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# Encoding politeness in African urban youth languages: evidence from Southern Africa

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**Abstract:** African urban youth languages (AUYLs) often function as languages of resistance and “anti-languages”, establishing alternative semiotic spaces. In this paper, we analyse the encoding of politeness and respect in AUYLs, drawing on examples from Southern Africa, and show that they have complex systems of politeness marking, comparable to the matrix languages on which they draw. This includes different types of address forms, polite reference forms, and the use of avoidance language. There are lexical and morphological strategies to achieve politeness in AUYLs and these can be used to express both negative and positive politeness. The picture that emerges from this study is consistent with previous findings showing the structural complexity of AUYLs. However, the paper suggests that the presence of complex politeness marking in AUYLs may reflect the complex, and at times ambiguous, relation of AUYLs with established, mainstream norms.

**Keywords:** politeness marking; African urban youth languages; language contact; Sheng; S’ncamtho; Tsotsitaal

**Igamfu:** Iz’ncamtho zontanga basematoni eAfrica ezingwa *African urban youth languages* ngesiVeti zivamise ukuspana njengeringaz zesmoko oro ezasedanyaneni. Ziyi-way amagents azikhulula ngayo kutaal zabothayima labo oledi. Kuleli’bhampiri sishesha ngokuspana kwe-*politeness le-respect* ekuringeni kontanga, sisampula iz’ncamtho zeMzansi waseAfrica, siyabonisa ukuthi i-*politeness* ibhaya kuringaz, tholukuthi icishe ifane lesiyithola ekusampeni kwabothayima labo oledi. I-*politeness* kuz’ncamtho itshunwa ngendlela ezibhaya ezifana lendlela zokukhodana, istayela samagama angajampisiyo, lamagama oku avoyida ismoko. Kuneztayela zokutshuna amagama oro ukwakhiwa kwawo ukuze le-*politeness* ispane kahle. Kukhona le-*politeness* yesijita besekuba yile yokuskrekana. Esikufrustana kuleli’bhampiri kungu 6 lo 9 lalokhu okutholwe ngabanye ngez’ncamtho ukuthi zi-complexnyana lazo njengokuringa konke. Ibhampiri leli lifrustana ukuthi lobucomplexnyana be-*politeness* kuz’ncamtho bubonisa i-*relations* ezicomplex lokuspanisana phakathi kwez’ncamtho letaal zabothayima labo oledi.

## 1 Introduction

African urban youth languages (AUYLs) have become a well-established research topic in African linguistics (Hurst-Harosh and Kanana Erastus 2018; Kießling and Mous 2004; Mesthrie et al. 2021). There is lively theoretical

We opted to include here an abstract for the paper in S’ncamtho. Given some of the terminology involved, this was not an easy task. As an illustrative example we present here discussion related to the term for ‘abstract’ itself for which, after some discussion with fellow speakers of S’ncamtho, author Sambulo Ndlovu suggested *igamfu*. One of the terms considered was *ibrifu* which comes from the English *brief* but has come to predominantly mean lies in S’ncamtho and as such, was decided not to be entirely appropriate for this purpose. An alternative explored was *ingqampungampu* which is related to an old Ndebele term for highlights of a story (*amangqampungampu*). In the end we settled on *igamfu* which is a Ndebele ideophone for cutting a story short. This seemed fitting for an academic abstract and is also a term which is more recognized in S’ncamtho given its use in the phrase *le awuthi igamfu yihwaa* ‘this guy has no shortening’. We do not explain all of the terminological choices involved in writing the abstract but felt this was a nice exploration of some of the issues involved and the background to this decision in particular.

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debate about how to best analyse and understand AUYLs, regarding structural and sociolinguistic aspects of AUYLs, and about different examples and varieties of AUYLs from across the continent.

