Ethnicity as social deixis

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Ethnicity and ethnic identity appear to be human universals (Antweiler 2007: 190). Ethnic autonyms, the names that people give to themselves, often translate as 'humans' or 'true people', which renders the status of members of other ethnic groups either as not truly human or at least of dubious standing. Across case studies, human communicative interaction seems replete with ascriptions of ethnic status, both in so-called pre-modern times and places and in the current situation of globalized and mediatized politics (cp. Eriksen 1993). In view of the ubiquitousness of reference to ethnic identity I take a lead from two sources, firstly linguistics (specifically speech act theory and pragmatics) and secondly practice theory (specifically as influenced by Pierre Bourdieu). The more general interdisciplinary strategy that I propose is not a simple transfer of a conceptual framework from one discipline to another, but a two-way approach whereby a concept is transferred, but then transformed and offered for re-import, as it were. I shall outline why it is useful to think of ethnic ascription as a form of *deixis*, a linguistic notion that is still foreign to most social scientists. In linguistics, deictic meanings (referred to in philosophy as 'indexical' meanings) are those that are effective only at a particular place and time. In brief, the argument will be that understanding a notion such as 'being indigenous' or 'being black' or 'being a member of ethnic group x' is as much dependent on who uses the notion (and when and where they do so) as is a prototypical deictic sentence such as 'I want her to come here today', which depends on a context of specific persons, on a specific time and place. As Levinson (1983) has pointed out in detail, the concept of deixis/indexicality has had a remarkable career. Initially it seemed to be a property of marginal utterances that required contextual coordinates to be properly understood, but today the question is rather whether there are any utterances at all that are truly context-independent. Here, I use the linguistic

terms 'deixis/deictic', rather than the philosophical term 'indexicality' because the use of ethnonyms – linguistic speech acts that classify people ethnically – are central features of ethnicity as a social and political phenomenon. At the same time, I shall add that the original linguistic notion of deixis has to be redefined, as *social deixis*, in a manner quite different from that in which deixis is understood in mainstream linguistics, in order to account for empirical observations. I argue that the main benefit of including notions such as deixis and social deixis in our analysis is that it allows us to take into account both the universal aspects of ethnic ascriptions and the variation that also exists therein. In this contribution I shall illustrate these theoretical points with reference to groups of people in southern Africa with whom I have carried out field research.

ETHNICITY AS DEICTIC REFERENCE

The idea of ethnically defined groups was for a long time a constitutive element of the discipline of 'Ethnology' at universities in Germany and neighboring countries. While ethnic community sentiments were instrumental for building national identity in many European countries they were considered detrimental elsewhere, in particular in Africa, from where I draw the empirical data for this contribution. Since most African countries gained their independence in the 20th century, the focus on ethnic identity has had negative effects for the discipline, because the emergence of nation states and nationalism has often conflicted with notions of ethnicity. As a result, very few research institutions in the independent countries of Africa – and, similarly, in the few newly founded universities in Germany – have departments of 'Ethnology'. It was felt that anything 'ethnic' was backward, and that focusing on such disciplines would highlight ethnic identity at the expense of nation-building. In the meantime, the discipline has increasingly adopted the label Anthropology, and its units of analysis are no longer ethnic groups, but rather may be constituted by any set of social or cultural relations and by the social situations in which people are involved. Conversely, the crises faced by many ethnic groups, and the political (ab)use of ethnic identity has become a recurrent research theme far beyond 'Ethnology' in all major social sciences.

While it may initially seem as if researchers who have converted to the denominations of Social Anthropology or Cultural Anthropology might have little to say about ethnicity, I shall argue that a reintegration of the subject of ethnicity into the wider spectrum of human social relationships, as studied by anthropologists today, has considerable benefits. To begin with, it allows ideas

