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# The story of South African English: A brief linguistic overview

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## Abstract

This article provides a linguistic overview of the history and current status of South African English (SAfE). With respect to the history of this variety it deals with its colonial origins, subsequent development as well as diversification into a number of sub-varieties, both L1 and L2 in nature. Next, the article provides a brief synchronic overview of the dialect-specific features of this variety, focusing mainly on phonetics and phonology, but also dealing with morphology, lexis and grammar where pertinent. The last section of the article focuses on recent developments, both in terms of the variety itself and research in the field.

**Keywords:** South African English, historical sociolinguistics, English dialectology, phonetics, sociolinguistics

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## 1. Introduction

This article is focused on providing a brief but general overview of the evolution of South African English (SAfE) as well as its current characteristics, both from a descriptive linguistic point of view as well as from the point of view of what might be referred to as the 'social life' of this dialect i.e. the linguistic system's diachronic and synchronic relationships with social factors and forces. Thus, in Section 2 below, the social history of SAfE will be sketched, detailing its emergence via a complex koineization process during the 19<sup>th</sup>-century and then focusing on subsequent developments during the 20<sup>th</sup> into the 21<sup>st</sup>-century. Section 3 will then provide an overview of this variety's phonetic and phonological nature as well as, where relevant, prominent features on other levels of the system (e.g. lexicogrammar, morphology). Lastly, Section 4, will provide a brief review of current developments in SAfE as well as (often related) current research in the field. Where possible, details will be provided not only for the standard variety (General White SAfE<sup>1</sup>), but also for the various sociolects (e.g. Broad SAfE), ethnolects (e.g. South African Indian English) and L2-varieties (e.g. certain variants of Black South African English) that also often fall under the rubric 'South African English'.

## 2. The Historical Sociolinguistics of South African English

The history of English in South Africa technically begins with the first British occupation of the Cape in 1795 (Giliomee & Mbenga, 2007: 85). On the standard account of the history of SAfE it is not, however, until the arrival of the 1820 Settlers in the Eastern Cape (see Figure 1 below) that a new dialect of English is born (or at least 'conceived').<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1: a Map of South Africa



There is no doubt that this episode in the colonial history of South Africa constituted what Trudgill (2004: 26) refers to as a 'tabula rasa' situation i.e. 'those in which there is no prior-existing population speaking the language in question, either in the location or nearby'. In other words, a koineization or mixing process took place across the various dialects of English that served as inputs, the output of which was a new variety of English. I have referred to this dialect as Cape English (CpE) elsewhere e.g. in Bekker (2009). The standard picture, e.g. in Lanham and Macdonald (1979) or Lass (1995), is that the 1820 Settlers were mainly of lower-class origin and predominantly from the south-eastern part of England (including London). The (over)simplistic picture is, therefore, of a CpE reflecting many of the trends of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Cockney (and similar in many linguistic respects therefore to Australian English). This picture is, however, complicated by

pronouncements such as those of Welsh (1998: 127) who claims that the selection criteria for emigration “were rather too strict, in that whilst they produced a high proportion of educated and responsible citizens, there were too few labourers and artisans needed for the pioneering work”. This of course places the predominantly lower-class origin of these settlers in question, a fact which goes some way towards explaining why SAmE does *not*, unlike the other Southern Hemisphere varieties, display some typical Cockney features e.g. the use of *-in* for *-ing* for the present participle (*talkin’* for *talking*). The other complication lies in the fact that the area in question had already been settled to a degree by speakers of what was no doubt by then a form of Proto-Afrikaans (a Dutch-based creole). There was much intensive contact (e.g. intermarriage) between the English and Afrikaans groups and there is some debate in the literature as to whether SAmE (and thus by implication CpE) was influenced by Afrikaans on more than just a superficial level (i.e. on a structural as opposed to purely lexical or lexicogrammatical level); with Lanham and Macdonald (1979) for example supporting the notion, while Lass and Wright (1986) vehemently deny it.<sup>3</sup>

