

English in South Africa

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[This article appears as the Introduction to the *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles*.]

In the South African context English has been both a highly influential language, and a language influenced, in different ways and to different degrees, by processes of adaptation within the country's various communities.

Recent estimates based on the 1991 census (Schuring 1993) indicate that approximately 45 per cent of the South African population have a speaking knowledge of English (the majority of the population speaking an African language, such as Zulu, Xhosa, Tswana, or Venda, as home language). The number of individuals who cite English as a home language appears to be, however, only about 10 per cent of the population. Of this figure it would seem that at least one in three English-speakers come from ethnic groups other than the white one (in proportionally descending order, from the South African Indian, Coloured, and Black ethnic groups). This figure has shown some increase in recent years.

The coming of the English

Records indicate that English people made initial contact with southern Africa prior to the period of formal British colonization of the area (Silva 1996). From the sixteenth century onwards, for instance, English explorers and traders who visited the region began to introduce a vocabulary describing the land and its people.

More lasting experiences of the area are also on record during this early period (Burman 1986). In the late seventeenth century a group of English sailors was wrecked on the Natal coast, and settled (in the present region of the coastal city of Durban) amongst the native inhabitants (probably Zulu), by whom they were amicably received. The sailors learned the language and customs of the local people, and explored and traded extensively over a relatively large area. While some were rescued after a few years of what appears to have been an adventurous but comfortable life, a few remained behind, forming what could possibly be regarded – a hundred years before the formal commencement of British colonization – as the first permanent settlement of English-speakers in southern Africa.. Xhosa oral lore also tells of English-speaking castaways (including a civilian woman by the name of Bessie) who were absorbed into a particular clan, apparently in the late eighteenth century. To this day there exists a Xhosa clan with the name 'abelungu', the Xhosa term for white people.

Besides these early encounters, three initial historical phases in the formal establishment of English-speakers in South Africa may be discerned (Lanham, 1982):

1. Following Britain's initial occupation of the Cape Colony in 1795, the first major establishment in 1820 of approximately 4,000 British immigrants on farms along the Eastern Cape frontier. These settlers were mostly from southern England, and primarily of working-class or lower-middle-class backgrounds. During the formation of a classless frontier society with few attachments to the home country, a 'settler English' developed which merged features of the various English dialects originally spoken by the settlers (a strongly influential dialect being Cockney), and which also revealed features indicative of extensive interaction with the Dutch farming community already established in the area.
2. The second major settlement of approximately 4,000 British immigrants in the colony of Natal between 1849 and 1851. Unlike the 1820 settlers, these immigrants, the 'Byrne settlers', were typically of middle- and upper-middle-class origin, and predominantly from the north of England. This group also appears to have maintained stronger ties with Britain than did the 1820 settlers (Branford 1991).
3. From 1870, the discovery of gold and diamonds, and the industrial revolution, which led to further British immigration, extensive urbanization, and the emergence of a stratified urban society. In terms of variety of English, the most affluent class in this context was associated with an externally focused British standard – Received Pronunciation. The variety of English which had developed in Natal, however, emerged as the basis of a local norm for the aspiring middle class, while Eastern Cape English assumed a low status, and became associated with working-class speech.

Language status

English was declared the sole official language of the Cape Colony in 1822 (replacing Dutch), and the stated language policy of the government of the time was one of Anglicization of the region. On the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910, which united the former Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State with the Cape and Natal colonies, English was made the official language together with Dutch (which was replaced by Afrikaans in 1925). During the height of the era of Afrikaner nationalism and apartheid, as well as after the establishment of the Republic of South Africa in 1961, this policy continued, the African languages being accorded no official status. However, in the 'independent homelands' (established as part of the apartheid policy of 'separate development'), English rather than Afrikaans was typically utilized by homeland authorities as an official language, together with one or more African languages of the region. Since the first democratic elections in 1994, in terms of the new interim constitution, English is now but one of eleven official languages in the 'new South Africa' (the others being Afrikaans, Zulu, Xhosa, siSwati, Ndebele, Southern Sotho, Tswana, Northern Sotho, Venda, and Tsonga).

The influence of English

English is presently established throughout South African society, amongst individuals from a

variety of linguistic and ethnic backgrounds (although less so in the rural than the urban areas, and amongst the working class). Especially amongst the educated, English functions as a lingua franca, and is a primary language of government, business, and commerce. It is a compulsory subject in all schools, and is the preferred medium of instruction in most schools and tertiary institutions (the only other medium of instruction at advanced levels at present being Afrikaans). In terms of societal influence it is clear that English has spread far beyond the domain of those of British origin (Mesthrie 1993).

Amongst the African majority, English has typically been seen as the language of liberation and black unity (as opposed to Afrikaans, which has been perceived as the language of the oppressor). Very few Africans, however, presently reveal complete language shift to English away from African languages. While English functions as the language of prestige and power, an African language is typically maintained as a solidarity code. According to the latest census figures, while 33 per cent of Africans have a knowledge of English, only about 1 per cent cite English as a home language.

The initial spread of English amongst Africans took place during the colonial era, through mission education which enabled a high standard of English amongst a privileged minority. Subsequently, however, the apartheid policy in general, and the discriminatory Bantu Education policy in particular, resulted in a poor acquisitional context, with restricted access to English and little opportunity to develop appropriate abilities in the language. Consequently, a major educational and societal challenge has been to improve access to English amongst the African majority.