from other domains of anthropological research to be imported into the study of ethnic identities. Consider the transferring of key ideas from the study of kinship relations to research on ethnic relations. After all, there are apparent similarities between these two domains. As I have alluded to above, the study of community formation has for a long time been biased towards ethnicity. Similarly, kinship studies were, up to the last century, firmly based on (European) ideas of biological genealogy, and have only recently been freed from their bias toward genealogical descent (Schneider 1984; Jones/Milicic 2012; Holland 2012). What can the investigation of the problems of ethnicity gain from kinship studies? From a long (and ongoing) discussion in comparative anthropology, it has become clear that kinship is, above all, an *idiom* for talking about social relations. Debate continues as to the narrowness or breadth of the confines within which this idiom can unfold in diverse ways, but modes of addressing others and referring to others as kin continue to be a central part of kinship studies. Transposed to the study of ethnic relations, this could provide us with a fairly easy and reliable guide for defining ethnicity and for recognizing it when stumbling over it during field research: Ethnic relations, according to this lead, are above all references to ethnic status, which make up a large part of the practices of ethnicization. This referencing can take the form of ordinary discourse, for instance when applying ethnic labels in conversation (see below), but other forms of referencing are also common, for instance boxes to tick on a form at a clinic, in an office or school, or as part of a census when being asked for self-identification. The same applies to non-linguistic forms of reference such as exhibiting iconic pieces of dress or body decoration or body modification. Whereas the idiom of kinship typically makes use of references to genealogies, marriage and neighborhood, the idiom of ethnic identity goes beyond that. For ethnic references the shared descent is typically not traceable through individual links and lines, and it involves a much larger group of people, most of whom never encounter one another face-to-face.

Moreover, by treating ethnicity first and foremost as a form of referencing we can benefit from sophisticated tools of analysis that have been developed elsewhere. In this contribution I want to illustrate this with regard to the notion of deixis, i.e. treating ethnicity not only as a reference to ethnic identity, but as an instance of *deictic reference*. Typically, deictic or indexical references include heavily context-dependent notions expressing place ('here'), time ('now') and person ('we') – that is, utterances or actions that *necessarily* change their meaning as they are used in different circumstances. The suggestion, therefore, is to treat ethnic deixis as a form of of social deixis. I shall discuss four main advantages of importing the notion of deixis to ethnicity studies:

- A better understanding of when, how and why people switch between ethnic and alternative modes of referencing;
- An approach that integrates both instrumentalist and primordialist ideas of ethnicity;
- The possibility of analyzing both universal and culturally relative aspects of ethnic reference within a single framework;
- A better understanding of the process whereby situational references to ethnic identity become 'canonized' into ethnicity.

At a more general level the adaptation of linguistic micro-analysis forces us to firmly anchor our theories of ethnicity in human practice and empirical evidence. In order to achieve the four goals set out above, however, it is not enough to simply import the notion of deixis from linguistics. As Bourdieu (2012 [1982]: 42) has pointed out, there is a tendency in linguistics to restrict the consideration of 'relevant' circumstances that affect the meaning of words to the immediate environment of an utterance in a conversation or text. This would restrict the investigation to the language-based parameters that generate a particular deictic reference and that make it acceptable to listeners. By contrast, social and ethnic deixis, as a re-import from political anthropology into linguistics, will look specifically at the social and political positioning of agents and utterances, their differences in power, and the effect that these have in human social settings.

MOVING IN AND OUT OF ETHNICITY

It is part of the political strategy used by both ethnic fundamentalists and their opponents who advocate 'civic' or national group membership, to emphasize how very different ethnic identity is from other forms of identity. The empirical data on reference suggests something different: On the ground we find frequent shifts between ethnic and other forms of reference, and we find a seamless shading in and out of ethnicity instead of a rigid dualism. To give an example: in southern Africa, the most elaborated ethnic difference in discourse is that between so-called 'Khoisan hunter/herder/gatherers' and 'Bantu agropastoralists', categorizations used in both academic and everyday discourse. In northern Namibia and southern Angola this split is manifest between *≠Akhoe Hai//om* on the one hand and *Kwanyama Owambo* on the other (cp. Widlok 1999). However, when talking about one another, very few people in the region use the autonym of the respective other group. Instead, Kwanyama mostly refer to Hai//om as *kwankala* and Hai//om refer to Kwanyama as */naben*. Both these terms not only

have ethnic connotations but also distinguish economic status, i.e. *kwankala* (also) means 'poor person' and */naben* (also) means 'rich person'. To the extent that ethnic group membership in this region is closely tied to ownership of material assets (lifestock, homesteads, etc.) the two meanings are often indiscriminable and may be treated as synonyms. However, there are contexts in which Owambo people use the term *kwankala* within the bounds of their own ethnic group, and at times Hai//om extend the term */naben* beyond their Owambo ethnic neighbours. Even in apparently clear-cut usages, the 'other' meaning is latently present, e.g. when calling someone *kwankala* not only highlights his or her poverty but also latently suggests that he or she is not a 'genuine Owambo'. Furthermore, the ethnic/economic references are often linked to the idiom of kinship. I have met Owambo patrons who downplayed the ethnic difference between themselves and Hai//om living on their farm by referring to themselves as the 'fathers' of the Hai//om 'children', which avoids using ethnic labels that nevertheless remain in the background. A similar process can be observed between Hai//om and other Khoisan-speaking hunter-gatherers like the *!Xũ*, whom they sometimes consider to be relatives 'of one blood' and sometimes as clearly ethnically separate. These examples illustrate a more general point that has been made with regard to the emergence of ethnic boundaries in Africa (cp. Southall 2010[1970]) and the strategic flexibility that exists, not only in terms of ethnic deixis but also with regard to actual group membership. The more general point to make is that our record of ethnic deixis indicates that it is a subset of social or person deixis which allows speakers to creatively link (or separate) the ethnic idiom with other idioms such as kinship or nationality. Ethnicity therefore emerges not as a natural opposite to nationality or family but rather as another variant in a larger repertoire of possibilities. In terms of a future research agenda it is exactly these bridges and shifts between idioms that need particular attention, since these switches constitute a rich political resource. The study of ethnicity, it seems, requires less a theory of its own than a reintegration into the larger field of social referencing.

