In his important new study, Rajend Mesthrie examines the rise of a new variety of English among Indian migrant workers indentured on the plantations of Natal in South Africa, and among their descendants. Considering the historical background to, and linguistic consequences of, language shift in an immigrant context, he draws significant parallels between second-language acquisition and the processes of pidginisation and creolisation. In particular, he analyses universals of second-language acquisition and the role of transfer from the Indic and Dravidian substrate languages.

*English in language shift* observes the acquisition of language in its social setting, often outside the classroom. Its linguistic focus is on the distinctive syntax of South African Indian English, with respect to word order and clause structures; and it contains descriptions of lexis, phonetics and morphology in terms of social variation. South African Indian English is compared with other dialects within South Africa, with English in India and with Englishes generally.
English in language shift
English in language shift

The history, structure and sociolinguistics of South African Indian English

RAJEND MESTHRIE
Department of Linguistics, University of Cape Town
For the family at 25 Jane Avenue: Panini, Platini, Billu, Ravi, and not forgetting Rckha and my wife, Uma
Contents

List of figures and maps  page xii
List of tables xiii
Preface xvii
Acknowledgements xviii
List of abbreviations xx

1 Historical background: the shaping of a New English  1
  1.1 Introduction  1
  1.2 ‘New’ Englishes  1
  1.3 Indian immigration and indenture  6
  1.4 English in the period of indenture (1860–1911)  11
  1.5 English in the post-indenture period  27

2 Variation in SAIE: a first glimpse  34
  2.1 The gathering of data  34
  2.2 The polylectal continuum  43
  2.3 Characteristics of the basilect  45
  2.4 Style-shifting between lects  58
  2.5 Pre-basilectal speakers  65

3 Syntactic variation: the relative clause  71
  3.1 Introduction  71
  3.2 Relative clauses in English dialects  71
  3.3 Types of relative clauses in SAIE  72
  3.4 Proportions of relative-clause types  81
  3.5 The social profile for relative clauses in SAIE  82
  3.6 Relative clauses by functional patterns  91
  3.7 Some acquisitional perspectives  94
  3.8 Comparison between lectal groups and R-groups  96
## Contents

3.9 Phylogenetic parallels 97  
3.10 Conclusion 100  

4 Word-order principles 101  
4.1 Introduction 101  
4.2 Parataxis 101  
4.3 OV influences in a VO dialect 105  
4.4 Topicalisation 110  
4.5 Conclusion 127  

5 Non-syntactic variation 128  
5.1 Introduction 128  
5.2 Morphology 128  
5.3 Phonetic variation 136  
5.4 Socio-lexical variation 141  
5.5 SAIE and other varieties of South African English 149  

6 Perspectives from second-language acquisition 152  
6.1 Introduction 152  
6.2 The view from language acquisition 152  
6.3 Transfer in SAIE 154  
6.4 Universals of SLA: negation 160  
6.5 Parameter setting in SLA 167  
6.6 Strategies of second-language learning 174  

7 Perspectives from pidgin and creole studies 183  
7.1 Pidginisation, creolisation, second-language acquisition 183  
7.2 Pidginisation in the pre-basilect 186  
7.3 The basilect as creoloid 191  
7.4 A comparison with creole grammars 205  
7.5 Analogies with decreolisation 210  
7.6 Undeveloped themes, conclusions, prognoses 218  

Appendix A Comparison between SAIE sample and census data for Indians in Natal 222  

Appendix B Types of relative clauses used by individual speakers 224  

Appendix C Rank orders for relative clauses, topics and morphology 229
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources and references</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>248</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures and maps

Figures
2.1 Present be + -ing by lectal group page 53
2.2 Past be + -ing by lectal group 54
3.1 Types of relative clauses favoured by R-groups 95
5.1 Twelve morphological variables in SAIE 131

Maps
1 Present-day India 8
2 The languages of India 10
3 Distribution of Indians in South Africa – 1936 36
4 Distribution of Indians by magisterial districts of Natal – 1936 37
## Tables