Amongst whites as a whole, 89 per cent appear to have a speaking ability in English. Amongst white Afrikaners, despite negative sentiments towards English earlier in this century, an ability in the language has become essential, given its general societal status and the lack of popular support for Afrikaans. Such speakers typically reveal superior abilities in English than native English speakers do in Afrikaans, and there is some evidence of language shift towards English amongst those who were previously Afrikaans-speakers.

For 'Coloureds' whose traditional language was Afrikaans, English has become increasingly influential since the early nineteenth century (Mesthrie 1993). While complete language shift to English *has* occurred in this group, this appears to be a trend only amongst more affluent and educated individuals. In total, 51 per cent of 'Coloureds' indicated a speaking knowledge of English in the 1991 census.

For South Africans of Indian origin there has been considerable language shift towards English, which has almost completely replaced the traditional Indian languages as home language. Census figures indicate that 99 per cent of South Africa's Asian population (the majority of whom are of Indian descent) know English.

English has also had a strong influence on the languages of South Africa, and an enormous stock of English words has been adopted into Afrikaans and the African languages. The pervasiveness of code-switching – the mixing of English and another indigenous language – is perhaps the

strongest indication of the impact of English. Such mixing has for many speakers become a linguistic norm, reflecting a dual identity of membership of both the elite and the specifically African groups. Consider the following example of code-mixing, with Zulu, English (*italics*), and Afrikaans (**bold**), recorded in Soweto:

I-Chiefs isidle *nge-referee's optional time, otherwise* ngabe ihambe **sleg. Maar** *why* benga *stopi* this system *ye-injury time?* (Mfusi 1989: 31)

Chiefs [a local soccer team] have won owing to the referee's optional time, otherwise they could have lost. But why is this system of injury time not phased out?'

Varieties of English

Given the discussion so far, it should be clear that there is presently considerable (and overlapping) variation in the manifestation of English in South Africa. First, one may distinguish between various 'ethnic varieties', such as 'Coloured', Black, South African Indian, and Afrikaans English, besides White South African English as traditionally defined. Each of these varieties in turn extends on a continuum from 'broad' to more 'cultivated' varieties (depending on the educational level and social status of its speakers), with these varieties becoming less distinct at higher levels of education. An additional overlay of variation is the distinction between first and second language varieties.

Amongst white English-speakers there has been a traditional threefold distinction between 'Conservative', 'Respectable', and 'Extreme' South African English (Lanham 1982). Conservative South Africa English is based on the (now dated) British norm of Received Pronunciation; Respectable English is an indigenously developed norm, typically found amongst the white English-speaking middle class, while Extreme South African English is associated with the lower classes and low educational levels.

Conservative South African English, as a variety based on externally rather than internally (and therefore ethnically) based norms, appears to have emerged as a prestigious variety or model across all ethnically based varieties. Many English newsreaders, no matter what their ethnicity, typically use something approximating this on radio and television. However, indigenously developed and more ethnically marked varieties, especially black accented English, appear to be becoming more acceptable, and are increasingly found on television and radio news broadcasts.

Influences on English

Indigenization or nativization is the process through which a language is accommodated and adapted to its speakers and their circumstances. In a country where English is acquired and used in a variety of different contexts, as it is in South Africa, the indigenization of English reflects particular socio-historical processes which have resulted in the emergence of the varieties discussed above. As in other parts of the globe, therefore, 'new Englishes' have come into being

in South Africa, reflecting the peculiarities of the South African situation and its people. Consider the following examples illustrating selected grammatical features of various varieties:

General South African English

- (a) 'Busy' as a marker of the progressive: 'I'm busy cooking'
- (b) Reduplication of adverb 'now' as 'now-now', which denotes either 'immediately' or 'soon'

African English

- (a) Use of indefinite article before certain 'non-count' nouns: 'He was carrying a luggage.'
- (b) Use of 'can be able' for 'can': 'I can be able to do it' (Gough 1995).

'Coloured' English

- (a) Use of 'the dative of advantage': 'I'm gonna buy me a new car.'
- (b) Use of 'do' or 'did' in unemphasized statements and questions: 'I did tell him to come.' 'Who did throw that?' (Mesthrie 1993:31)

South African Indian English

- (a) Use of 'y'all' as second person plural pronoun
- (b) Retention of ordinary question order in indirect questions with the verb 'be': 'I don't know what's that.' (Mesthrie 1989: 6).

The future of English

Despite the popular support English has among the masses, there is an attitude among the intelligentsia that the dominance of English entrenches present unequal power relations in the country. It is held that English is not a neutral language, as some would believe, but that it effectively discriminates against the majority of the country's citizens. In South Africa such thinking appears to be reflected in a shift in state policy towards emphasizing multilingualism and the rights of indigenous languages against English as a prerequisite for democracy.

An alternative response to the simple rejection of English has been to valorize the indigenous varieties of English. As opposed to imposed, externally focused, standards, many authors have emphasized the future emergence of a specifically South African norm, reflecting influences and changes from the other languages of South Africa.

More generally, perhaps, the future of English within South Africa is not so much a question of

what variety of English will emerge, but rather of whether an appropriate learning context can be constructed which enables English to be a language of access and empowerment.

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