INSTRUMENTALISM AND PRIMORDIALISM

A lot of ink has been spilled over the conflict between instrumentalist and primordialist approaches to ethnic identity (cp. Eriksen 1993 for a summary). When considering ethnicity in terms of deixis this debate proves to be based on a somewhat bogus distinction. Or, to put it differently, ethnic deixis allows the incorporation of diverse phenomena that may be generally identified solely with

either the primordialist or the instrumentalist approaches to ethnicity. Consider the following example, again from my field research in Namibia: This is the account of a young man who had grown up with Owambo-speakers and who did not necessarily strike outsiders as a Hai//om, either in outward appearance or in the personal name he used for himself (for more details cp. Widlok 1996). As a consequence, when he was imprisoned he was put in a cell together with four Owambo men by police officers (of European descent) who took him to be ethnically Owambo. This is what he said happened:

"One of the men told me to go away because, he said, I was spreading diseases like all Kwankala. I told him that we are not like that and that to be a Hai//om was not as bad as being an Owambo. Then one of them men attacked me and I hit him with my fist. But the Owambo men all stuck together and beat me up."

It is easy to recognize the instrumental use of ethnic references here. Hai//om can report many incidences where they are addressed or referred to as 'San' 'Bushmen' or *kwankala* with the aim of discriminating against them, making them act as servants, pressurizing them to accept a low position, and preventing them from being equals in power. Precolonially, the label *kwankala* was used, then during colonial times the term 'Bushmen' was used; since independence 'San' is the official designation in Namibia ('Basarwa' in Botswana). On being asked which of these ethnonyms they like or dislike, Hai//om occasionally disagree, but they all agree that it is the fact that these terms are typically used in conjunction with adjectives such as 'stupid' or 'dirty' that is the problem, not any of the ethnic labels as such. Thus, the instrumentality in these references is very clear, as it is in all deixis. People use deictic terms as speech acts, to achieve something, to address or to discriminate, or simply to distinguish. Instrumentality is inherent in the process. At the same time, deictic expressions only work with reference to a shared background of empirical knowledge. As alluded to above, knowledge of place, time and relative position of speakers (and hearers) is necessary to understand deictic terms like 'here' and 'now'; the same applies to social deixis. The instrumentality of the speech act would not work if there was no shared cultural knowledge. Ethnic deixis 'works' because it refers to a shared world in which, for instance, people have perceivably different outward appearances, speak differently, have different economic status and different family backgrounds, exhibit different ways of doing things, and so forth. I have heard Hai//om jokingly addressing a child: 'Hey !Xũ', and referring to another child as 'little Owambo', and the speakers knew the reference was intelligible to those listening because the first child had more 'peppercorn hair'

than others and because the second child was known to have an (absent) Owambo father. In other words, the given state of the world – or 'primordial' state, if you will – is relevant, and it places limits on what can be said (instrumentally) and defines which utterances are not acceptable or intelligible. Background knowledge includes imagined differences as much as experiential ones; the key point is that such knowledge is shared. Since the background knowledge is often diffuse and multivariant it is in turn open to instrumental manipulation. What you are as a particular kinsperson or as a member of an ethnic group is partly produced by the repeated patterned references in particular situations. Far from being opposites, it seems that instrumental and primordial aspects are not only not mutually exclusive, they even condition one another and imply one another.

Deictic statements are therefore part of larger speech acts that are employed to achieve certain goals. The instrumental aspect is part and parcel of an analysis of ethnic deixis. These speech acts only work because they refer to social facts outside the situative discourse as such. They have to refer to the known and (at least partially) shared background of speaker, listener and bystanders in order to be effective.

