

Tsotsitaal, global culture and local style: identity and recontextualisation in twenty-first century South African townships.

Ellen Hurst

University of Cape Town - South Africa

This paper follows upon that of Mesthrie on “Tsotsi and other taals” (at this conference), which is more structural in orientation, whereas my focus will be mainly on cultural and stylistic aspects. Tsotsitaal is a linguistic phenomenon which is inseparable from a style adopted by many youth living in urban townships in South Africa. The style is signalled by the unique and innovative lexicon of Tsotsitaal, and additionally indicated by clothing and other identity markers. Features of the style are ‘urban-ness’, consumerism (in terms of brand names) and cultural iconography such as music and sports. While many of these items are influenced by, or even drawn from, global cultures (particularly in the diaspora), they are transformed into uniquely South African cultural currency by a process of recontextualisation in township spaces and between individuals. There has been a dialogue between the Tsotsitaal style and the global since at least the 1940s, which should put to rest fears that increased global influence since the end of apartheid will diminish the integrity of local South African cultures.