In terms of their social and societal functions, AUYLs are often associated with resistance ideologies and with the notion of “anti-language” (Halliday 1976). These functions are typically concerned with establishing alternative semiotic and cultural-social spaces, and with challenging, subverting, and cancelling established social hierarchies and norms. In this context, it is interesting to examine strategies for expressing politeness and respect in AUYLs, as politeness in language is typically considered to establish, maintain, or reinforce hierarchical social relations. The question addressed in this paper is how politeness is expressed in AUYLs and what lexical and structural means are harnessed for this purpose. In particular, we will show that linguistic politeness strategies not very different from those found in other African languages (see e.g. Marten and Kula 2021) are also found in the AUYLs we discuss in the paper. Empirically, we focus on language ecologies that have a high presence of Bantu languages in Southern Africa, which reflects our expertise as authors and which also allows us to draw comparisons over a broad geographic area where related (and as a result structurally similar) languages are found.

We discuss lexical and morphosyntactic strategies employed for encoding politeness, including compounding and the use of noun class morphology to mark politeness or respect both in the marking of participants and of referents. Functionally, we look at terms of address, person reference, and avoidance.

Moreover, we consider the broader implications of the existence of politeness strategies in youth languages and to what extent they are similar to or different from the expression of politeness in African languages, particularly in the Bantu languages from which the AUYLs examined here draw. We also raise questions related to the role of youth languages in these contexts, who speaks them, and for what purposes.

In many ways, the present study is of a preliminary nature, and we are aware that it could be extended in different ways. Three areas are particularly worth mentioning in this respect. First, here we develop a broad typological comparison and analyse politeness marking in AUYLs against the background of politeness marking in Bantu languages more generally, rather than developing fine-grained, contrastive analyses of the specific (Bantu) languages which the AUYLs are based on or studying specific transference effects from different languages onto a particular AUYL in detail. Second, we focus here on lexical and morphosyntactic means of expression of politeness, rather than wider, pragmatic strategies in which these expressions are embedded. Third, in terms of our pragmatic analysis, our discussion centres around the two key terms of positive and negative politeness (see Section 3), even though we are aware that other concepts could be usefully employed for a further understanding of the data. We hope that our study stimulates further work, and that areas such as these will be addressed in the future.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides a short overview of AUYLs and Section 3 introduces key concepts of linguistic politeness. Section 4 examines the use of terms of address for encoding politeness. Section 5 looks at how plurality is used to mark politeness. Section 6 discusses lexical avoidance strategies. Section 7 presents a wider comparative overview, looking at the broader encoding of politeness in Bantu languages. Section 8 represents a concise conclusion and highlights avenues for future work.

## 2 African urban youth languages

The presence of particular ways of speaking among young people in Africa has been noted since at least the first half of the twentieth century (see Hurst 2008; Mazrui 1995) and several studies have been conducted over the last four decades. Within this research tradition, youth languages have been reported in countries such as Cameroon (Camfranglais), Kenya (Sheng), Uganda (Luyaaye), South Africa (Tsotsitaal), and Zimbabwe (Iscamtho). In a seminal paper, Kießling and Mous (2004) provide an overview of these youth languages, bringing them to the attention of a wider audience. They propose a broad characterization of AUYLs as involving linguistic manipulations at various levels of linguistic structure (predominantly phonological, morphological, and lexical) and as serving a particular sociolinguistic function which can include “resistance identity” and an attempt at reversal of norms, but also “project identity” and finally even the promotion of new norms. Youth languages often play a central role in youth mobilization, as illustrated, for example, by the use of Sheng in Kenyan political discourse

(Githiora 2018) or the Bobi Wine campaign in the 2021 Ugandan elections and its characteristic use of Luyaaye (Taylor and Namagembe 2020; *The Economist* 2018).

