* that claims to promote authentic femininity or the purity of young Zulu maidens. This section of bare-breasted young women, called “Natural Beauty”, was accepted by some readers as having educational value for young girls. Older focus group members and young rural males tended to share this view:

If you compare... you can see that a woman shown in *Ilanga*, despite that she is ‘naked’ with breasts, you can see she is a pure Zulu; you will see that she is not a prostitute rather she is a pure, pure Zulu. I have seen that the entire *Daily Sun* is filled with prostitutes (Young male, Kwanyuswa).

Ilanga’s natural beauty section teaches and encourages our youth to keep their bodies clean/pure, be able to use them as source of pride and show them off to other people... Some of the girls you can see they are still virgins, which encourage our youths not to let themselves to be touched by boys (Older female, DUT).

The positive reaction by elders and some young males to the representation of some forms of Zulu femininity was rejected by young females at DUT. They argued that *Ilanga* showed young women as backward:

No one shows their bodies like that anymore; even when you have *umemulo* [loosely translated it means the Zulu version of a 21st birthday party for a young female – authors] you cover you breast (Young female, DUT).

Young female participants asked why boys were not asked to show their purity. While young female readers accepted the appearance of these young women in traditional attire, they rejected the notion of not covering up. For them, tradition has to adjust to modern times. These young female readers found *Isolezwe* ideologically progressive in comparison to *Ilanga*.

The differences among Zulu readers can also be seen in the realm of language use by the Zulu newspapers available to them. *Isolezwe*’s success, in part, lies in its strategic appropriation and incorporation of those language styles and manner of speaking commonly used among urban (upwardly mobile) isiZulu speakers. This variant of isiZulu positions *Isolezwe* as urban, modern, and upwardly mobile. This use of the Zulu language has traction among Zulus in particular spaces. For example, at some point, one of the biggest Zulu media, Ukhozi FM, showed signs of losing listeners (Ndlovu 2011). Welcome Nzimande, Ukhozi’s then station manager, blamed the decline on the radio station’s tendency to speak “pure” Zulu in a high register. Nzimande (see Ndlovu 2011) said:

The thing with youth is that they have their street lingo which they like being spoken to in. I have been criticized for letting some of our DJs

slip it in from time to time but the bottom line is we can't be purist at the expense of our listeners.

The recent eventual collapse of both *Sunday Times*' IsiZulu edition and *UmAfrika* (a Friday newspaper) cannot only be blamed on their relatively formal and serious news content, but also on their use of formal language, which did not keep up with the more hybridised versions of Zulu spoken by urban youth:

Even now, you can hear us mixing it with English. So, it is slowly changing bit by bit. It won't be the isiZulu known by old generation. There is this Zulu child, he speaks only English, he can't speak isiZulu, he can't even write in IsiZulu. Those who learn it (isiZulu) from mixed (black and white) schools the kind of isiZulu they learn, is not like that from rural areas, that I think will influence the writing of isiZulu papers (Young female, DUT).

In this context, *Isolezwe* is winning the battle of language registers. The success of *Isolezwe*, in part, on the strength of language register represents broader social changes in the KwaZulu-Natal region as a result of urbanisation, "middleclassisation" and transformation of socialising agencies (cf. Fourie 2013). The former editor of *Isolezwe*, Thulani Mbatha, puts it as follows: "The modernising Zulu is someone who may go back home to the rural areas to slaughter a cow to the *amadlozi* (ancestors), but is as equally comfortable taking his family out for dinner and a movie and in a shopping mall" (Tolsi 2007: 2).

These differences in how readers respond to different variants and registers of isiZulu, linked to social position and generational groups, suggest that the task of Zulu media to relate to cultural identity is not a simplistic one, as the linguistic group is not monolithic and the language itself is dynamic and will continue to undergo

Rhetorical strategies

Although readers' responses, like the ones above, would probably make it seem as if social/cultural identity on its own is an overarching motivator for the selection of *Isolezwe* over other newspapers, there are other motivating factors. To suggest that isiZulu-speaking consumers choose Zulu newspapers only because they are Zulu, would be reductionist and essentialist. On the strength of evidence produced by focus groups interviews, *Isolezwe* readers are also motivated by the gratification of other uses, e.g. surveillance of occurrences of the day; relaxation and diversion needs; and the need for social prestige – to appear well-informed in conversations with peers.

