English in South Africa: parallels with African American vernacular English

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A comparison between Black English usage in South Africa and the United States

THERE HAS been a long tradition of resistance in South African politics, as there has been for African-Americans in the United States. The historical links between African Americans and their counterparts on the African continent prompt one to draw a comparison between the groups in terms of linguistic and social status. This comparison demonstrates that Black South African English (BSAfE) is a distinctive form with its own stable conventions, as representative in its own context as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is in the United States.

Black South African English

The motivation for this contrastive analysis of BSAfE and AAVE is as follows:

> Historical studies of colonial linguistic contact have made comparable points about the construction of new and syncretic linguistic genres, especially in local political discourse. Indeed, current research is attempting to write the sociolinguistic history of colonial contact. Often the goal is to recover the kinds of social relations that gave rise to current languages or varieties: how much mutual intelligibility and bilingualism was demanded and what category of people became bilingual in given colonial situations.
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> – S. Gal, 1989, in 'Language and Political Economy,' p.358, the *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18

The historical factors which have prevented BSAfE from becoming a legitimate institutional variety are undoubtedly political and social in nature. In the past, it was a stigmatized dialect. Lanham wrote: '[U]nless a writer or speaker knows that he controls [English English] any public display of African English is marked by hesitance and self-consciousness' (1976:290). In 1984, BSAfE was still regarded as nothing more than an interference variety (Magura, 1984:5). Its phonological features were described by Magura (1984:5) and Lanham (1982:342). Mawasha states that, although at that stage BSAfE was not regarded as a high status variety, it was accepted as a group marker and therefore its speakers did not attempt to 'out-English the English in English' (11984:16). The notion of BSAfE as a group marker underlines the argument in this project, because BSAfE carries with it many embedded tone and style features of resistance.

Already in 1984, Magura writes that BSAfE is distinguishable from other Englishes because of area-bound, context-bound and language-bound features (1984:14-22). The features of the variety were said to be intelligible in in-group communication, but perhaps not in out-group. This has of course changed since 1992, since many of the context, area and language-contact boundaries have been removed.

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The hierarchical system of classification of varieties of English in terms of distance from 'white' SAfE is no longer applicable. A new system of classification of varieties of English in Southern Africa will in all likelihood come into being according to the existing prestige, status and role of each specific variety in the current societal structures. My argument in this regard is that BSAfE has gained considerable status and wide usage in a multitude of high status domains: political, legislative, parliamentary, educational, and the media. This means that it seems to be well on its way to becoming a dominant variety. Some have termed this variety 'Africanised English', which is a bit vague. African English, as described by Kachru (1983) and Bokamba (1983), does not overlap completely with BSAfE in terms of features, domain of usage or prestige. BSAfE is something unique, resulting in part from language contact and formations of linguistic identification processes in a very specific 'locality', namely under resistance to apartheid.

A study conducted by Smit (1996:184) in high schools in the Grahamstown area, Eastern Cape, has elicited certain information concerning attitudes towards 'white' SAfE and 'Africanised English' (my BSAfE):

> In response to the speaker-evaluation test – on an emotional and subconscious level – the majority of the informants preferred their own accents of English, which means that the biggest section of the test population evaluated the English spoken by Black South Africans more positively than the other varieties. On a more conscious level, in response to part 2, more than a third of all the informants, and half of the Black informants, supported the use of a new, standard Africanised English for educational purposes. In supporting presently non-standard varieties of English, the informants thus revealed their positive attitudes towards a different standard of English for the future.

The findings of Smit's study underline the widespread quest for a stronger African identity and demonstrate that there seems to be strong support for the officialization of BSAfE. This points to the likelihood of BSAfE being declared the national standard in the near future, of course preceded by a number of studies like this one which provide evidence of codified norms and a positive attitude to it by the majority of its educated users. A prerequisite is that BSAfE needs to be seen as a possible way towards increased democratization and global economic power, while it is commonly accepted that an exonormative standard of 'international' English is also necessary.