UNIVERSALISM AND RELATIVISM

Deixis is a universal feature of language and there is sufficient indication to suggest that ethnic deixis is universal, too. Having said that, person deixis also provides a good illustration for showing that there is variation with regard to ways of expressing deixis and, conversely, that there are limits to this variation. For instance, common personal deixis for the first person singular 'we' in many languages allows differentiation between an 'inclusive we' and an 'exclusive we'. In ≠Akhoe Hai//om and other Khoisan languages this distinction is expressed through personal pronouns (cp. Vossen 2013). Instead of one 'we' there is an 'all male we', an 'all female we', and a 'mixed we', and speakers are able to distinguish not only singular from plural but also a dual (the two of us). Moreover any of these forms of 'we' can be expressed either exclusively (e.g. *sida*, 'we', but not including the addressee) or inclusively (e.g. *sada*, 'we', including the addressee). Other qualifications of the deictic 'we'" are possible, relating to whether participants have been previously mentioned or not, whether they are human or not, and whether their communicative status is definite or not. In other words, languages differ in the ways in which they allow speakers to include or to exclude people who are present in a 'we'-construction. As indicated

earlier I suggest following this lead and applying it to contexts beyond the narrow speech situation. Bourdieu's reminder of the importance of including the political position of the speaker (and listener) is very relevant here (cp. Bourdieu 2012[1982]). A 'we' uttered by someone in power is different from a 'we' used by a subordinate, even when applied to the same group of people. In the first instance it may be 'granting community' in the second it may be 'claiming community' (or, in rare cases, vice versa, e.g. when politicians want to claim to be 'one of us' among ordinary people). State representatives commonly speak in the name of an absent (but contextually implied) social entity when they say 'I' or 'We', in a way in which other speakers without a mandate cannot (cp. Bourdieu 2014: 93).

The use of ethnonyms does not automatically include or exclude, nor does it necessarily do so in the same way across situations and speakers. Among ≠Akhoe Hai//om I have often observed that the same ethnonym for the neighboring !Xũ is at times used in order to be inclusive ('we are one') or in order to differentiate (from ≠Akhoe). Again, there is evidence that in many settings ethnonyms can be applied in a wider sense (including named subgroups) or in a more narrow sense (the 'xy proper') (cp. Southall 2010 [1970]). In parallel to what I described above in terms of moving in and out of ethnic deixis, here we may speak of upscaling and downscaling strategies within ethnic referencing. Moreover, the two strategies may be combined. Here I slightly part ways with Bourdieu (2014 [2012]: 608) who rightly points at differences in the ways in which citizenship is referenced in Germany and France, at least up to recently, namely ethnically in the German case and universally in the French case. Bourdieu notes that despite this difference in state philosophy and immigration policy the actual treatment of immigrants in France and Germany is strikingly similar (2014 [2012]: 612), but he does not provide an explanation for this. I suggest that this is so because 'being a citizen on universal grounds' and 'being a citizen on ethnic grounds'" are both subject to upscaling and downscaling. As Donnelly (2013: 93) has recently pointed out, universality is always relative to a particular 'universe' of application. Things like 'universal healthcare' (or education, voting rights, rights to move, to work etc.) are typically only available to recognized citizens of a particular country, not to those of other countries, even if they are local residents, let alone for everyone on the planet. The same applies to the status of 'eligibility to become a citizen'. The French civic universality that Bourdieu describes is *in principle* independent of ethnic background, but it is still relative to a universe with particular bounded extensions. In any particular political context it may be downscaled and may exclude for instance those who cannot prove (due to lack of papers) that they do

not enjoy citizenship elsewhere or that they have not committed crimes. Similarly, the 'ethnic' criterion for German citizenship can (and has been) upscaled in particular historical settings to include family relations with those already recognized as German citizens (irrespective of their ethnic identity) or those who have previously been deprived of their German citizenship (e.g. when of Jewish descent). In other words, just as 'universality' is defined in relation to a domain, 'relative' by definition is not a general notion but immediately "calls forth the question 'Relative to what?'" (Donnelly 2013: 94), and thus depends on something else. Granting citizenship, just like granting affirmative action based on ethnic grounds, is dependent on a framework to which it relates. Typically this is a temporal framework, a privilege granted for a specific time, in order to compensate for disadvantages during a particular past time frame, or with regard to other conditions that have to be present for such 'positive discrimination' to be maintained. The rights of indigenous people in southern Africa are a case in point: such 'positive discrimination' is not a special right reserved for one ethnic group but a 'universal' right for those who have suffered special marginalization as a group in the past (cp. Zips-Mairitsch 2009: 97). The parallels with the linguistic notion of deixis makes it easier to recognize the relative universality (or universal relativity) of different forms of deixis, including ethnic deixis. However, this needs to be complemented by drawing in the wider political and historical context in the way I have alluded to in the examples above.