The second phase in the evolution of SAmE was a second period of settlement, this time during the 1840s to 50s and focussed on Natal.<sup>4</sup> Here the standard picture in the literature is that the relevant settlers were of a more middle-class to upper-class nature (as compared with the earlier 1820 settlers), that there was virtually no Afrikaans influence on the koineization process that presumably took place and that there was a distinctly north-of-England bias.<sup>5</sup> The output of the relevant koineization process can usefully be termed Natal English (NE) and for many commentators the formation of SAmE ends at this point. This standard model of the formation of SAmE is, for example, echoed in Schneider (2007: 176) who explains that, with respect to the Eastern Cape and Natal periods “in both cases a recognizable founder effect is worth noticing: despite their relatively small numbers ... these two groups laid the foundations for the main accents of present-day SAmE”. As argued for in Bekker (2009), however, an important third phase in the development of SAmE took place during the birth and development of Johannesburg (see Figure 1) which was itself based on the discovery of gold on the so-called Witwatersrand. A discussion of the technical details is not appropriate for a brief overview such as this, but in essence the argument is that Johannesburg constituted yet another *tabula rasa* situation (Trudgill 2004: 26) and that a third koineization process took place, inputs into which included CpE, NE, a whole gamut of other English accents (British as well as colonial<sup>6</sup>) as well as L2 varieties such as the English spoken by L1-Afrikaans and L1-Yiddish speakers.<sup>7</sup>

As argued by Bekker (2009: 70-81), the output of this last and third koineization process was a sociolectal continuum that many refer to as ‘South African English’ i.e. that variety still spoken primarily (although certainly not exclusively) by ‘white’ L1-speakers of English in South Africa and henceforth referred to as ‘White’ SAmE (WSAmE).<sup>8</sup> This sociolectal continuum is traditionally broken up into three units, referred to by Lass (1995: 93) as “the great trichotomy” (a feature shared with other Southern Hemisphere Englishes):

1. A standard with an external British reference: in terms of pronunciation this is near-RP in Wells’ (1982: 297-301) sense and often approximates an older form

of RP. This variety is hardly used among young speakers any longer (Lass 2002: 110). This is referred to in the literature as either Conservative or Cultivated (W)SAfE (CWSAfE).

2. A more local standard that has progressively become the most widely spoken sociolect of WSAfE; in terms of accent, lexicogrammar and lexis this standard is distinctively different from other varieties of English spoken around the world. This local standard is either referred to as Respectable or General (W)SAfE (GWSAfE). According to some commentators, such as Lanham and Macdonald (1979), GWSAfE is, very roughly-speaking, NE absorbed into the Johannesburg mixing process and reanalyzed as a sociolect. In Lanham and Macdonald's (1979) time at least both CWSAfE and GWSAfE were associated with "rejection of South Africanism in favour of links with the wider Anglo-Saxon world, a low level of patriotism, and hostility towards Afrikaners" (Jeffery 1982: 254). I suspect, however, that in the intervening 30 or so years, and in the case of GWSAfE, these associations have largely dissipated, partly as a result of the spread of GWSAfE at the expense of the other sociolects, and partly because of the ideological effects of the political change to a fully democratic society in 1994.
3. A variety alternatively known as Extreme or Broad (W)SAfE (BWSAfE): the indexicality of this variety is more than just working-class, an observation which, I suspect, remains as valid today as it was in Lanham and Macdonald's (1979) time. As explained by Jeffery (1982: 253-255; my parenthesis), BWSAfE is associated with attributes such as being "tough, manly, sport-mad, sociable, patriotic and other things beside ... Ext SAE is loaded with political-ideological meaning as well as social: the South African tradition is to be not only tough etc. but also conservative, right-wing, authoritarian, unsympathetic to African aspirations ... Ext SAE speech reliably predicts such views ... which are a significant part of the stereotype of the "typical local man". And indeed you do not have to be LC [Lower Class] to conform to the stereotype". It should also be noted that "the more extreme the variety is, the harder it becomes to distinguish it from second-language Afrikaans English" (Lass 2004: 373). For Lanham and Macdonald (1979) and other commentators the idea is, very roughly again, that CpE was absorbed into the Johannesburg mix and reanalyzed as this sociolect.

