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# The Formation of South African English

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A re-evaluation of the role of Johannesburg in the history of South African English

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## Introduction

Of all the major colonial varieties of English, South African English (SAfE) is arguably the most under-studied. Its linguistic history is also one of the most complex, South Africa having been the site of a series of immigration events involving English-speakers from a vast array of regional and social backgrounds. On top of this the English spoken by native speakers of other languages also, conceivably, had a role to play in this dialect's formation. This paper provides a brief historical reconstruction of the formation of SAfE, drawing on recent work which seems to indicate that in many important respects SAfE is younger than many might suspect.

## The Cape Colony, Natal and the Standard Model

The history of English in South Africa begins with the first British occupation of the Cape in 1795 (Giliomee and Mbenga, 2007: 85), which was followed by the second and final occupation in 1806. It is not, however, until the arrival of the 1820 Settlers at Algoa Bay in the eastern Cape Colony (see Figure 1) that a new dialect of English is 'conceived'.<sup>1</sup> This episode constitutes what Trudgill (2004: 26) refers to as a *tabula rasa* context, 'in which there is no prior-existing population speaking the language in question, either in the location or nearby'. The upshot of this is that koineization (or dialect-mixing) took place among the various English dialects that served as inputs, the output of which was a new variety of English, which can be referred to as Cape English (CE) for the sake of convenience. The existing literature generally claims that the 1820 Settlers were

predominantly lower-class and mainly from the southeast of England (including, of course, London). The picture, therefore, is of a variety similar to early 19th-century Cockney (and therefore similar in many regards to Australian English or New Zealand English).<sup>2</sup> However, according to historians such as Welsh (1998: 127) and Giliomee & Mbengwa (2007: 85–6), the approximately 4000 settlers in fact included a high proportion of *middle class, educated* settlers, many of whom had some means upon their arrival in the Cape and did not intend to become farmers or labourers. Thus, the received opinion among linguists concerning the working-class 'flavour' of CE is open to debate. In fact, an updated view *may*<sup>3</sup> help to explain why SAfE, unlike closely-related varieties like Australian English, does not display certain typical Cockney features e.g. the use of *-in* as present participle (*talkin'*



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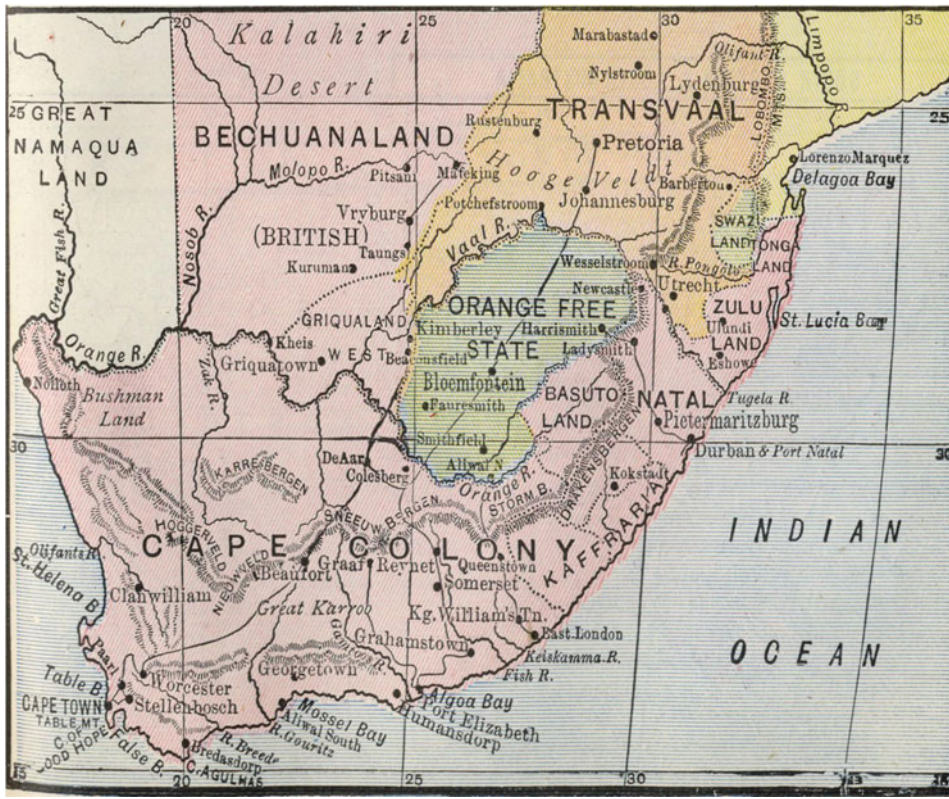