But in the end, the effortlessness of reading IsiZulu papers, expressed largely by those participants of working class and rural backgrounds, suggest the extent to which "semantic noise avoidance" is a motivating factor. According

to Steinberg (2002), “Semantic noise is a form of psychological disruption that occurs when unfamiliar terms (language) are used in explanation or when cultural and social differences distort meaning between the sender and the recipient”. In the words of a participant:

In a Zulu newspaper everything is easy to read. You read something in a language you speak; in English newspapers, there are difficult terms which you need a dictionary for explanation of their meaning. Even if you do understand the content but if there is one term which is hard to understand, the meaning is gone (Young male, Kwanyuswa).

Semantic noise avoidance is not only articulated by readers through choosing Zulu newspapers over English or Afrikaans ones, but also through selecting *Isolezwe* over other competing Zulu language newspapers on the basis of language register, as mentioned above. Some readers further differentiate between those newspapers that are “easy”, as compared to those that are “difficult” to read in isiZulu. Apart from reiterating the need to view the isiZulu readership as heterogeneous, these distinctions between linguistic registers also amount to a rhetorical strategy on behalf of the newspaper to resonate with particular readers. This becomes clear when respondents distinguish between *Isolezwe* and other isiZulu media:

Isolezwe’s writing is readable and clearer. If you page through *Ilanga*, the writing is different. They both use isiZulu. The difference is the way they use the language (Young male, Kwanyuswa).

Isolezwe’s writing... it is vivid and simple, they report on a story in a straightforward manner (Young male, Kwanyuswa).

Because a systematic content analysis was not included in the methodology of this article, a comparison between *Ilanga* and *Isolezwe* falls beyond the scope of the current study, save to say that the responses indicate a linguistic spectrum within the use of isiZulu that has important implications for understanding the newspapers’ place in a social context.

Audience-centred definition of news

The popularity of IsiZulu newspapers among their isiZulu-speaking readers does not rest solely on the reduction of semantic noise and them being an extension of a particular social identity of an imagined IsiZulu community; their popularity is also enhanced by these newspapers’ clear editorial agenda of an audience-based definition of news and the resultant congruence between newspaper content and readers’ needs. In the words of a participant:

Another thing which I think makes isiZulu newspapers popular is because every morning when people think of buying a newspaper they

think of *Ilanga* and/or *Isolezwe* because everything they read in them is local; they won't hear that somebody from somewhere whom they have no knowledge of (Young male, Kwanyuswa).

So, isiZulu newspapers are succeeding where other media are failing in terms of audience-centred news. Newspaper organisations regularly undertake audience research to ascertain readers' interests and needs in their news provision. However, scholarly research (Harrington 1998; Raeymaeckers 2004) argues that despite research projects aimed at determining audiences' definitions of news, there are always *incongruences* between what news providers offer and what audiences demand (Raeymaeckers 2004: 223). The reason why news providers pay little attention to audience research findings is, according to Harrington (1998: 473), "... because it raises the question about their power to construct the news for the public". Gans already concluded in 1980 that journalists neither understand their audiences nor incorporate their feedback. What is news is a product of a journalist's judgement. In the similar vein, Hagen (1999: 131) pointed out that "journalists make their decisions based on, among other things, what they perceive to be appropriate for the public". Accentuating this point, Branston and Stafford (1999: 162) argue that "like most television professionals, journalists make programmes for other television professionals, partly because their sense of the rest of their audience is very flimsy" (cf. Schlesinger 1987).