During the 20<sup>th</sup>-century this sociolectal continuum has dispersed geographically, largely doing away with the original regional lects (CpE and NE) and creating a typical Southern Hemisphere level of regional homogeneity.<sup>9</sup> Generally, GWSAfE has spread at the expense of both BWSAfE and, in particular, CWSAfE.

While WSAfE was undergoing its somewhat complex formative process, other varieties of SAfE were of course also developing. These include South African Indian English (SAIE), Cape Flats English/Coloured English (C[F]E) and Black South African English (BSAE). In the case of SAIE, developments began in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century when the "the British-administered Indian government permitted the recruiting of labourers to a variety of colonial territories" and as a result "just over 150 000 workers came to Natal on indentured contracts between 1860 and 1911" (Mesthrie 1995a: 116). These immigrants spoke a variety of Indian languages, both Dravidian and Indo-European, some features of which have determined the linguistic nature of

SAIE (see Section 3 for more). English was gradually introduced into the linguistic repertoire of these immigrants and their descendents, first as a L2, later as a L1 (see Mesthrie 1995b: 251-252) and currently exists along a continuum running from basilectal to acrolectal lects, the latter almost indistinguishable from WSAfE. According to Finn (2004: 964) CFE "originated in working class neighbourhoods in inner-city Cape Town. However, as a result of Apartheid social engineering, most of its speakers now live far from the city center in a number of adjoining areas collectively known as 'The Cape Flats'". The terminology is somewhat problematic here given that the alternative term, 'Coloured English', is, according to Finn (2004: 964), objectionable on both political grounds (certain individuals resist the label) and rational grounds (it is an over-generalisation given that not all 'coloured' individuals speak what he refers to as 'Cape Flats English' either because of their social class or regional affinity). If one rejects the term, however, it is not clear what one should call the non-acrolectal (i.e. non-WSAfE-like) varieties of SAfE spoken by 'Coloured' individuals in areas of South Africa other than Cape Town, and as a result, I have retained the term 'Coloured' English (CE) to refer to all non-acrolectal ethnolects of SAfE (including CFE) spoken by individuals that would probably have been classified as 'coloured' during the Apartheid regime. As far as BSAE is concerned, the origins of this variety lie in attempts by speakers of South African Bantu languages (Zulu, Tswana etc.) to learn English, either informally or within an educational context. There is some debate as to the L1 or L2 status of this variety (or varieties) but it is at least clear that within the post-Apartheid context the English spoken by 'black' individuals can no more be simplistically characterized simply on the basis of L1-interference, since like other varieties of SAfE (e.g. SAIE) it exists on a creole-like continuum with acrolectal speakers often attempting to approximate WSAfE; or something similar but with a number of features which index ethnic identity (see Section 4 for more on this and related issues).

### 3. The Linguistic Features of South African English

This section will be divided into two sub-sections: Section 3.1. will deal with the phonetics and phonology of SAfE (in all its variety) while Section 3.2. will focus on other levels of the linguistic system e.g. lexicogrammar.

#### 3.1 The Phonetics and Phonology of SAfE

Some distinctive characteristics of the various accents subsumed under the rubric 'SAfE' are as follows:

- WSAfE displays what has been commonly (and egregiously) referred to as the KIN-PIN Split by Wells (1982: 612-3). As shown in Bekker (2009), this is not a phonemic split at all but rather the entrenchment<sup>10</sup> of allophonic variation in the KIT vowel.<sup>11</sup> Basically in certain restricted contexts (e.g. after /h/) KIT is pronounced [ɪ], before tautosyllabic /l/ it is [ɤ] while in all other contexts it is [ə].
- Unlike the other Southern Hemisphere Englishes (Australian English (AusE) and New Zealand English (NZE)), WSAfE does not have a diphthongized

FLEECE vowel (i.e. [əɪ] or thereabouts); even in BWSaFe it is a categorically monophthongal [i:].