Figure 1. Map of South Africa in 1898

for *talking*). An added complication relates to the fact that the Cape Colony (including the eastern frontier area where the 1820 settlers found themselves) had already been settled to a large degree by Cape-Dutch/Afrikaans speakers. There was much subsequent and intensive contact (e.g. intermarriage) between the two groups, even if political relations were often strained (Branford, 1996: 38–9). There is therefore some debate as to whether CE (and on the standard account, SAfE) was influenced by Afrikaans on a ‘deeper’ level (e.g. accent) than the simple borrowing of words.

Another immigration ‘moment’ took place during the 1840s and 50s, the focus being on Natal, following on from the British annexation of this area from the Afrikaners in 1843. Here the normal ‘picture’ is of settlers from a more middle- to upper-class origin and with a distinctly north-of-England bias (Yorkshire and Lancashire featuring prominently), although this bias was no doubt tempered, but not completely, by the use of Standard English (and thus an early form of Received Pronunciation) by many of these middle- to upper-class immigrants. By all accounts, there

was virtually no Afrikaans influence on the dialect-mixing process. The output of this process can usefully be termed Natal English (NE) and for many commentators the formation of SAfE ends here. This *Standard Model* of the formation of SAfE is, for example, summarized by Schneider (2007: 176) who explains, with respect to the eastern Cape Colony and Natal periods, that ‘despite their relatively small numbers . . . these two groups laid the foundations for the main accents of present-day SAfE’.

Bekker (2012), however, argues that an important third phase was the establishment and development of Johannesburg, itself based on the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand.<sup>4</sup> A discussion of the technical details is not provided here, but in essence the argument is that Johannesburg constituted yet another *tabula rasa* context and that a third dialect-mixing (koineization) process took place. The relatively radical thesis presented in Bekker (2012) is that the ‘conception’ of SAfE took place at this moment. The next section looks at the facts supporting this model: the *Three-Stage Koineization Model* of the formation of SAfE.

## Johannesburg and the *Three-stage Koineization Model*

A third major influx of British subjects occurred during the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century as well as the early part of the twentieth century. It was part of a more general influx of immigrants to South Africa. Lanham (1982: 327) mentions ‘400,000 immigrants who arrived between 1875 and 1904 ... mainly from Britain and eastern and western Europe’, this influx being the result of the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley and the 1886 discovery of gold on the Rand.<sup>5</sup> According to Van Onselen (1982: xv), ‘into this cauldron of capitalist development [compare Figures 2 and 3] poured men, women and children drawn from all over the world’ and in terms of L1-English dialects there were many to choose from, including non-English but British (i.e. Scottish and Irish) as well as colonial (e.g. Australian and American) varieties. As far as English English varieties are concerned, Van Onselen (1982: 5) mentions Cornwall, Cumberland and Lancashire as prominent areas from which particularly working-class miners came, and there were, as usual, also working-class immigrants from the southeast of England, including London. Many of the mainland European immigrants were Jewish and together constituted the first un-ancestral population to be integrated into the SAfE speech-community. The vast majority would have been Yiddish speakers. This influx from the outside was accompanied by a more local migration of CE, NE and Afrikaans-speakers. The varieties of English spoken during the early days of the Rand therefore included at least the following:

- Cape English: in terms of the standard ‘picture’ and very loosely-speaking, a mixture of early 19th-century Cockney and, conceivably, the L2-English of Afrikaans speakers;
- Natal English: mainly north-of-England, but with a distinctively middle-to-upper-class ‘flavour’;

- Regional dialects from all over the British Empire (including RP); and
- Possibly the second-language varieties spoken by Yiddish and Afrikaans individuals.

Most importantly, it seems clear enough that Johannesburg constituted a *tabula rasa* context for dialect-mixing and resultant new-dialect formation. As Trudgill (2004: 84) emphasizes, ‘certain sorts of sociolinguistic situation involving contact between mutually intelligible dialects – colonial situations, new towns, rapid urbanization – can lead to the development of new dialects’. Early Johannesburg fits this description: it was created as the direct result of the discovery of gold and on no reasonable interpretation of ‘nearby’ was there any ‘prior-existing population [of English-speakers] ... in the location or nearby’ (Trudgill, 2004: 26). There was rapid urbanization and all immigrants, including CE and NE speakers, were emigrating to a non-British country i.e. the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek, one of the two Boer states established in the nineteenth century and overthrown by the British as a consequence of the Second Anglo-Boer War. There was therefore ample opportunity for mixing to occur and for the emergence of a variety different to the two original colonial koines (i.e. CE and NE). Figure 4 provides a graphic schematization of this new model for the formation of SAfE. This is, of course, a working model and is open to revision, particularly with respect to the proposed strength of any one input.