Serious vs human interest

It may be counter-intuitive considering the frequent criticism against tabloid newspapers that they provide their readers with diversion from politics, but seriously politically-minded participants interviewed for this article – readers who have a strong interest in political news, particularly males – indicated a preference for *Isolezwe* above *Ilanga*. Older educated females also generally prefer *Isolezwe*, and special features in *Ilanga*, such as features on the economy and a healthy lifestyle. This group (see below) is not only interested in these features for personal reasons; they use them for educational purposes, as the educated female participants in this study were teachers. This use of a tabloid newspaper to read about politics defies the usual criticism that tabloids divert readers from politics, but resonates with Wasserman's (2010) findings that readers of *Daily Sun* recognised themselves in stories that covered the "politics of the everyday" – events and happenings that resonate with their daily lived experience and that can be read to have a political dimension. The preference for politics among readers of *Isolezwe* seemed to be directed at mainstream politics as well:

I read *Isolezwe* because its stories are about politics and I am into politics (Young male, DUT).

Younger females expressed a preference for entertainment (club life, celebrities), which *Isolezwe NgeSonto* (*Isolezwe on Sunday*) provides:

I like the Sunday *Isolezwe* because it contains Saturday's [cultural] events (DUT, female student).

Participants who were into politics and who were looking for trustworthy political coverage tended to prefer *Isolezwe*, and avoid *Ilanga*. *Ilanga* was perceived as writing disproportionately more about people's private lives, rather than about serious political issues. The following quotations speak to these issues:

The thing about these media people is that they publish news in a way that they appear to be true only to find those stories are not true... I think *Isolezwe* establish the facts first before publishing. I trust *Isolezwe* compared to other newspapers (Older female, Edgewood).

In *Ilanga Sunday* focus much on people's privates and lifestyles; they publish stories about people's private lives (Older female, Edgewood).

CONCLUSION

This article did not seek to provide comprehensive answers to *Isolezwe's* popularity upon which predictions for future sustainability can be based. The aim of the discussion was merely to explore the views of readers who expressed a preference for *Isolezwe* in comparison to other Zulu-language media and in comparison to English and Afrikaans tabloids, with the aim of identifying certain broad categories of uses and gratification within a specific framework of social and cultural identity. Focus group participants argued that for as long as there are consumers of *Isolezwe*, and isiZulu newspapers in general, who are not consuming news in isiZulu on the Internet and are not on social media, the physical copy will be around for a long time and the future of these newspapers is sustainable. As one respondent articulated it:

Papers won't collapse because children as they grow up they see us, their parents, buying newspapers. They don't learn this isiZulu at their schools. People send their children to white schools, but they want them to know more about their language, hence they are compelled to buy newspapers, like my daughter she didn't do isiZulu at school but she can read it (Older female, Edgewood).

Participants further point to schools and parents as the custodians of the Zulu language, and as socialising agencies. They argued that these socialising agencies will ensure the future of these newspapers. The authors of the article share the view, as pointed out above, that *Isolezwe* and Zulu media in general thrive in

the province of KwaZulu-Natal where isiZulu provides a certain cultural and political currency that may not be equally valued in other parts of the country. The responses in this regard therefore have to be seen within a specific cultural-geographic context.

Focus group participants, however, also pointed out, and the authors fully agree, that the sustainability of *Isolezwe* depends on keeping up with the audience's news interests and technological use of media. *Isolezwe* has to keep up with the young generation, particularly the post-1994 so-called Born Frees who have a different frame of reference to generations that grew up under apartheid:

I don't see *Isolezwe* selling or growing fast if it does not change with the generation which is going to start reading newspapers now. The generation growing up now, is mixit generation. It does not read entirely; it likes shortcuts. It uses electronic media rather than print media. I see all these newspapers being affected by this. Unless... take their content and put in online. Another thing that is going to negatively affect newspapers... the generation growing up now is not interested in those things which we are interested in now (Young male, Kwanyuswa).

Lastly, Zulu readers of *Isolezwe* read it to gratify a specific set of uses. In this regard, the cultural identity underpinning the current preference for *Isolezwe* should categorically not be understood in essentialist or reductionist terms, but in relation to a specific social context. As this context, and the determinants of a dynamic cultural identity shifts over time, so may the needs of readers – which may in turn impact on the future popularity, or otherwise, of *Isolezwe*.

Endnotes

- ¹ The translations were made from isiZulu by one of the co-authors, Musawenkosi Ndlovu.
- ² This should NOT be read to mean illiteracy; “school” should be understood in the sense of having been in school to the degree that you are fluent in English. Simply, the participant is saying I did not go very far or advance higher in school.

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