- WSAFe does not participate as fully in the Diphthong-Shift and the PRICE-MOUTH Crossover as do the other two Southern Hemisphere varieties (Wells 1982) i.e. at least in GWSaFe, MOUTH often has a similar starting point to PRICE (i.e. [vʊ] and [eɪ] respectively<sup>12</sup>), FACE has a narrow diphthong (i.e. [eɪ]), while GOAT in GWSaFe is often fronted as opposed to lowered (i.e. [øʊ]). It is only in the broader idiolects that one finds a relatively fronted MOUTH onset (i.e. [æʊ]), backed PRICE onset (i.e. [ɪɪ]), and lowered onsets for FACE and GOAT (i.e. [eɪ] and [vʊ] respectively).
- WSAFe is often recognizable in terms of its substantially backed BATH vowel, which in the broader lects also shows lip-rounding (i.e. [ɑ:] or [ɒ:]); again SaFe differs from AusE and NZE in this respect, both of which have a fronted BATH vowel i.e. [a:].
- Some consonantal characteristics of WSAFe include the fact that it has a clear-dark /l/-allophony, no evidence of /l/-vocalisation in coda position (i.e. [jeɫ] not Cockney-like [jeʊ] for *yell*), Yod-Assimilation (e.g. [tʃu:n] not RP-like [tju:n] for *tune*) and according to Bowerman (2004a: 935), a ``tendency for voiceless plosives to be unaspirated in stressed word-initial environments''.
- BWSaFe often displays features that are, perhaps, due to early Afrikaans influence (via CpE) e.g. obstruent (tapped) /r/ (e.g. [re:li:] for *really*), semi-rhoticity and epenthetic schwa (e.g. [fələm] for *film*). The L2 English variety spoken by Afrikaans speakers (i.e. Afrikaans English (AfrE)) would, of course, show clear signs of L1-interference e.g. word-final devoicing ([dɒk] for *dog*).
- SAIE displays a variety of dialect-specific phonetic features, many of which are traceable to the original Indian substrate languages. According to Mesthrie (2004a: 956-959), vocalic features include an unrounded RP-like NURSE vowel (i.e. [ɜ:], different in this respect to GWSaFe which has [ø:]), a GOOSE vowel that tends to be backer than in WSAFe, and a short diphthong in GOAT (in the region of [oʊ] rather than [vʊ] or [øʊ] as found in BWSaFe and GWSaFe respectively). Consonantal features include occasional retroflexion of /t, d, n/, the realization of /f, v/ as [ɸ, ɸ] and /θ, ð/ as [t̪, d̪] (i.e. [d̪] for *then*) (Mesthrie 2004a: 959-962).
- According to Finn (2004: 979), phonological features unique to CFE (and perhaps CE more generally) include an antedental /f/ (lower lip advanced beyond the top teeth), final-nasal elision ([plæ̃] for *plan*), and Canadian Raising of PRICE and MOUTH with non-low onsets (i.e. [əɪ] and [əʊ]) in pre-fortis environments. There is also evidence to suggest the influence of, among other things, Cape Vernacular Afrikaans (CVA)<sup>13</sup> on this variety e.g. LOT-raising (e.g. *lot* as [lot] and not WSAFe [lɒt]) and /h/ as voiced i.e. [ɦ], the influence being conceivably both of a historical nature (in terms of language contact) and synchronic (in terms of L1-interference in the case of CVA speakers).
- Van Rooy (2004: 944) summarizes the general phonological status of BSAE as including the reduction of typical English vowel contrasts (e.g. *bad, bird* and *bed* as [bed] or [be:d]), occasional consonant cluster reduction and syllable-timed stress patterning, all of which are ultimately reducible to the substrate Bantu languages.

