

South African English: Oppressor or Liberator?

Penny Silva

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A. English in South Africa

1. *A brief outline of its history*

The history of English in South Africa dates from the arrival of the British at the Cape in 1806. As was the case in most colonies, English was brought to South Africa during the 19th century initially by soldiers, and then by administrators, missionaries, settlers, and fortune-seekers. It took root as a southern African language as a result of the settlements of 1820 (in the Eastern Cape) and 1848–1862 (in Natal), and of the influx to the diamond mines of Kimberley (1870) and the gold mines of the Witwatersrand (1886).

English has evoked differing reactions in the different South African language communities. From the beginning, English was imposed at the Cape upon an unwilling Dutch (later Afrikaans) community. There was an attempt to make English the sole language of the law and of education, even in the overwhelmingly Dutch/Afrikaans-speaking rural areas, causing a deep resentment which is still noticeable in some Afrikaner groups today. Afrikaner hostility towards English was of course considerably hardened by the South African (or ‘Boer’) War of 1899–1902, and English became *die vyand se taal*, ‘the language of the enemy’.

In the early years of the 19th century English was introduced into many black communities of the Eastern Cape (and subsequently Natal) by missionaries – who at the same time codified Xhosa, and later the other African languages. English was used as the medium of instruction in mission schools – “superior English, classical and mathematical education” being offered. By the end of the century there was an influential corps of black educators, writers, ministers, and political leaders who were fluent in English. The accomplished, elegant writings of John Tengo Jabavu, Gwayi Tyamzashe, Sol Plaatje, John Knox Bokwe, and many others, remain as proof of this.

As in most countries where it serves as *lingua franca*, English came to be perceived as the language of the social elite. But while it was seen as the language of aspiration and empowerment for black South Africans and for many Afrikaners, among a significant section of the Afrikaans population it was consistently received with hostility as an oppressor, and, from the time the National Party came to power in 1948, Afrikaans became the openly-favoured language. Despite the fact that English was the other official language, the business of government and administration was conducted almost exclusively in Afrikaans. State resources were allocated to the development of Afrikaans while English was afforded a lesser status and the African languages were ignored (except for some being declared the official languages of the discredited ethnic ‘homelands’).

Despite the treatment of English as a ‘Cinderella’ language in official circles from 1948–94, English was too powerful to be adversely affected, and it retained its dominance as the language of higher education, commerce, science, and technology, and as the internal and international language of communication.

2. The nature of South African English (SAE): what distinguishes it from other varieties?

South African English has always existed in a complex multilingual and multi-cultural environment. Since 1994 English has been one of eleven official languages, and mother-tongue English-speakers number just three and a half million in a population of over forty million people – under 9%. So the position of SAE is markedly different from that in multi-lingual but predominantly English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the USA. There is the potential for influence by many more languages than in other English-speaking communities, and these languages have widely divergent origins and structures. From the beginning English was in “extensive and intimate” contact with another language, Afrikaans, a descendant of Dutch which was influenced by Malayo-Javanese and Khoi languages. The South African Bantu languages are divided into two major groups, Nguni in the east (Zulu, Xhosa, Siswati, Ndebele) and Sotho in the central and northern areas (Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi). Two far-northern languages, Xitsonga and Tshivenda, are unrelated to the Nguni and Sotho groups. Among the languages not recognized as official are the vanishing Indian languages, particularly Gujarati and Hindi, formerly influential in the province of Kwazulu-Natal; community languages like Portuguese, German, and Greek; and religious languages such as Arabic and Hebrew.

While English-speakers are certainly out-numbered, there is at the same time a larger, more permanent, and more influential body of mother-tongue speakers in South Africa than is the case, for instance, in India, Nigeria, or Kenya. There is in other words a greater ‘standard’ mother-tongue English presence in South Africa than in some countries which have opted for English as the language of communication.

