

Do cultural factors influence the exchange of compliments? The case of rural and urban Namibia

Gerhard Matheus

Bielefeld University

Namibia's speech community is distinguishable by the diverse range of languages and dialects, with English as the official language. The population is split into two parts: the rural areas where traditional cultures and indigenous languages predominate, and metropolitan areas that are more cosmopolitan and impacted by global cultures. The rural-urban dichotomy provides a unique framework for investigating how geographical and cultural factors influence social interactions. Complimenting is one of the key speech acts integral to social interactions, and among all other functions, serves as a social lubricant (Holmes 1988). This paper adopts the framework of variational pragmatics (Barron and Schneider 2009) to examine the influence of social factors such as social class, region, gender and ethnicity on language use in rural and urban Namibia.

Semi-structured interviews combined with Discourse Completion Tasks with different compliment scenarios are used to illuminate connections between compliment behaviour and spatial and social factors in rural and urban Namibian settings. The paper indicates that the level of nation and region (data from rural and urban settings) accounts for a certain degree of variation in the choice of the compliments produced, and social variables like gender and ethnicity also impact complimenting behaviour. While compliments are more frequent and direct in urban areas, rural speakers often employ indirect or implicit forms, embedding narratives or using proverbs and idiomatic expressions which reflect communal orientation and the emphasis of collective identity in rural cultures. These differences underscore the importance of cultural differences and norms in the realisation of speech acts in multicultural settings.

References

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Gerhard Matheus

Gerhard Matheus is a Doctoral Researcher at Bielefeld University's Faculty of Languages and Literary Studies, focusing on variational pragmatics and how compliments are expressed in Namibian English. Her work explores how English interacts with indigenous languages and socio-cultural factors in post-colonial settings, enriching the understanding of linguistic diversity. With a master's in English studies, she developed a strong foundation in linguistic theory and sociolinguistics, sparking her interest in the social aspects of language. Her doctoral journey also encompasses interactive, inclusive teaching and learning that encourages critical thinking and engagement with complex linguistic topics. Her academic interests span pragmatics, sociolinguistics, World Englishes and intercultural communication and their influence on identities and communication in multilingual societies.