Structurally, AUYLs are often characterized by the way in which they draw on the rich multilingual resources associated with African urban linguistic ecologies. Sheng, for example, is often seen as drawing on English, Swahili, and Kenyan community languages, and even though structurally it retains a strong Swahili base, there is extensive lexical enrichment from a range of sources (Githiora 2018). AUYLs also typically show very high linguistic productivity, with a continuous flow and high turnover of lexical innovation, the creation of new terms, and high amounts of lexical homonymy, with many terms referring to the same referent, in particular in high density semantic domains such as those related to money or romantic and sexual relations, but also when it comes to terms related to specific styles associated with AUYLs, interactive terms such as greetings, and terms of relationship and camaraderie (Mesthrie and Hurst 2013: 123). Furthermore, AUYLs typically involve a high degree of linguistic manipulation, that is, the deliberate change or rearrangement of linguistic structure. For example, there are many instances of reversing the order of phonemes or morphemes at the word level: Standard Swahili *-kula* ‘eat’ becomes *-laku* in Sheng; and Standard Swahili *sigara* ‘cigarette’ becomes *ngife*, from the English loanword *fag*, which becomes adapted to Swahili syllable structure by addition of a final vowel /i/, so *fegi*, which is inverted and then placed into class 9/10 with the nasal prefix *n-* (Githiora 2002).

Sociolinguistically, youth languages have sometimes been identified as expressions of subculture and as anti-languages (Artha and Irawan 2022; Halliday 1976), and linked to resistance identity (Kießling and Mous 2004). Anti-languages, as noted by Halliday (1976), are used to construct alternative societies, and AUYLs can be seen as providing an alternative space for often marginalized, younger speakers of African languages (McKenzie 2021; Storch 2011). Even though the alternative space delineated by AUYLs is construed around age (rather than, for example, gender, class, or ethnicity), the interpretation of “youth” and physical age is fluid, and does not necessarily imply a tension between younger and older generations. What is more important is an ambiguous relation to mainstream power structures, from which speakers of AUYL often feel excluded, and as a result they seek to create alternatives to these systems, yet also wish to maintain the option of retaining or gaining access to them.

Under the umbrella of anti-language, youth languages are often assumed to involve the deliberate flaunting of “standard” or “normative” language rules, to play with taboos, and in some instances, to be deliberately designed to shock. The existence of politeness strategies in youth languages is therefore an interesting area of research, as politeness strategies can be constitutive of alternative spaces but can also be seen as a link to the matrix languages and the associated social structures. In this paper, we show that youth languages use a range of strategies to encode politeness.

### 3 Marking of politeness and respect

Language is a key tool for interaction with the world, and one of the central domains of this interaction is the structure of social relationships. Language is often used to define, assert, and negotiate the way people relate to each other, and many languages have specific structural means which can be exploited to signal and contest social relationships, and to express solidarity, politeness, or respect.

In relation to politeness, an influential paper by Brown and Gilman (1960) introduced the concept of the “T/V distinction”, distinguishing singular T forms of address (from Latin *tu*) used in informal or familiar contexts from plural V forms (from Latin *vos*) used in formal or polite contexts. These forms can be used to structure asymmetric social relationships, for example when the V form is used to address higher ranked addressees but the T form is used to address lower ranked addressees. On the other hand, symmetrical use of the T form can also be used to express social equality and solidarity. The notions of solidarity and respect give rise to positive and negative politeness respectively. Positive politeness leads to solidarity, offers of friendship, and informal language use while negative politeness leads to indirectness and formality of language (Wardhaugh 1998). Positive politeness is generally encoded through the use of symmetrical pronominal T/T as it reveals closeness and solidarity as opposed to strategies that reveal social distance, respect, avoidance, and at times fear associated with negative politeness. For example, negative politeness can be achieved through T/V and to some extent V/V pronominal

usage. It is also interesting that positive politeness is usually associated with informal language usage and negative politeness with formal language usage, yet, as we will show below, AUYLs can encode negative politeness although they are typically seen as informal languages.

There are a number of other linguistic means which have been linked to the construction and expression of social relationships and of politeness (Foley 1997). For example, the use of names (first name, last name), titles, and nicknames can indicate different levels of formality, politeness, and solidarity.

The expression of politeness is sometimes divided into three different domains, namely the expression of politeness towards the addressee, for example through the use of titles or special addressee forms; the expression of politeness towards the referent of an expression, for example by using an indirect form of reference; and the expression of politeness towards the discourse situation, for example through the use of specific formulaic languages or a special register.