The assimilation of words and patterns from the other South African languages, over nearly 200 years, has made SAE into a variety of English which is rooted in the region and which reflects the way in which all South African communities have appropriated the language. The vocabulary of SAE has been influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the other ten official languages, and by other languages too, both historical and contemporary – but SAE has particularly been influenced by the following languages:

- Afrikaans, e.g. *apartheid*, *boerewors* ‘spiced sausage’, *braai* ‘barbecue’, *in a dwaal* ‘confused, dreamy’, *jol* ‘have fun’, *laatlammetjie* ‘younger last child’, *lekker* ‘pleasant, nice, delicious’, *middelmannetjie* ‘ridge down the middle of a dirt road’, *springbok* ‘type of antelope’ and ‘sports-person in a national team’.
- the Nguni languages, especially Xhosa and Zulu, e.g. *bonsella* ‘surprise gift, something extra’, *dagha* ‘(to) plaster’, *indaba* ‘discussion’, *lobola* ‘bride price’, *muti* ‘medicine’, *spaza* ‘informal township shop’, *tokoloshe* ‘malevolent spirit’.

Less influential are:

- the Sotho languages (Sesotho, Sepedi, and Setswana), e.g. *the Difaqane* ‘large-scale dispersal of tribes-people during the 19th century’, *mampara* ‘idiot, silly person’, *marula* ‘tree; its edible berries’, and several Indian languages (especially Gujarati and Hindi), e.g. *breyani* ‘Indian dish of meat and rice’, *bunny-chow* ‘curry in a hollowed-out half-loaf of bread’, *Deepavali* ‘religious festival’ (known as *Diwali* elsewhere), and *samosa* ‘triangular pastry with curried filling’ (known as *samosa* in Britain), *charo* ‘Indian’ (affectionate if used by an Indian person, but racist if used by others).

Several languages were influential in the past:

- Portuguese, e.g. *bredie* ‘stew’, *commando*, *kraal* ‘animal enclosure’, *padrao* ‘cross’ (as erected by early explorers)
- the Khoisan languages, e.g. *abba* ‘carry (a child) on one’s back’, *buchu* ‘medicinal plant’, *dagga* ‘marijuana’, *eina* ‘ouch!’, *gogga* ‘insect, creepy-crawly’, *kierie* ‘knobbed stick’, *kudu* ‘large antelope’
- and the Malayo-Javanese languages, e.g. *bobotie* ‘curried mince dish’, *pondokkie* ‘rough hut, hovel’, *sjambok* ‘whip’

In addition to borrowed words, SAE includes expressions translated from other languages, e.g. from Zulu and Xhosa, the common greetings *go well* and *stay well*, *monkey's wedding* ‘simultaneous sunshine and rain’; *to throw the bones* ‘to divine’; and from Afrikaans, *to hold thumbs* ‘to cross one’s fingers’ and *to suck one’s thumb* ‘to make something up’ – with the noun *thumbsuck*. It has also developed new senses of established English words, e.g. *cubbyhole* ‘glove compartment’, *just now* ‘in a while’, *location* ‘black residential area’, *motivation* ‘project proposal’, *robot* ‘traffic-light’; has retained old-fashioned British English words, e.g. *geyser* ‘water heater’, *bioscope* ‘cinema’; and has created new expressions, e.g. *bundu-bash* ‘drive (or walk) through wild countryside’, *interleading (doors, rooms)* ‘interconnecting’, *securocrat* ‘military bureaucrat’, *skiboat* ‘flat-bottomed fishing-boat’, *sleeper-couch*, *stop street* ‘stop-sign, intersection’.

In SAE, pronunciation and intonation (and often vocabulary, and sometimes even grammar) differ markedly from one ethnic community to another (largely a result of the Group Areas act during the apartheid era, which separated communities into different residential areas, and segregated school-children into ethnically-based schools). There is no one South African English, but a number may be distinguished – mother-tongue, Afrikaans, Black, Coloured, and Indian English, each with its own standard form. Obviously, as the ethnic barriers break down in the new society, these old, enforced differences have begun to blur.