As can be seen in Figure 4, the output of this protracted formation-process was a sociolectal continuum. This continuum is traditionally broken up into three sociolects, referred to by Lass (1995: 93) as ‘the great trichotomy’ and a feature shared with other Southern Hemisphere Englishes like Australian English:

- 1 A standard with an external reference: in terms of pronunciation this is near-RP in Wells’



Figure 2. Johannesburg around 1890



Figure 3. Johannesburg around 1910

(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) and is referred to in the literature as either Conservative or Cultivated SAfE. From the beginning it would have been associated with strong, direct ties to Britain, as well as with upper-class status and/or wealth.

- 2 A more local standard that has gradually become the most widely spoken variant of SAfE; it is referred to as either Respectable or General SAfE. According to Lanham & Macdonald (1979), this sociolect is, roughly speaking, NE absorbed into Johannesburg and reanalysed as a sociolect, a position which implicitly rejects the *tabula rasa* status of Johannesburg and which emphasizes the role that prestige and identity played during this stage in the history of SAfE. According to this ‘picture’, Johannesburg simply ‘re-allocated’ the two original colonial (regional) lects to two of the socioeconomic classes (lower and middle) of early Johannesburg society, effectively ignoring the other varieties of English brought in during this period of immigration. It is this version of the *Standard Model* that has, I believe, been unquestioningly taken up by later commentators. In Lanham & Macdonald’s (1979) time at least both Cultivated SAfE and General SAfE 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).

- 3 A variety alternatively known as Extreme or Broad SAfE: the indexicality of this variety is more than just working-class, an observation which, we suspect, remains as valid today as it was in Lanham & Macdonald’s (1979) time. As explained by Jeffery (1982: 253–5), Broad SAfE is associated with attributes such as being ‘tough, manly, sport-mad, sociable, patriotic and other things beside ... Ext SAfE 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 SAfE 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 pointed out that ‘the more extreme the variety is, the harder it becomes to distinguish it from second-language Afrikaans English’ (Lass, 2004: 373). For Lanham & Macdonald (1979) the idea is, very roughly again, that CE was re-allocated by Johannesburg as a sociolect or at least as a lect with some working-class associations; the