As we will show in this paper, a number of these politeness strategies are found in AUYLs, indicating their complex social function beyond their role as languages of resistance.

## 4 Address terms

S'ncamtho is a Ndebele-based youth language of Zimbabwe. Due to the close historical, linguistic, and social ties between Zimbabwe (and in particular Zimbabwe's Ndebele speakers) and South Africa, an understanding of the phenomenon of youth language in South Africa is also important for understanding S'ncamtho (Ndlovu 2020: 1). The glottonym S'ncamtho is derived from the same source as the name iSicamtho, which is used for the Zulu-based South African youth variety.

The use of politeness-conveying terms of address is widespread in S'ncamtho. An example of this can be seen from the derivational use of noun classes, where lexical forms can be used in more than one class, with attendant change in meaning. For politeness marking with address terms, S'ncamtho uses class 1 with the prefix *u-*, which is typically used for human referents, and class 5 with the prefix *i-*, which is not normally used for human referents, as can be seen in (1).<sup>1</sup>

- (1) S'ncamtho
- a. *u-bra* (Negative politeness, respect)
    - 1-brother
    - 'brother'
  - b. *i-bra* (Positive politeness, solidarity)
    - 5-brother
    - 'brother'

In the forms above, the addition of the class 1 prefix *u-* in (1a) serves to encode negative politeness, that is respect-based politeness for an elder, for example, or for someone who is less close to the speaker. In contrast, the use of the class 5 prefix *i-* in (1b) is used to encode positive politeness and solidarity. In other contexts, class 5 conveys pejorative meanings and can be used for undesired people and derogative terms. However, here we can see the use of the class 1 (typically human) prefix for encoding negative politeness and the class 5 (non-human) prefix for encoding positive politeness. These two different uses may be the result of the deviation from the standard use of this form. Class 1 is the canonical noun class for human referents, and so is appropriate in formal registers and "official" discourse. In contrast, the use of class 5 for human referents deviates from grammatical norms. Through this, the use of the class 5 prefix might be associated with informal, colloquial speech, and in turn with positive politeness.

A similar situation can be seen in example (2), which shows two different forms for the term *sistez* 'sister'. The use of the class 1 prefix *u-* again encodes negative politeness and respect, while the use of the class 5 prefix *i-* encodes positive politeness and solidarity.

<sup>1</sup> Examples follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules. Abbreviations used: # (i.e. a number) represents noun class; 1SG = first person singular; PERS = persistent; POSS = possessive; PRF = perfective; PST = past; RESP = respect; SM = subject marker.

- (2) S'ncamtho
- a. *u-siste-z* (Negative politeness, respect)  
1-sister-RESP  
'sister'
  - b. *i-siste-z* (Positive politeness, solidarity)  
5-sister-RESP  
'sister'

However, in this instance, there is an interesting outstanding question related to the form of the noun and the possible singular or plural interpretation. We assume that *sistez* is a borrowing from English *sister*. However, what is less clear is whether this is borrowed as a plural form – that is, *sisters* – or whether the *-(e)z* ending is performing another function. The use of the class 1 and class 5 prefixes (both of which are singular) means that the overall reading is singular. We return to processes of word formation involved in these examples in Section 5 below, where we will propose that *-(e)z* is a politeness marker based on erstwhile plural morphology.

A third form of address worth mentioning here is *krootman*. While 'brother' and 'sister' are popular address terms that mark solidarity in slang and youth varieties, *krootman* is used in S'ncamtho to exclusively nuance politeness to one's older brother or an older male who does not qualify (by age) to be *tayima* 'father' or *ankela* 'uncle'. The examples in (3) demonstrate this use of *krootman*, again with the use of class 1 and class 5 noun class prefixes.