### 3.2 Other Linguistic Features of SAE

Linguistic features at other levels of the linguistic system include the following:

- WSAE displays a range of lexical items borrowed from other South African languages e.g. *braai* [*trans.* barbecue] from Afrikaans, *indaba* [*trans.* conference; meeting] from Zulu (see Branford 1994 for more extensive details on borrowings into WSAE).
- WSAE also displays the use of a number of discourse markers borrowed from Afrikaans e.g. the use of the interjection *ag* [*trans.* oh!; [ex]] in colloquial speech e.g. *Ag, go away man!*
- Another probable borrowing from Afrikaans is the use of *now- now* and *busy* in WSAE (and in other varieties of SAE too). The first expression is idiosyncratic since its use in expressions like *I'll do it now-now* usually means that the act to be performed will be done at a point in time further removed than the time referred to in *I'll do it now*. Afrikaans has a similar expression: *nou-nou*. The use of *busy* in WSAE has been subject to grammaticalization since it is often used as a redundant 'carrier' of the progressive aspect, as in *I was busy sleeping* (which does not imply, as in other dialects of English, the literal meaning of the word *busy*). Afrikaans expresses the progressive aspect in a similar periphrastic (although non-redundant) manner: the English sentence above is translated as *Ek was besig om te slaap* [*trans.* **besig** = 'busy'].
- Bowerman (2004b: 953) provides other WSAE features such as 'the strong obligative modal *must* [which] has much less social impact in WSAE than in other varieties of English, and often substitutes for polite *should/shall*'. Thus a visitor to South Africa from Britain asking for directions will be told to his amazement that he *must* take this road and then he *must* turn left etc.
- For SAE, Mesthrie (2004c: 974-992) includes features such as 'the regular use of *y'all* (< *you all*) for second person plural pronouns' and the use of the present participle 'in a number of contexts beyond (and in addition to) the usual progressive in StE ... *I'm staying in this house seven years*'.
- According to McCormick (2004), non-phonetic features of CFE include the non-standard use of auxiliaries (e.g. *We did move here a week already* meaning 'We had moved here a week previously'), the deletion of the adverbial suffix (*We must move quick*), various non-standard forms of agreement or lack therefore (*I've watched this children*), the use of loanwords from Afrikaans (*I wasn't mos so well* [*mos trans.* indeed, of course]) and idiosyncratic meanings for certain word (e.g. the use of *every time* for *always*: *What is the purpose of you doing this every time here?*).
- For BSAE, Mesthrie (2004b) provides some of the following non-phonetic characteristics: the mutual substitution of *he* and *she* (as a result of gender differences not being marked in Bantu languages), the particularly 'high use of topicalisation phenomena like left location, fronting and focus movement ... *Today's children, they are so lazy*', the use of the progressive for stative verbs (*Even racism is still existing*) and the treatment of non-count nouns as count nouns (*We bought two furnitures*). According to Buthelezi (1995: 245-246), BSAE is characterized by a number of loanwords from the South African Bantu



languages (e.g. *skorokoro* meaning 'a jalopy' [from Sotho]) as well as a number of lexicogrammatical idiosyncracies such as the use of *late* as a predicate: *she is late* means 'she is dead'.

## 4. Recent Developments and Research into SAfE

There is growing evidence to suggest that SAfE might be undergoing a process of nascent regionalization i.e. that speakers in the different English-speaking urban centers of South Africa (Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Kimberley, Durban and Johannesburg) are developing their own manner of speaker and indexing regional provenance. This appears to be true both of WSAfE (Bekker 2007; O'Grady and Bekker 2011) and other varieties such as SAfE and CE (Mesthrie 2011). Other recent developments (or at least developments that have only recently been noted) in WSAfE in particular include the use of Uptalk (i.e. rising question-type intonation on declarative sentences) (Dorrington and Bekker 2010) as well as the possible beginnings of a NURSE-CURE Merger (Bruce and Bekker 2010) i.e. [pwø:] for *poor*.