1.1 A comparison of some background factors in three language-shift Englishes  
1.2 Indian languages in South Africa (1936)  
1.3 Asiatics in Natal with a command of spoken English, by age (1936)  
1.4 Asiatics in Natal with a command of spoken English, by age and gender (1936)  
1.5 Asiatics in Natal with a command of spoken English, by age and rural–urban domicile (1936)  
2.1 The SAIE sample, by region  
2.2 Size of the lectal groups in SAIE  
2.3 Absence of auxiliary inversion among twenty-four speakers in three types of questions  
2.4 Non-use of do-support in wh- and yes–no questions by twenty-four speakers  
2.5 Use of rhetorical questions by twenty-four speakers  
2.6 Non-phonological copula deletion by twelve speakers  
2.7 The functions of be + -ing in SAIE  
2.8 Use of be + -ing by twenty-four speakers  
2.9 Reduplication and phrasal repetition by twenty-four speakers  
2.10 Use of only as a focus marker by twenty-four speakers  
2.11 Use of modal ’d by twenty-four speakers  
2.12 The use of four rephonologised items by twenty-four speakers  
2.13 Summary of the use of twelve features in SAIE  
2.14 Absence of auxiliary inversion in yes – no questions in the speech of interviewer and twenty-four interviewees  
2.15 Absence of auxiliary inversion in wh-questions in the speech of interviewer and twenty-four interviewees
xv

List of tables

2.16 Absence of do-support in yes–no questions in the speech of interviewer and twenty-four interviewees 64
2.17 Absence of do-support in wh-questions in the speech of interviewer and twenty-four interviewees 64
2.18 A comparison between semi-speakers and pre-basilectal speakers in Natal 66
2.19 Use of -ing in the pre-basilect 68
2.20 A comparison of deletions in the pre-basilect and basilect 70
3.1 Frequency table for relative clauses in SAIE, by broad type 81
3.2 Frequency table for standard and non-standard relative clauses in SAIE 81
3.3 Percentages of speakers using standard and non-standard relative clauses 84
3.4 Percentages of speakers per R-group for relative clauses 84
3.5 Cross-classification of speakers by relative-clause usage and education 87
3.6 Cross-classification of speakers by relative-clause usage and first and second language 87
3.7 Cross-classification of speakers by relative-clause usage and social class 87
3.8 Cross-classification of speakers by relative-clause usage and urban–rural networks 88
3.9 Cross-classification of speakers by relative-clause usage and age in years 89
3.10 Classification of relative clauses by speakers’ language background and language family associated with each type of relative clause 89
3.11 Cross-classification of speakers by relative-clause usage and home language 90
3.12 Focus embedding and embedding in SAIE relative clauses 92
3.13 Focus embedding and embedding in SAIE and by Scots children 92
3.14 The Keenan–Comrie hierarchy for SAIE relative clauses 93
3.15 The revised Keenan–Comrie hierarchy for SAIE relative-clauses 93
3.16 Relative-clause types exhibited by four speakers 95
3.17 Cross-classification of relative clauses by R-group source and broad relative-clause type 95
3.18 Cross-classification of speakers by impressionistic lectal group and topicaisation strategy 96
3.19 Cross-classification between relative-clause usage and impression-based lectal groups 97
## List of tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>Proportion of non-standard to standard relative clauses by embedding type</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>Occurrence of <em>be/get/have</em> in relative clauses</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>Relative frequencies of topic types in SAIE</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>Syntactic and pragmatic mode</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>Correlation between use of topics and relative clauses</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>Comparison of topic range with relative-clause usage</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Twelve variable morphological features of SAIE</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Use of twelve non-standard forms</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Use of <em>should</em> and <em>childrens</em> by individual speakers</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>The social profile for the <em>should</em> and <em>childrens</em> variable</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>The social profile for SAIE morphology</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Correlations between rankings for three broad areas of variation</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Spearman rank correlations for three broad areas of variation</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>Comparison of four morpho-syntactic groupings of speakers</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>Retroflex [t] and [d] used by six SAIE speakers</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.10</td>
<td>Front short-vowel reflexes in SAIE, South African English and RP</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.11</td>
<td>Initial <em>/h/</em> in SAIE, according to lectal groups</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.12</td>
<td>Use of <em>/h/</em> in SAIE, according to ancestral language</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Copula deletion in the present tense by ten speakers, according to ancestral language</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Use of focus <em>only</em> and <em>too</em> by ten speakers, according to ancestral language</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Comparison of five features of SAIE and substrate morphology</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Presence of subject pronouns and pleonastic subjects in SAIE, by lectal group</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>Complementation patterns in the basilect</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>A comparison of SAIE usage with twelve features of creole grammars</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>A comparison of basilectal, standard and intermediate mesolectal forms</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