- (3) S'ncamtho
- a. *u-kroot-man* (Negative politeness, respect)  
1-big-man  
'brother'
  - b. *i-kroot-man* (Positive politeness, solidarity)  
5-big-man  
'brother'

The form *krootman* is based on borrowings from Afrikaans and possibly English. The first part of the compound, from Afrikaans *groot* /χruət/ 'big', has the same effect as the *vous* plural in negative politeness: the 'big' corresponds to the plural in *vous* politeness strategies. The phonological manipulation of the initial voiceless fricative to a voiceless stop may be due to a (sociolinguistic) distancing effect. The second part of the compound comes either from English or Afrikaans, both of which have *man*. However, an Afrikaans origin seems more likely as only Afrikaans allows a form such as *grootman*. The form *man* marks not only gender but also conveys the concept 'big'. In cases of solidarity, the choice could have been *boy* instead of *man*, but for negative politeness, which corresponds to *vous*, *man* is strategically chosen over *boy*. The term is used with variation in the prefixes, corresponding to what was seen in examples (1) and (2), one option being class 1 (human) and the other class 5 (non-human). This too can be read as expressing politeness, as class 1 can be construed to express negative politeness and class 5 to encode positive politeness, in particular endearment, which is a classic example of positive solidarity politeness.

In addition, possessive compounds involving the term *nja* 'dog' can be used to express solidarity in S'ncamtho, in reference to one's friend. Solidarity is positive politeness and an example for the use of *dog* in S'ncamtho is presented in (4).

- (4) S'ncamtho  
*nja-yami*  
dog-POSS.1SG  
'my dog, my friend'

The noun *nja* 'dog', which would ordinarily be an insult, marks the closeness between youth language speakers, and the possessive is an expression of solidarity and oneness. The use of 'dog' to express solidarity and friendship in slang and youth languages is common (Hill and Banks 2019; Mesthrie and Hurst 2013).

Other AUYLs have similar expressions. Often there are different lexical forms for referring to or addressing an older or respected person, or a person seen as socially superior, as in (5).

- (5) Ndebele youth language  
*khiwa* (respectful address)  
 fig  
 ‘boss’ (lit. ‘fig fruit’)  
 (Hollington forthcoming)

The words *khiwa* ‘boss’ comes from the word for fig fruit. This is based on the perceived similarity between the colour of the flesh of the fruit and the colour of white people’s skin, so the meaning is, or was historically, ‘boss, white person’ (Hollington forthcoming), reflecting colonial social hierarchies based on race. This is a term used amongst friends and so again reflects politeness and camaraderie.

Another example comes from the South African youth language or “stylect” (Hurst 2008) Tsotsitaal, where a range of related terms are used as respectful address terms:

- (6) Tsotsitaal  
 a. *bra*  
 b. *brikie*  
 c. *bircate*  
 (Magogodi 2012; via Hurst-Harosh, pers. comm.)

The three terms in (6) all refer to an older respected male figure, but can also refer to a friend or confidant, covering different semantic spaces. Formally, the examples illustrate phonological and morphological manipulations of the type identified above as being typical of AUYLs. The form *bra* in (6a), from English *brother*, is widespread in many colloquial varieties of different South African languages. The form in (6b) is likely an adaptation of the form *bra* to *brikie*, which we assume involves the creative use of the Afrikaans diminutive suffix *-ie*, which in some contexts is pronounced as /ki/ – including, for example, the diminutive form of *maat* ‘friend’, which is *maatjie* (/maɪki/). We are less certain of the processes involved in the formation of *bircate*, but we assume it also to involve the conscious manipulation of material in the cluster (cf. Kießling and Mous 2004).<sup>2</sup>

## 5 Plural marking

An important aspect of politeness marking is related to the marking of plurality, and often plural forms are used for polite reference to singular referents. This strategy can also be found in AUYLs as shown in the example from Tsotsitaal in (7).

- (7) Tsotsitaal  
*Bo-ou lady ba va-ile*  
 2-old lady SM2 GO-PRF  
 ‘Mother/an older lady has left’  
 (Ditsele 2015 and pers. comm.)