CANONIZED DEIXIS

So far, I have highlighted the similarities between ethnic referencing and other forms of deixis. However, the parallel also invites us to be specific with regard to how ethnic deixis may differ from other forms of deixis in general, and from other related forms of social deixis in particular. What marks forms of social deixis off from other forms of deixis is that typically here, humans have found it useful to derive more stable meanings from situational contexts and to 'freeze' meanings across different contexts – in other words, to 'canonize' utterances and actions. This is true for social roles ascribed, for instance, to 'mothers' or 'children', as much as for membership in 'lasting' collective social groups such as clans and lineages, but particularly so with regard to ethnic groups and nations. One of the main research requirements in this approach is therefore to document ethnicity as cases of ethnic deixis, and to retrace the process whereby ethnic classifications become 'canonized' across time and space, thereby limiting their inherent flexibility.

With specific regard to the domain of my research region, southern Africa, but probably also more widely, the main agent that provokes this intensification of 'canonization' across contexts is the state and its representatives. Why is ethnic deixis less flexible than other forms of deixis, e.g. deixis involving personal pronouns, spatial descriptions or, possibly, references to time? It is because the referencing in this domain is not only carried out by 'natural' persons in face-to-face interaction but also, to a very large extent, by agents who represent 'fictitious' (i.e. legally constructed) but at the same time very powerful corporate agents. This power is distilled, for instance, in bureaucratic forms that provide a limited choice of ethnic self-identifications, and in the power of state administrators to specify ethnic membership for state subjects. In pre-independence Namibia this was very crudely visible through the encoding of ethnic identity on the national identity cards (cp. Figure 1, '03' indicating the category 'San/Bushmen'). During apartheid legislation this categorization would specify eligibility to vote (for ethnic representatives only), to marry, and to be resident in a certain area. After independence the ethnic classification was dropped and replaced by proxies such as 'language spoken at home' (during the first national census), or 'born in Namibia' (also encoded on the ID). Most recently the 'invisibility' of ethnic identity has become a matter of concern because of a systematic underrepresentation of some groups in government positions (cp. Widlok 1996). Similar concerns against discrimination have led government agencies (of education, labor, health) in Western, formally 'non-ethnic' democracies to introduce ethnic classification for applicants. When applying for a job in the US or when being admitted to a clinic in the UK, one is routinely asked to self-identify ethnically according to a schema that may or may not coincide with the ethnic deixis one practices in everyday life, but which was designed from a position of power. My argument is that these schematic categorizations are not 'deixis-free', despite the fact that they do not allow situational factors to be brought in. Rather, we are dealing with channelized deixis that structures the social and political environment in such a way that only a limited choice of deictic references remain possible. This is very much like delimiting the temporal deixis of 'now' and 'later' into exactly measured time intervals – a process which is not alien to legal practitioners and their language – or like delimiting the spatial deixis of 'here' and 'there' into the mapped universe of the surveyors and the authority they derive from states to carve up the land.

CONCLUSION

In this contribution I have suggested an interdisciplinary import from linguistics into anthropology in the form of introducing the notion of deixis. I have also suggested the re-importing of a notion of ethnic deixis that is enriched by having been interpreted through both the social science perspective of political agency and the fieldwork-based perspective of ethnography, in this case of southern Africa. The resulting model provides a number of theoretical benefits: We are able to see, and investigate in more detail, the bridges between ethnicity and other forms of social deixis, of references and relations moving seamlessly into and out of the domain of ethnic identity. We have also been able to reconcile aspects of instrumentalism and primordialism, and we have gained a better understanding of universality and relativity with regard to the phenomena of ethnic identity and ethnic reference. Finally, considering deixis as an activity has directed our attention to the agents engaged in this activity, and in particular to the contrast between 'natural' persons (individual humans) and the often more powerful but 'fictional' corporate agents of the state. The most far-reaching conclusion that one might choose to draw from this is that ethnicity no longer appears to be a domain sui generis, but rather an epiphenomenon of underlying social processes of social deixis and the social positioning that it implies. Ethnicity may be critical in many political constellations, yet not be anything special in itself.

Figure 1: Identity card in pre-independence Namibia. The second block of figures encodes ethnic identity

Source: Photo by Thomas Widlok

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