This is the first study of the syntax of South African Indian English, as spoken in its natural home and neighbourhood surroundings. It is my belief that language study of this sort cannot be divorced from a historical and social context. Earlier studies of the dialect and prescriptive judgements by educators suffer in this regard. Unlike most earlier commentators, I do not believe that the dialect is deficient in any way. It is as systematic and logical as any other. If it has evolved many rules of its own, we must seek to understand the nature of these rules and establish the reason for their existence, rather than condemning them by some simplistic comparisons with the formal norms of upper-middle-class speech and writing. This work is both an attempt at understanding and a celebration of those rules, many of which turn out to co-exist in (new and old) English dialects all over the world.
Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the following:

The people who served as informants for this study, for their willing participation in sharing the story of their lives with me, for their patience in responding to my sometimes searching questions and the hospitality that always included at least a hot cup of tea.

The staff of the Killie Campbell Collection (University of Natal), Natal Archives (Pietermaritzburg), and African Studies Library (University of Cape Town) for assistance in locating material relating to the research.

To my wife, Uma and my family in Umkomaas and Durban for their solid support at all times.

The Mistrey family in Dannhauser; Mr and Mrs B.C. Maharaj in Ladysmith; Premilla and Ramesh Mungal for accommodation during field-trips in northern Natal.

Sanjeev Raichund, who stepped in to assist with transcription of data, after an earlier assistant failed to fulfil his promises.

The Human Sciences Research Council for a generous *ad hoc* grant (no. 15/1/3/3/762) which covered most of the expenses associated with the research. Opinions expressed in this work and conclusions arrived at are my own, and not to be attributed in any way to the HSRC.

The Educational Opportunities Council for a fellowship which made possible a rewarding semester in the United States leading to extensive revisions of the text.

The staff and graduate students of the Linguistics Department at the University of Pennsylvania for the sociolinguistic stimulation during my stay there in the autumn of 1989.

Brief discussions with a variety of linguists have been more informative than they might realise: thanks to Ronald Macaulay, Sherry Ash, Corky Feagin, George Cardona, Braj and Yamuna Kachru, Robin Sabino, Philip Baker and Bernd Heine. For more specific comments I must thank J.M. Coetzee and William Labov. On matters phonetic I am lucky to have
Acknowledgements

Roger Lass in situ. At Penn Terry Pica’s teaching skills inspired in me a respect for second-language acquisition as an academic discipline.

Dr Tim Dunne of the University of Cape Town for the statistical information in chapter 3.

Manoj Chavda for computer assistance, and Jane Foggart for her careful redrawing of my ungainly illustrations.

Maureen Le Sar and Denise Ehrenreich at the fax office at UCT for their cheerful services.

Several anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press, Witwatersrand University Press and the HSRC, whose comments were positive and helpful.

To Eve Horwitz, Jo Sandrock and Pat Tucker at Wits University Press; Marion Smith, Judith Ayling, Catherine Max, Lynn Hieatt and Jenny Potts at Cambridge University Press for their friendly and efficient handling of the publishing process.

Most of all, I thank Gillian Sankoff for the support at Penn, the care she took in reading an earlier draft and the many helpful pointers. Blemishes that remain are my own.
Abbreviations

acc. accusative case
acr-M acrolectal group for morphology
acr-R acrolectal group for relative clauses
bas-M basilectal group for morphology
bas-R basilectal group for relative clauses
conj. conjunctive
co-ord. co-ordinative suffix
dat. dative
inf. infinitive
L1 first language
L2 second language
mes-M mesolectal group for morphology
mes-R mesolectal group for relative clauses
neg. negative
NIVE non-native institutionalised variety of English
nom. nominative
obl. oblique
presum. presumptive
rel. pt. relative particle
S speaker (or subject)
SAIE South African Indian English