The example illustrates the different lexical and structural resources AUYLs such as Tsotsitaal draw on. The form *ou lady* can be analysed as combining *lady* from English and the Afrikaans adjective *ou* ‘old’, or alternatively as an old borrowing from English slang *old lady* meaning ‘wife’, sometimes rendered as *o’ledi* or *oledi*. In any case, the noun class 2 prefix *bo-* and class 2 agreement prefix *ba-* are widely found in South African Bantu languages, for example in Northern Sotho, where these forms are also used to mark politeness. In terms of structure, it is notable that the adjective precedes the noun. This is the standard word order in English and Afrikaans, but only an alternative order in South African Bantu languages, where the adjective typically follows the noun – for example,

<sup>2</sup> We are very grateful to Theresa Biberauer for an informative discussion of these examples.



in Zulu *inkunzi emhlophe* [bull white] ‘white bull’ (see e.g. Doke 1992: 100–102). Notably, in (7) the noun class prefix is attached only to the adjective rather than to both the noun and the adjective, as would be a more typical Bantu pattern (see e.g. Van de Velde 2019).

In addition to showing the diverse resources which Tsotsitaal speakers make use of, the example is also instructive for the use of plural forms to express politeness in AUYLs and for the sociolinguistic understanding of Tsotsitaal. The class 2 prefix is nominally a human plural prefix, but it is used in many Bantu languages as a V politeness form when used with singular referents (Marten and Kula 2021). As noted above, the class 2 prefix *bo-* is used in this way in Northern Sotho, one of the languages Tsotsitaal draws on. The example in (7) therefore shows how both the form and the meaning (that it, to express respect with single referents) have been adopted in Tsotsitaal, which retains this morphological expression of politeness, where it is used, like here, in reference to older people.<sup>3</sup> As we will discuss further below, the example clearly shows, first, that structurally AUYLs are often similar to and not less complex than the languages they draw on, and second, that speakers of AUYLs retain access to established mainstream social conventions and their underlying hierarchies, by adopting aspects of the politeness marking system of their matrix languages.

In S’ncamtho, too, there is an interesting use of plural morphology, as we noted briefly in Section 4. S’ncamtho allows the use of (erstwhile) plural morphology with singular reference. However, here the plural marker results from borrowing from English, rather than from Bantu languages. As we saw with the form *sistez* ‘sister’ in (2), English plural morphology is borrowed with the noun, but loses its plural reference, and is reanalysed as a politeness or respect marker; in addition, euphonic reasons may have contributed to the process as well, based on the phonetic saliency of the sibilant. This effect is not restricted to *sistez*, but is found in a range of kinship terms borrowed from English in the plural form, including *motherz*, *antez*, and *fatherz*, which are all used in S’ncamtho as singular forms. Other terms that follow a relexicalization path similar to *sistez* are *mebraz* for ‘brother’, with a lexicalized possessive pronoun (*me-* < *my*), and *bhudasi* also for ‘brother’, both from the English word *brother*.<sup>4</sup>

Although often, and probably originally, used with loanwords from English, the euphonic respect *-z* suffix can also be found with Ndebele roots, for example in *nawez* for ‘younger sister’ from Ndebele *mnawami* ‘my younger sibling’. The likely derivation path of the form is *mnawami* > omission of noun class 1 prefix *m-* and the possessive suffix *-ami* to leave the root *-naw-* > *naw* + *ez* (respect affix from English *-s*) > *nawez*. *Mnawami* is gender neutral in Ndebele, but the S’ncamtho derivation *nawez* is feminine. It only refers to young sister and *ntwana* is used for young brother.

A final example of the use of *-z* is provided in (8). Another term for ‘younger brother’ in S’ncamtho is based on the Ndebele word for child, *umntwana*, from which *intwana* is derived for reference with positive politeness (8a). To this, the politeness marker *-z* may be added, as seen in (8b):

- (8) S’ncamtho
- a. *i-ntwana* (Positive politeness, solidarity)  
5-child  
‘younger brother’
  - b. *i-ntwana-z* (Positive politeness, solidarity and respect)  
5-child-RESP  
‘younger brother’

The examples show that *-z* has been reanalysed as a nominal suffix to encode respect, based on the English plural suffix *-s* through language contact.