B. Attitudes to SA

1. Introduction

South Africans have been generally unaware of the extent to which their variety differed from other world varieties. White mother-tongue speakers are aware of some of the distinguishing features (particularly the slang), and are typically very critical of SAE, perceiving it as an inferior, ‘incorrect’ version of British English. The publication of specialized SAE dictionaries, and especially the appearance of the *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* (1996), will hopefully help to improve the perceived status of the variety within the mother-tongue community, and will perhaps raise awareness of the ‘flavour’ of SAE, and of the contribution made by all language communities to this variety. A black journalist recently wrote the following:

Publishing a dictionary of words which are as exclusively South African as *pap en wors* [porridge and sausage] frees indigenous people from balking at using their own version of the English language. This book recognizes, traces, documents, celebrates and elevates our English. It is an affirmation of this eclectic language and the freedom of a people. (Saint Molakeng, *The Sowetan*, 29 Oct. 1997, p.17)

2. Apartheid, Afrikaans, and English

Whereas in other post-colonial societies English has often been viewed as an interloper, imposed from outside and thus politically suspect, in South African society Afrikaans shielded SAE from this stigma in the period 1948–94. Afrikaans became known as “the language of the oppressor”: apartheid was enforced in Afrikaans, as it was the language of the bureaucracy and the police force. In contrast, English was chosen as language of communication by the ANC and the other liberation organizations during the ‘freedom struggle’, and “has typically been seen as the language of liberation and black unity” (Gough 1996:xviii). English was chosen as the language of instruction by the black governments of ‘independent homelands’ such as the Transkei, and English-language newspapers enjoyed wide readership in the townships. The attempt to introduce Afrikaans as a language of instruction in ‘Bantu Education’ schools, supplanting English in some subjects, was the spark which ignited the Soweto uprising of 1976.

Since 1994 Afrikaans has severed its intimate connection with power and oppression, and there is a new emphasis being placed by Afrikaners on the fact that Afrikaans is the community language of blacks as well as whites. The public use of Afrikaans (in government and the media) has shrunk dramatically, and its symbolic role has changed from being the language of power to being one of a number of community languages, leading (understandably) to insecurity and considerable anger amongst many Afrikaans-speakers. It is notable that some Afrikaners have recently identified themselves in public forums with speakers of the African languages, ‘standing together’ against the perceived threat of the juggernaut, English.

3. *Paradoxes*

There is much that is paradoxical in the way that English operates, and is perceived, in South Africa.

Politicians and position papers condemn the hegemony of English, and call for the development and modernization of the African languages as languages for higher education; yet the reality is that practicality, the cost, and public opinion all lead to English.

The constitution entrenches eleven official languages as equals, and supports the concept of multilingualism: yet impassioned conferences on the promotion of multilingualism have been conducted largely in English. The language of government is English, despite valiant attempts to publish official material in several languages. The reality is that the high cost of multilingualism is beyond the reach of South Africa, and English is the only 'neutral' national language available to government. In Vivian de Klerk's (1996:8) words:

In South Africa language has now become a terrain of struggle, a struggle over the basic human right to express oneself in one's mother tongue. It is all about self-worth and belonging and is underpinned by power: economic interests, political muscle and cultural concerns.

In this context the status of English is a highly-charged issue; and yet practical considerations usually result in the choice of English, with no apparent struggle and little argument.

English is the mother-tongue of 3.5 million South Africans of all ethnic backgrounds,: yet it is often perceived only as a 'neutral', colourless *lingua franca*, not as a cultural and community language. The stresses arising from this perception are illustrated in the recent restructuring of the English-language radio station, SAfm, as the 'flagship' of national radio. It is now the one station which attempts to cater for all communities, and in which non-mother-tongue speakers are employed as announcers and newsreaders. The process has led to discontent and indignation in the (white) English-speaking community, and to accusations from the head of SABC Radio that this reaction was "racist, colonialist, chauvinist".