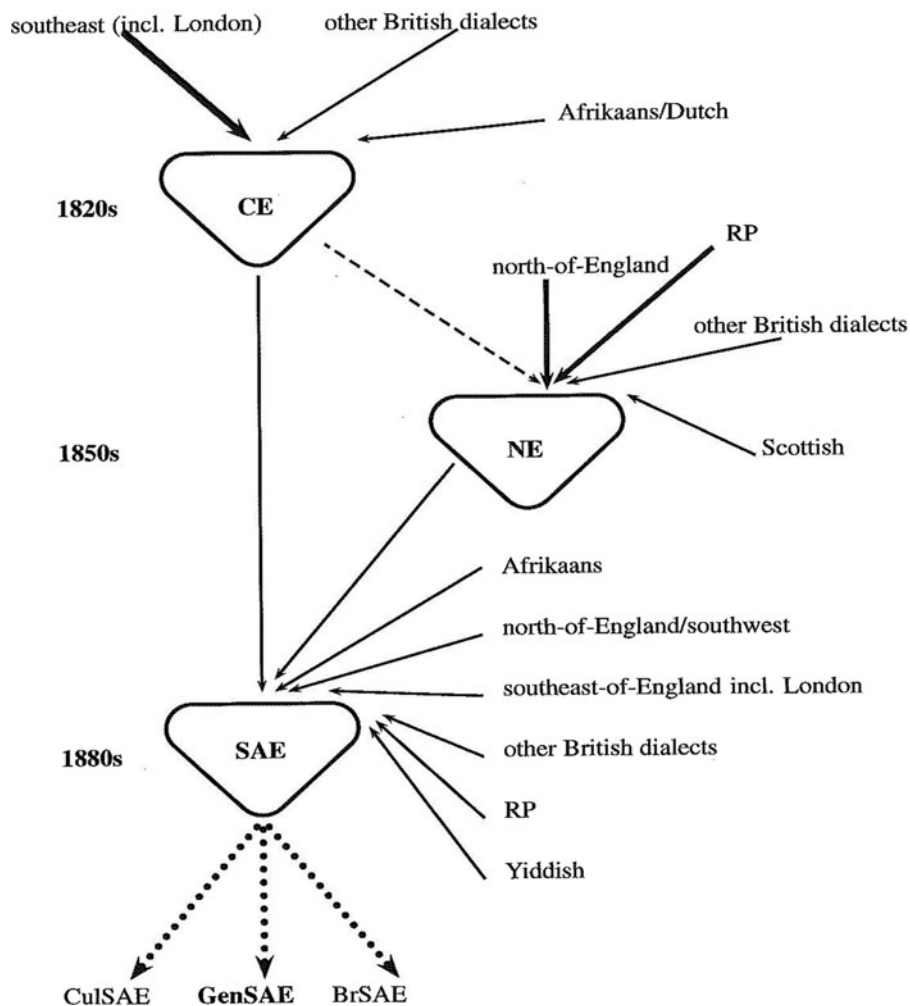


Figure 4. The *Three-Stage Koineization Model* of the formation of SAfE

point being again that what was originally a regional variety becomes associated with class and other socio-ideological constructs.

During the twentieth century this sociolectal continuum has dispersed geographically, creating a typical Southern Hemisphere level of regional homogeneity and largely doing away with the original regional lects, CE and NE. In terms of both the *Three-Stage Koineization Model* and the *Standard Model* this continuum had its origins in Johannesburg. The difference is that in terms of the former model this sociolectal continuum (i.e. SAfE generally) was the product of a completely new mixing process during which CE and NE constituted *minority* inputs and which created something completely new; while in terms of the latter

model, Johannesburg simply re-allocated the existing colonial varieties with socio-ideological as opposed to regional associations. This article argues that the former model has merit and requires closer consideration. In Bekker (2012) it has already been shown that at least one aspect of SAfE (so-called START-Backing) can be more elegantly explained by giving Johannesburg its due.

### Some further complications

The *Three-Stage Koineization Model* outlined above still needs to be backed up with more confirmatory evidence before it takes over from the *Standard Model*, i.e. much work still needs to be done in order to show convincingly that

koineization during the Johannesburg period did in fact take place and that this last stage of dialect-mixing and the subsequent focusing period between 1886 and approximately 1936<sup>6</sup> would have had the main role to play in the establishment and nature of SAfE as we know it today. There are some potential complications, however, that need to be considered as part and parcel of such a research programme.

Firstly, the *Three-Stage Koineization Model* given above largely assumes Trudgill's (2004) recent model of new-dialect formation, which asserts that dialect-mixing in *tabula rasa* contexts proceeds on a face-to-face (deterministic) basis among children who are largely insensitive to broader prestige and identity issues (particularly at the level of national identity). Trudgill's (2004) model has, however, been critiqued from a variety of perspectives, not the least of which is his emphasis on the 'social insensitivity' of the dialect-mixing process. If, on the other hand, we allow for the construction of a South African identity (a particularly post-1900 phenomenon – see below) as playing an integral role in the construction of SAfE then the Standard Model is perhaps resurrectable and Lanham & Macdonald's (1979) identification of General SAfE with NE and Broad SAfE with CE might in fact be the correct one. As mentioned above, on this basis no true mixing took place, and the *Standard Model* holds true.

Secondly, an intriguing possibility is that the relevant koineization process in Johannesburg did not really get under way until 1900 (which would mean that SAfE only became a focused variety after World War 2); this is based on two observations. Firstly, prior to the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902), Johannesburg was largely a male-dominated society. Women were few and far between and many of them were in fact prostitutes; English speech-networks among the few first-generation children that were in Johannesburg at the time no doubt existed, but they were presumably small, tentative and fragile. Secondly, on the eve of war (i.e. at the end of 1899) there was a wholesale exodus from Johannesburg of the vast majority of the so-called *Uitlander*<sup>7</sup> population, with many individuals leaving for other parts of South Africa. Any existing speech-networks among Johannesburg-born children would have been severely compromised by the war. It is thus conceivable that long-term speech networks were only put in place during the post-war period of reconstruction: while many of the pre-War population returned, some of course did not, and there were many newcomers as well.