In terms of morphological strategies, the examples discussed so far show that affixation can be used to encode politeness. In S’ncamtho we see the use of noun class morphology and specifically the contrastive use of classes 1 and 5 to encode politeness. In some cases, affixation is combined with clipping to derive positive politeness in context of solidarity. Such cases are exemplified by the clipping of the English term *brother*; for example, *bra* < *bro* < *brother* in S’ncamtho seen in (1) and in Tsotsitaal as seen in (6).

<sup>3</sup> We are very grateful to Thabo Ditsele for the helpful discussion of this example.

<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, the form *bhudasi* might be related to the Afrikaans term *boet* ‘brother’.

## 6 Avoidance

Euphemisms also form part of the broader domain of politeness. S'ncamtho marks negative politeness to avoid tabooed terms. Mesthrie and Hurst (2013: 118) observe a similar strategy in South African Tsotsitaal. We share below some examples of euphemisms from S'ncamtho which are created through compounding and blending. Ndlovu (2022) describes the phenomenon of part homophony and decoy lexicalization in S'ncamtho and demonstrates that this strategy achieves the politeness associated with euphemisms. In this strategy, parts of tabooed words are combined strategically with those from similar sounding words. The following examples from Ndlovu (2022) further demonstrate this type of euphemistic politeness in S'ncamtho:

- (9) S'ncamtho  
*Mfana u-thanda izibusiso over.* < *izibunu*  
 boy SM2SG-love blessings too\_much bums  
 'Boy! You love blessings [i.e. bums] too much.'  
 (Ndlovu 2022: 140)
- (10) S'ncamtho  
*Kkk! Ya be-ngi-kama skim.* < *be-ngi-kaka*  
 [laughter] yes PST-SM1SG-combing friend PST-SM1SG-defecate  
 '[laughter] Yes I was combing [i.e. defecating] friend.'  
 (Ndlovu 2022: 140)
- (11) S'ncamtho  
*... over 100! ama-speya a-sa-spana kodwa?* < *ama-spemu*  
 over 100 6-spare SM6-PERS-work really 6-sperm  
 'He is over 100 years! Do his spares [i.e. sperm] still work really?'  
 (Ndlovu 2022: 140)
- (12) S'ncamtho  
*Bo-sisi, u-khona o-sa-gqoka i-Pitoli?* < *i-pitikot*  
 2-sister SM1-there SM1-PERS-wear 5-Pretoria 5-petticoat  
 'Sisters, is there any of you still wearing Pretoria [i.e. petticoat]?'  
 (Ndlovu 2022: 140)

In examples (9)–(12), the words *izibunu* 'bums', *ukukaka* 'defecating', *amaspemu* 'sperms', and *ipitikoti* 'petticoat' are replaced by *izibusiso* 'blessings', *ukukama* 'combing', *amaspeya* 'spares', and *iPitoli* 'Pretoria' respectively. This form of lexical replacement achieves politeness by replacing a tabooed term for a non-taboo term that exhibits part homophony with the taboo form. For example, the sequence /izibu/ is part of both *izibunu* and *izibusiso* and this facilitates the exchange of the terms in S'ncamtho to achieve euphemism. The strategy can be seen as the expression of politeness towards the discourse situation, and is similar to other taboo or avoidance strategies such as *hlonipha* (e.g. Finlayson 1982; Ntuli 2000).

## 7 A comparative perspective

The preceding discussion has shown that the expression of politeness is widespread among the AUYLs discussed in this paper. Specific strategies include the use of address terms to express politeness towards the addressee, but also the use of lexical and morphological means for the expression of politeness towards the referent of an expression. We have also seen how avoidance forms are used for the expression of politeness towards the discourse situation. In terms of formal marking, both lexical and morphological means for marking politeness are employed.



Overall, the linguistic strategies employed for expressing politeness in the AUYLs under examination in the current paper are similar to those found in other Bantu languages. Marten and Kula (2021), based on a sample of 33 languages, provide a comparative overview of the marking of politeness in Bantu languages. The survey shows that politeness marking in Bantu uses many of the same structural means we identified in the discussion of AUYLs above. With respect to the use of noun class and agreement marking to encode a T/V distinction, the study found that just over half of the languages in the sample make use of noun classes and agreement in that way. The majority of languages use plural agreement marking for singular reference, while some use class 2 plural noun class morphology for referent-focused politeness. Many languages (about 20 percent of the sample) in fact use both strategies.