English is seen as the language of upward mobility and empowerment by black South Africans: yet it is the historically disempowered (and particularly the black rural poor), who are least likely to have access to this resource. As Vivian de Klerk (1996:7) writes:

Alongside its growth because of its perceived neutrality and its high status ... and despite a pragmatic recognition of what English can offer, there is a very real possibility that elitism, domination and social injustice, as well as personal language loss could result from the spread of English ... and this is particularly true of South Africa. As Albie Sachs puts it ... "the omnipresence of English can be inconvenient and suffocating and induce a sense of disempowerment and exclusion. In a sense, all language rights are against English, which in the modern world is such a powerful language that it needs no protection at all."

The opinion has been expressed by politicians and academics that 'African English' should be accepted as 'standard' – that English should be restandardised. However, much of the value attached to English resides in its status as international language, and increasing divergence from the international standard will tend to disempower second-language speakers and make internal communication more difficult. The average black parent demands that his or her children learn 'good English', or even 'the Queen's English'.

While Black parents insist on education in English for their children, in reality many teachers in the black school system (particularly in the rural schools) have, as an inheritance of 'Bantu Education', not acquired enough knowledge of English to make this possible. The poor use of English as a medium of instruction hampers the wider educational process; but reverting to mother-tongue instruction (as was imposed by the apartheid system) would be opposed by many black parents.

While 'good English' may be aspired to, there is often a social divide between those black people who speak 'standard' SAE and those who do not. Children who attend private schools are sometimes embarrassed by being seen to speak standard SAE, and thus adopt a more typical African pronunciation in the townships. People speaking standard SAE, or even what is perceived as 'too much' English, are given nicknames like *situation* or *excuse me*. Black television announcers with standard SAE accents are branded as too 'white' by some black viewers.

C. Conclusion

The advent of Nelson Mandela's government in 1994 brought about rapid changes in the balance between English and Afrikaans in government and the media, and also increased the use of African languages on television. English remains the politically 'neutral' language for public use: President Mandela's speeches are almost invariably in English; national conferences are held largely in English; in Parliament, although all official languages may be used, English is predominant; tertiary education is in English, with the exception of some of the Afrikaans-language campuses. Multilingualism is entrenched in the constitution, and supported as an ideal, but with its massive translating, interpreting, and printing implications, it is beyond the reach of the South African economy while there are urgent needs in health, housing, and education.

The status of English as an international language, and as one which is politically more neutral than any other South African language, and its choice by the ANC, seems to ensure its ever-increasing dominance at a national level. At this level English is a national asset and 'liberator', in that it offers international access and a tool for communication between language groups. However, this dominance is likely to result in a growing resentment of English, particularly among those who have an 'old' political agenda, or who do not have access to becoming proficient in the language. To these South Africans, English will certainly be seen as 'oppressor'.

English in South Africa has long since passed out of the hands of mother-tongue speakers. With its increased public use by the new black elite, and in the electronic media, it seems likely that standard SAE is entering a period of accelerated change. This has already led to an intolerant reaction from some conservative English-speakers, and 'standard' is likely to become an increasingly difficult issue.

If English is to be seen as 'liberator' by the average second-language speaker, the attitudes of mother-tongue speakers are significant. Triumphalism, arrogance, and irritation towards second-language speakers result in resentment.

If it is to be 'liberator', English should be a resource to be appropriated and owned by all South Africans, not just the elite, to be used as a gateway to the wider world. For this to happen, creative solutions (and massive expenditure) would have to be applied to the teaching of English, particularly in black rural schools.

Simultaneously, SAE will hopefully be claimed as the colourful and particularly local creation of an increasingly multi-ethnic company of first-, second-, and third-language speakers, and be used even more extensively than at present as the national language of communication. If it offers itself (and is perceived) as servant and liberator rather than oppressor, English will provide the linguistic 'glue' to bond a diverse and complex society.

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