Chick and Wade (1997) conducted a study similar to the one by Smit. They took a large sample of school-leavers and first-year university students in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, all of them Zulu mother tongue speakers, in order to ascertain the sociolinguistic status of English among them and evidence of their linguistic behaviours. These findings, like those of Vesely (1998), in her smaller Cape Town project, reveal that English is persistently valued highly above all other languages, even more so among rural than among urban students:

> In a ranking exercise, 57.5% valued it first as a language of international contact: 29.78% first as the language of national unity: adverse evaluations were minimal. 81% saw themselves as using English as the primary language of their professional lives. 68% saw it as the primary language used in interaction with public servants. These are perhaps less surprising than that 46.9% saw it as the primary language of the area where they were going to live, and 19.7% as the first language of their home lives in future (Chick and Wade 1997:274). This represents a huge swing towards English apparently at the expense of Zulu. However, two interesting observations qualify this conclusion. First, Zulu pupils observed in a formally white school use code switching 'to index an English identity while still retaining a Zulu identity' (Chick and Wade 1997:276). Secondly, 'the linguistic vitality of Black South African English continues to improve relative to that of Standard South African English'.
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> – Chick and Wade, 1997:281 (cited in Ridge, 1999:13)

These studies accumulatively seem to point to the fact that English in South Africa is moving more and more in the direction of dynamic hybridity, varying according to context, situation and time.

A sociolinguistic profile for English as occurring in typically multilingual black urban settings is presented by Calteaux (1996: 65–75). According to Calteaux, English was thought of, before 1996, mainly as a language of formal domains and had official status. It was used by middle-class black interlocutors of the younger generation, especially by Nguni speakers. In terms of its function, it was not a lingua franca in townships but rather a medium of wider

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communication (across township boundaries). It was regarded as a high-status language and commonly known as a symbol of upward mobility.

I argue that the situation in 2001 is somewhat different. English enjoys increasingly high status and is increasingly regarded as a symbol of social and economic upward mobility. Presently, English seems to be used in some form or another in virtually all formal, informal, official, and unofficial domains by everyone in schools, social, commercial, and official domains. It has become indisputably established as the language of general communication in townships, on campuses, and as a language of social communication in South Africa at large. This again confirms that its current status and its features need to be monitored in specific domains such as parliament and in the media, because its status is consistently increasing.

Comparing BSAfE and AAVE: status and functions

BSAfE is currently used by a highly literate educated majority of the population in high status contexts, in the private sphere, in the public sphere, in cultural contexts as well as in education. AAVE in the US is still largely regarded as a dialect used by low status minority groups. AAVE is somewhat overshadowed by the global economic power of American English. While BSAfE speakers in South Africa consciously aspire to conform to what is perceived as 'standard' English, they simultaneously strive to retain the cultural goods of the African languages by familiar turn of phrase and metaphor. AAVE speakers, on the other hand, lost their languages during the slave era and had no common language other than English.

AAVE, through consistently fighting its cause, has become acknowledged, and is deemed acceptable, in many genres, i.e. in certain 'tough guy' movie scenes and in contemporary rap music. It is also being marketed globally through the sitcom genre and is being mimicked by, and serves as a powerful identification tool for, teenagers all over the world. It is certainly a most influential cultural force in the lives of South African teenagers today. The fact that AAVE is common in TV shows and movies has not, however, totally eradicated its stigmatization. In contrast, BSAfE is regarded by linguists and speakers in public and private contexts as largely acceptable and understandable and at its worst is seen as roughly complying with prototypical international 'standard' English norms. On the other hand, AAVE in the United States is still battling to be recognized as a separate variety of English. The issue is being addressed as a general human rights issue in the United States and has recently enjoyed considerable attention from activists and their constituencies in the educational sphere.

In terms of its current status, BSAfE has been lent some credibility by the *Oxford Dictionary of South African English* (1995), which legitimates many Africanisms as part of post-liberation official SAfE. However, a comprehensive glossary does not yet exist. In comparison, a comprehensive guide to AAVE titled *Black Talk* has been marketed worldwide since 1994. Recent studies on BSAfE, conducted by Chick and Wade among others, have shown that a prototypical consistent grammatical structure is recognizable and in the process of being stratified.

Since 1998, at least three books on 'Ebonics' (as AAVE is often called) have appeared: by Baugh (2000), Mufwene *et al* (1998), and Perry and Delpit (1998). According to the Linguistics Society of America Resolution on the Oakland 'Ebonics' issue (Chicago, January 1997, cf. Mesthrie *et al*, 2000:380/1), Ebonics is systematic and rule-governed. Studies over the past 30 years have shown that its grammar and pronunciation are stable, and, although it is not labeled a language or a dialect, its systematicity is acknowledged. It was agreed by the official investigating body that there are individual and group benefits to maintaining vernacular speech varieties and that there are scientific and human advantages to linguistic diversity as there are advantages to gaining access to 'standard' varieties. It was decided by the investigating body that the recognition and utilization of AAVE in educational processes is linguistically and pedagogically sound. This decision was based on evidence from Sweden, the US, and other countries where the other varieties of the official lingua francas are employed in aiding the acquisition of a standard variety.