For the AUYLs discussed here, there seems to be prominent use of noun class morphology for expressing politeness towards a referent or for addressee-directed politeness when the relevant forms are used as terms of address. However, in the data examined and reported on here, we have not yet found examples of second person plural agreement for expressing politeness. In S'ncamtho, a plural strategy is employed, but here it is based not on noun classes, but on the respect or politeness marker *-z*, which is based on borrowings with the English plural marker *-s*. While formally different, and an interesting example of language contact, the system is similar to the use of plural noun class morphology for politeness marking in Tsotsitaal and many Bantu languages.

In sum, the comparative evidence shows that AUYLs are structurally very similar to the Bantu languages which have influenced, and continue to influence, their genesis and development. There is no evidence that AUYLs are less complex than their surrounding Bantu languages in this respect. This finding is consistent with studies of the grammatical structure of AUYLs, which have found that they tend to be structurally very similar to the main language(s) in their environment, for example, isiXhosa for (Eastern Cape) Tsotsitaal (Mesthrie and Hurst 2013) and Swahili for Sheng (Gibson et al. forthcoming; Githiora 2018). However, it is remarkable that this structural complexity for marking politeness is retained in AUYLs, given that AUYLs are often seen and analysed as anti-languages and so as an instrument for defying conventions and norms. We will further discuss this question on the role of politeness and politeness marking for AUYLs in the following section.

## 8 Summary and future directions

The constructions that we have explored in the current paper provide evidence of politeness strategies in African youth languages. We have shown the use of different types of address forms, polite reference forms, and the use of avoidance language. The strategies involve both solidarity and politeness as they fall under the ambits of face (Brown and Levinson 1987; Goffman 1955). There are both lexical and morphological strategies to achieve politeness in S'ncamtho and other AUYLs and these can express negative and positive politeness. Positive politeness strategies emphasize the aspect of solidarity, which is important in youth languages, while negative politeness generally marks the interaction between youth language speakers and those who are outside their social group, especially parents and elders.

The various politeness strategies are realized through lexical and morphological processes such as compounding, blending, clipping, and affixation. These processes are prevalent in interactive speech such as address terms, names, and reference and are subject to the dynamic patterns of innovation and change which are so characteristic of AUYLs.

One question we raised at the outset of this paper was to what extent the presence of elaborate politeness marking can be reconciled with the typical function of AUYLs as languages of resistance and anti-languages. While this question requires a more comprehensive investigation into the use of AUYLs and attitudes and ideologies associated with them, beyond the limits of the present paper, there are two observations we would like to make here. The first is that AUYLs have been shown to be dynamic, and may change in function from resistance language to what Kießling and Mous (2004) call “project language”, and may be used to promote new, “standard” values. Because of this wider range of functions, AUYLs may remain ambivalent with respect to standard politeness strategies, and speakers may wish to retain them, even if reinterpreted in terms of marking. A second, related point is the ambiguous relation of many AUYLs with the mainstream. As Storch (2011) and McKenzie (2021)

have noted, while AUYLs are often used to create alternative social and cultural spaces, this is largely the result of the marginalization of large groups of urban youths, but less of a conscious choice of ideological distinction from established norms. This means that often an option is maintained of a rapprochement with the mainstream, ideally on more favourable terms, and so the maintenance of established norms of engagement, including politeness marking, may reflect this option.

In conclusion, we have shown that AUYLs have complex systems of politeness marking, comparable to the more standardized languages they draw on. This result is consistent with previous findings showing that the structural complexity of AUYLs is both comparable to and draws from relevant (Bantu) matrix languages in the relevant context (Gibson et al. forthcoming). Finally, we have suggested that the presence of complex politeness marking in AUYLs may reflect the complex, and at times ambiguous, relation of AUYLs with established, mainstream norms.

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