Of perhaps greater interest, however, are the linguistic reflexes of the growing racial integration that has taken place since the advent of full democracy in 1994 in South Africa. What integration exists has been mainly the result of a burgeoning black middle-class, so it is particularly at this level of the social-class continuum that new developments in SAfE have been noted. Thus, for example, Da Silva (2007), following Horvath (1985), uses a Principal Components Analysis to analyze the accents of students at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and provides evidence for various changes within the English used by black individuals. More recently, Hartmann and Zerbian (2009) have shown that while middle-class (particularly female) black South Africans often approximate GWSAfE, they are also, it would appear, creating new means for indexing ethnic identity; in this particular case Hartmann & Zerbian (2009) found evidence for neo-rhoticity (GWSAfE being a non-rhotic variety) in the speech of many such subjects.<sup>14</sup> Research currently underway at the North-West University in Potchefstroom, South Africa, is investigating whether or not young white female South Africans are attempting to emulate their black peers in this regard. On a lexico-morphological level, Van Rooy & Terblanche (2010) have found a growing convergence between white and black speakers of SAfE. Mesthrie (2010) has broadened the investigation to include all ethnic groups (white, black, coloured and Indian) and concludes, in his study of GOOSE-Fronting among young middle-class South Africans and with a few 'ifs and buts', that 'middle-class, L1 English-speaking South African students of all backgrounds are fronting the GOOSE vowel'; thus a sign of the possible development of a new, deracialised, middle-class variety of SAfE.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has provided an overview of the various sub-varieties of SAfE, both in terms of their development, their synchronic status as well as recent development both in and across these varieties and within research being conducted in the field.

## Notes

1. The use of the term 'White' here is explained in Section 2.
2. This standard narrative of the history of SAfE effectively excludes the role played by Cape Town in the formation of this variety. This lacuna still requires further research.
3. Or at least assert that alternative endogenous explanations are, mostly, available.
4. Now KwaZulu-Natal – see Figure 1.
5. The regional bias here was no doubt tempered, although not completely, by the use of Standard English (and thus an early form of Received Pronunciation) by many of these middle-class to upper-class individuals.
6. There were, for example, immigrants from the United States and Australia.
7. The immigrants to early Johannesburg included a sizeable number of mainly Eastern European Jews, particularly from Lithuania and Latvia (Kaplan and Robertson 1991).
8. The use of scare-quotes around 'white' and other racial terms is meant to underscore the arbitrary nature of these categories as applied during the Apartheid regime in South Africa. Unfortunately, due to this country's past, linguistic divisions still often reflect these imposed racial divisions. Note, in addition, that the term SAfE is used interchangeably (and often ambiguously) in the literature to refer either to WSAfE, all L1 varieties of English spoken in South Africa, or, lastly, all forms of English used in the country.
9. There is some evidence that this is changing – see Section 4 for more details in this regard.
10. Via phonologization (as opposed to phonemicization) – see Bekker (2009: 13–18) for more on the technical details.
11. Terminology such as KIT, PRICE etc. is that of Wells (1982) and constitutes his so-called lexical sets which "refer concisely to large groups of words which tend to share the same vowel, and to the vowel which they share" (Wells 1982: xviii).
12. Sometimes PRICE is in fact considerably fronted (and monophthongized) in certain prestige varieties within WSAfE (i.e. [pra:s] for *price*). This, however, only underlines the notion that a PRICE-MOUTH Crossover is not a particularly prominent features of SAfE.
13. This is a variety of Afrikaans particular to the 'Coloured' community (and some 'black' speakers of Afrikaans). It is different in obvious ways to the Afrikaans spoken as an L1 by AfrE speakers.
14. That is, for example, the use of [kar] rather than [kɑ:] for *car*. As far as the origin of such neo-rhoticity is concerned, one possibility is of course the influence of American media products, particularly rap-culture, which many young black South Africans appear to imitate (at least partially). The irony of course lies in the fact that most rap artists would no doubt use African American Vernacular English which is non-rhotic.

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