BSAfE appears to some degree in the new emerging South African dialect literatures which were published in the 1990s and early 2000 by Buchu Books and Kwela Publishers, among others. However, these texts are largely translated into 'standard English' or at least

SAfE. BSAfE is still only used by the characters overtly representing the dialect in direct speech or in thought representations. In the case of AAVE, no body of literary texts is mentioned in the relevant sources.

Thus, what BSAfE and AAVE have in common is that they are both largely deviational from standard English. Though there are several evolutionary hypotheses explaining how AAVE and BSAfE came into being, I strongly consider that in each of the two cases certain distinctive features were used to deliberately signal a separate identity, for the assertion of group values, rights and solidarity. Attempts at seeking difference for upward mobility via the educational system (in which the campaign for AAVE in the United States is largely lodged), have elicited on-going policy debates. In South Africa, BSAfE is being used for the cultural and political assertion of rights and identity, and is still to some degree employed in the capacity of a covert resistance tool to the old order of the colonizing powers in the official public sphere.

After due consideration, I would argue that BSAfE has a strong case for recognition as an official variety. The argument is strengthened by the fact that speakers of 'standard English' in South Africa are overwhelmingly outnumbered by speakers of local dialects, argots, and interlingual versions of English. For elites, however, BSAfE may not be passed on to their children, who learn mainly SAfE as spoken by 'white' children in the ex-Model C schools (historically whites-only schools) which they attend. In the conclusion of his book on Ebonics, Baugh makes the following statement:

> In addition to important efforts to help students master standard English (efforts that should be modified as necessary to serve students from diverse linguistic backgrounds), new efforts are necessary to broaden existing curricula to teach more Americans about their fascinating linguistic heritage. Indeed, an honest portrayal of the rich linguistic history of the United States has the potential to introduce American linguistic diversity to students in an enticing multicultural format that includes every person in the United States. The envisioned multicultural curriculum need not take on the dreaded form of politically correct dogmatic enlightenment but, rather, can be tailored to each school – and those schools can in turn be linked to their local school districts.
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> – John Baugh, *Beyond Ebonics*, 2000:115

Whether such a project is viable for BSAfE in South Africa, is dependent firstly, on the zeal of linguists to create a substantially funded project in the name of corpus studies of dialect, and secondly, on the national educational agendas and policies of the coming decade. It seems appropriate, therefore, in the light of John Baugh's statement, to give a brief overview of the development of BSAfE in terms of the functions it has served in the face of a long history of racial oppression.

Ideological and political factors are fast overruling previously accepted English norms and the historically existing stigmas attached to BSAfE usage, because it is a majority usage and seems to have more consistencies than variations. In terms of World Englishes, BSAfE is recognizable as an institutionalized variety, as is AAVE in the United States, but which is still largely regarded as the dialect of a minority. BSAfE is an institutional variety, recognized unanimously as a national lingua franca, by a newly 'voiced' influential majority. South Africa is a cross-cultural political nation where English is regarded as primary lingua franca. South Africans, while they may have very little else in common, are all striving to become users of English. While the English used differs greatly from one discourse community to another, a positive emotive disposition towards English has provided alternative positions from which to view cultural and ideological polarisation.

BSAfE has not yet been in the position to be addressed as a recognized variety because, firstly, it has only been used in law, parliament, etc., minimally, in an unrecognized way, since 1983, and officially condoned only in 1996 (see Ginwala 1996). Secondly, BSAfE has always been a nonissue because the 'voices' attached to Southern African varieties were powerless and disenfranchised. Such voices have come into power by being infused into dominant, historically entrenched modes of discourse, subverting that discourse, appropriating it to new ends in terms of an agenda which intends to represent a more inclusive, democratic notion of governance than that which existed previously.