Thirdly, if there was a genuine mixing process during the early Johannesburg period (regardless of whether this began in all earnest before or after the war), it is quite possible that this mixing was complicated by the existence (and participation) of non-L1-English speakers in this mixing process. Traditionally a (somewhat artificial) distinction is made between language contact and dialect contact. In the early-Johannesburg context there is good reason to believe that the English spoken by L1-Yiddish speakers and L1-Afrikaans speakers (or, more accurately, the English of children who had L1-Yiddish and L1-Afrikaans parents but English as a second *first-language* i.e. acquired during the critical period on the basis of interaction with British peers) would have played a role in any putative koineization process. In some areas (see below) such speakers might in fact have been the majority, with L1-English speakers oddly enough being forced to (presumably) creolize a second-language variety.<sup>8</sup>

The last complication (and one hinted at in footnote 4) is the fact that gold and other mining activities (and the associated immigration) was not only a feature of Johannesburg proper, but the whole of the Witwatersrand. Many of the towns of the East Rand (e.g. Boksburg) and West Rand (e.g. Krugersdorp) formed separate urban areas, with different demographic characteristics. To use just one example, Benoni on the East Rand was strongly associated with Cornwall and also had a very prominent Jewish population in the early years. Many of the East and West Rand areas are (and were) also more strongly associated with an Afrikaans input than Johannesburg itself. How (if at all) the mixing process differed across these various areas and the impact this might have had on the eventual status of SAfE are matters that still require close attention.

## Conclusion

This article has provided evidence to suggest that SAfE is, in fact, younger than generally supposed: a late-19th, even early-20th century English. In terms of the model provided, SAfE was, it is hypothesized, created during the massive influx of immigrants to early Johannesburg, the resultant koine then spreading geographically and replacing the original colonial varieties existent in the Cape Colony and Natal. This koine was, furthermore, the product of an incredibly complex mixing process with inputs from all over the British Empire as well as possibly being influenced by second-language varieties of English as used by Yiddish and Afrikaans speakers. Far more research

needs to be conducted, however, to put all the relevant pieces together. ■

## Notes

1 The role of Cape Town in the formation of SAfE has been neglected in the existing literature, mainly due to the fact that during the early period of British colonization most English-speakers in Cape Town did not settle, given their roles as administrators or military personnel. At some point, however, a speech-community was created, presumably separated at first from the English outpost in the eastern part of the Cape Colony.

2 That there is still a grain of truth in this picture is evident (anecdotally) from the fact that the author is regularly mistaken for an Australian or (perhaps somewhat more often) a New Zealander when travelling overseas, much to his chagrin.

3 Another explanation is that modern SAfE is not particularly reflective of the earlier CE – a thesis taken up in the rest of this article.

4 The Witwatersrand (or ‘Rand’) is a range of hills stretching in an east-west direction across the Transvaal Highveld (the ‘Hoogeveldt’ in Figure 1). It forms a continental divide (with rivers running north flowing into the Indian Ocean and rivers flowing south flowing into the Atlantic). Famously, it is home to the Witwatersrand Basin, the geological formation holding the world’s largest gold deposits. In terms of surface (urban) geography the ‘Rand’ is understood to include not only Johannesburg proper but also the East Rand (including Boksburg, Benoni, Germiston and Springs) and the West Rand (including Randfontein and Krugersdorp). While the Witwatersrand (together with the Midrand and Pretoria) now virtually forms one urban conurbation, in the later part of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century, many of these centres were separated from each other by substantial stretches of farmland or veld.

5 The exact role (if any) played by Kimberley in the overall picture is unclear. What is clear is that many who started out in Kimberley moved to Johannesburg when gold was discovered and that Kimberley was quickly ‘outpaced’ by Johannesburg, particularly during the twentieth century. As such, the third period of SAfE’s formation is, I believe, safely linked to Johannesburg and thus begins in 1886.

6 Trudgill (2004: 129) generally allows for a 50-year period for the process of new-dialect formation to complete itself.

7 This refers to a non-Afrikaans-speaking person and means ‘out-lander’ or foreigner.

8 This situation has echoes in modern-day South Africa where it is not uncommon for white children at some (particularly non-private) schools to constitute a minority in a peer-group in which the majority consists

of black children whose English has distinct L2-characteristics. Anecdotally (e.g. based on experience with my own child), the white children in this context become bi-dialectal, with, for example, my own child having the ability to switch between General SAfE (especially at home) and what I can only assume is a creolized version of Black South African English. In the early-Johannesburg context (particularly where the L2-variety was in the majority) it is not inconceivable that L2-varieties became creolized (or nativized) by otherwise L1-speakers. This would, I believe, go some way towards explaining the strong overlap between Broad SAfE and Afrikaans English.

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