

Mesthrie, Rajend, with Jeanne Hromnik. 2011. *Eish: but is it English? Celebrating the South African Variety*. Cape Town: Zebra Press (an imprint of Random House Struik). xvi + 151 pp. ISBN 9781770221789.

This book is a collaboration between journalist Jeanne Hromnik, who asked the questions, and linguist Rajend Mesthrie, who responded orally in a series of interviews. Hromnik then undertook transcriptions and Mesthrie a light edit to produce a popular book on the history and characteristics of English in a highly multilingual country. In the preface Hromnik discusses her inspiration for pursuing this project: a national radio programme presented by John Orr entitled *Word of Mouth*. Linguists like Roger Lass and Mesthrie have over the years responded to questions by listeners and the programme presenter regarding language structure in general and South African languages in particular. That programme has since deceased, or at least morphed into a rather different phone-in format, so the appearance of this book is an unintended tribute to a programme that ran for about four decades.

*Eish* is a book that is therefore aimed at a general rather than specialist audience, and makes accessible detailed sociolinguistic research on South African English to a lay audience. The word *eish* is an example of the kinds of words described in some of the chapters: a South African coinage, probably from its Black townships, informally signalling surprise, consternation, dismay etc. Chapter 1 “*Coeree home go*”: *historical firsts* details the history of English in South Africa. The quotation points to a sentence from the seventeenth century uttered by a Khoikhoi man taken to London to train as an interpreter for the half-way stop that was Cape Town, as European ships headed for the East Indies. The chapter details this and other aspects of English before the English, who arrived officially in South Africa a century and half later. Chapter 2 “*He was busy dying*”: *grammar with a difference* records the intimate co-histories of English and Dutch/Afrikaans in South Africa, and the kinds of grammatical convergences they spawned. Chapter 3 “*Imagint excusations*”: *Missionary endeavours* is also foundational in treating of the influence of European missionaries in

South African education and the inculcation of English and African languages. The cryptic heading draws on the idiosyncratic English of some of the missionaries themselves. Dialect grammar that congealed as a consequence among the general populace is treated in chapter 4 “*Who did throw that?*”: *A question of acceptance*. The next two chapters discuss a well-known aspect of South African English, its prolific vocabulary from a diversity of sources, with Afrikaans leading the way. The titles are “*The robot’s not working again*”: *Making sense of the vocabulary* (chapter 5) and “*There’s a gogga in my veldskoens*”: *Words, words and more words* (chapter 6). Chapter 7 “*Not just a matter of mixing jou tale*”: *slang and code-switching* goes beyond vocabulary borrowing to grammatical code-switching which is very common in urban centres. The intimate co-existence of English with Afrikaans and African languages like Zulu and Sotho have produced urban youth hybrids rich in slang, as well as syntactic code-switching. As with all chapters the discussions go beyond structure to speakers’ attitudes and a never-ending search for novelty and creativity. Chapter 8 “*I like my coffee to be black*”: *a recognisable black variety* visits the English grammar of the country’s Black majority. It shows a number of regularities not suspected by prescriptivists keen on finding errors or over-worked teachers bent on inculcating the standard. Chapter 9 “*A ghetto of mediocrity?*”: *Finding the middle ground* continues with this theme, pointing to new elite varieties of English found amongst the first generation of children in post-apartheid South Africa. The title refers to expressions of concern among Black leaders that their children run the risk of losing competence in the indigenous languages. Chapter 10 “*He has a headache in his toes*”: *the English of Indians* focuses on Mesthrie’s lifelong research on the language practices of Indian immigrants of the nineteenth century. It discusses common terms still restricted to the community, as well as terms it has contributed to a wider South African English. The concluding chapter “*He tried to kill mah daddy*”: *no laughing matter* examines the use of English in South African satire and comedy. This includes the broader accents of Whites as lampooned in Robin Malan’s book *Ah Big Yaws*, stereotypical representations of Indian English in colonial times, as well as the way the dialect is represented by insider playwrights and novelists.