Linguistic hybridity and a new South African identity

Rather than seeing the hybridization of South African English as a counter-text to global technological advancement and power, English needs to be seen as one African language

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among many which can be put to use in a variety of ways and will take on many different forms. This would then give it a place within the intra-national context while in no way prejudicing or preventing speakers of the variety in any way from gaining simultaneous access to 'international English', the prototypical corpus of which has become available on the internet.

What further enhances the argument in favour of official status for BSAfE is that there is an attempt by the current government to re-Africanise South African society. This engages with the agenda of the African Renaissance movement. Currently, all talks and conferences of the African Renaissance movement are conducted in English. One may say that the current South African political environment of transformation is decidedly post-modern:

> Its postmodern hallmarks include: the superabundance of whimsical hybridity and globalised pastiche (the stagy pastiche of colonial and anti-colonial with television apocalyptic in the uniforms of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging); the playful juxtaposition of grotesque incongruities; the radical fragmentation of subjectivity; the social field as a heterogeneous, partially connected ensemble; the plurality, contingency and indeterminacy of social boundaries; the constant innovation; the collapse of an authoritarian bureaucratic master plan with the end of a master narrative for the total order of a modern nation-state.
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> – Werbner, in Werbner & Ranger, 1996:11

South Africa cannot yet be said to be postcolonial as all current discourse is rooted in, and linked to, the colonial era and old systems are still in place. However, new trends in terms of language usage are made more visible in this project. In summary then, my argument in this regard is actively in favour of hybridity and support for a diversity of dialects in the official sphere and for public use. There is already tacit support for this diversity especially on radio:

> The stigma associated with the use of BSAE does not seem as strong as it was in the past, and another sign of increasing confidence in its value is the fact that a recently launched regional radio program (YFM) almost exclusively for the use of BSAE speakers registered a weekly listenership of 611,000 in two months.
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> – de Klerk 1999:317

This is also reiterated by NtIhakana (2000:15):

> In apartheid South Africa, the contexts in which whites, coloureds and Indians would be exposed to BSAE were relatively few (perhaps in communication with one's domestic staff, over a shop counter, and so on), but in present-day South Africa, the contexts are vast (with co-workers, co-students, in parliament, in political broadcasts, and so on). Therefore, increased exposure to the variety has resulted in increased levels of intelligibility by other racial groups.

My argument is therefore directly in line with NtIhakana's (2000:16):

> BSAfE will probably move close to standard South African English as more blacks receive a better quality of education, and it is this emerging variety which is most likely to become the new standard rather than one which is imposed by a very small minority who no longer hold political power.

Assuming that various micro-studies are done at different times, this data may be useful in comparison to similar data collected in the future and in the past. The linguistic description and analysis in studies such as the one conducted in parliament (Hibbert 2000) highlight sociohistorical and African linguistic influences on English at a time of significant political transformation and underline the fact that a new variety is in the making.

Expanding boundaries are necessary and describable while a new social order is coming into being. Crystallization will follow as it is an identification process which always does manifest itself and is marked linguistically.

The short term and long term consequences of the 'relaxed boundaries' policy in parliament can only be positive. Initially a wide spectrum of variability will be expected and accepted. Crystallisation of a certain number of 'acceptable' forms as the norms will take place. This will be the consequences of research and corpus compilation which results in recognition and is followed by official acceptance and status.

The influence of the African languages is visibly and audibly influential in BSAfE. The question which lights the way to further research is what is the cut off criterion of acceptability going to be at each stage in future and what will the status of BSAfE be. Similar questions are awaiting answers in the US regarding AAVE. ■

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FROM OUR FILES

Mega-terrorism

Al-Qaeda's terrorist assault on September 11th awakened Americans to the stark reality of mega-terrorism: terrorist acts that kill thousands of people at a single stroke. In the twinkling of an eye, possibilities earlier dismissed as analysts' (or Hollywood's) fantasies became brute fact. President George Bush rightly and resolutely declared war on Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and their Taliban hosts…. Even in the midst of the exhausting exigencies of the current crisis, responsible leaders must acknowledge the possibility that much more catastrophic terrorist acts may be yet to come. Along the spectrum of mega-terrorism, the worst case would be a nuclear explosion in a large city…. The question is whether the horror of September 11th can now motivate the United States and other governments to act urgently not only against al-Qaeda, but also the well-identified agenda for action to minimise the risk of nuclear mega-terrorism.

– Graham Allison, 'Could worse be yet to come?', *The Economist*, 3 Nov 01.

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