

## CHAPTER I

*English in South Africa: Contact and Change**Raymond Hickey*

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**1.1 Introduction**

Since the end of apartheid and white-minority rule with democratic, non-racial elections in 1994, South African society has undergone major change.\* The African National Congress came to be the dominant party in government, and society opened up considerably with much interaction due to the lifting of restrictions on the living places and movements of various groups, the result being the greater presence in South African public life, in the media, in higher education and in the government of the non-white population of the country (Webb 2002). The enfranchisement of the indigenous populations of South Africa has had consequences for both the European heritage languages in South Africa (Gilmour 2006). The social and cultural status of Afrikaans (McCormick 2006, van Rooy and van den Doel 2011) – the continuation of Cape Dutch Vernacular (Roberge 2007; Deumert 2004) spoken by the first European settlers (van Rooy, Chapter 12 in this volume) – was threatened<sup>1</sup> in the 1990s and into the 2000s, as it was associated with the apartheid era, despite the fact that it is spoken by a sizeable and mixed proportion of the country's population. Nonetheless, a shift from Afrikaans to English in strongholds such as the Western Cape has been documented (Anthonissen 2013).

English has also been spreading to the indigenous groups in South Africa to a much greater extent than before, and the increasing gentrification of certain sections of the black population, due to the opening of

\* For many useful comments on this section which I received from Ian Bekker and Yolandi Ribbens-Klein I am very grateful. Any shortcomings are, of course, my own.

<sup>1</sup> This is part of a general movement in South Africa to gradually replace Afrikaans with English in official institutions, or at least to give English equal status, as happened with the traditional Afrikaans University of Stellenbosch in 2017 despite considerable protest by the Afrikaner rights group AfriForum, which rejects the principles of affirmative action. At the beginning of 2019 the University of Pretoria began implementing English as its official language, replacing Afrikaans in this role, in part as a result of the campaign #AfrikaansMustFall.

professions, official positions and universities to that sector of South African society, has meant that young educated black people, with greater social opportunities than the generations which preceded them, have adopted more mainstream middle-class varieties of English in South Africa.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2 Language and Society in Contemporary South Africa

South Africa is distinguished by its complex ethnic and linguistic composition. The post-apartheid constitution of 1996 gives official recognition to eleven languages, thus offering coverage for over 90 per cent of the first language speakers in contemporary South Africa. In alphabetical order the languages are Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, Northern Sotho (Sepedi), Southern Sotho (Sesotho), SiSwati (Swazi), Xitsonga, Setswana (Tswana), Tshivenda, isiXhosa and isiZulu. The first two are European languages, present in colonial form for several centuries in southern Africa: Afrikaans has over 7 million native speakers (about 13.5 per cent of the population of South Africa) while English has about 5 million native speakers (just under 10 per cent of the population), but English is found as a common means of communication in the public domain. Afrikaans also has a not insignificant number of second language speakers, both in South Africa and in neighbouring Namibia.

The remaining nine constitutional languages all belong to the southern section of the East Bantu group, which forms part of the Benue-Congo language family, which in turn is a section of the Niger-Congo phylum, embracing the majority of indigenous languages in sub-Saharan Africa. The numbers of speakers for each of these languages varies greatly in present-day South Africa. According to the census of 2011, the two largest groups are isiZulu, the first language of approximately 23 per cent of the population (11.6 million speakers), followed by isiXhosa, that of 16 per cent of South Africans (just over 8 million speakers). Both these languages belong to the Nguni subgroup along with Swazi and isiNdebele. The Sesotho-Tswana branch comprises Northern Sotho (Sepedi), Southern Sotho (Sesotho) and Setswana. The remaining two languages are (i) Xitsonga, which belongs to the Tswa-Ronga branch, and (ii) Tshivenda,

<sup>2</sup> See Mesthrie (2010) on this issue, though the earlier studies by Wright (1996), van der Walt (2000), van der Walt and van Rooy (2002), de Klerk (2003b) and Wissing (2002) saw emerging forms of Black South African English as constituting a new norm for South Africa. On the issue of possible restandardisation, see Wade (1995).

which is a further Bantu language related to Western Shona in Zimbabwe. The Bantu languages with the smallest numbers of speakers in South Africa are isiNdebele, with about 1.1 million, and Tshivenda, with about 1.2 million speakers.

All these indigenous languages are in continual contact with English, given the pervasive presence of this language in South African society, and code-switching is common. (See the analysis of isiXhosa-English code-switching in Simango's contribution to this volume, Chapter 15.) Exposure to English by speakers of indigenous languages during first language acquisition is also significant; see the analysis provided by Wilsenach in her chapter (Chapter 17). This contact has resulted in widespread bilingualism and language shift.<sup>3</sup>

The continuing contact of English with other languages not only involves the indigenous languages of South Africa but also contact with present-day Afrikaans (Williams 2012), the topic of the contribution by van Rooy (Chapter 12). Furthermore, there are youth jargons, found mostly in major urban centres like Johannesburg, Durban or Cape Town which are known as tsotsitaals (Mesthrie and Hurst 2013), forming sub-varieties, often based on Afrikaans and/or Bantu languages mixed with elements from English, which serve as insider gang codes (Brookes, Chapter 9 in this volume).

In the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century (officially between 1860 and 1911), well over 100,000 Indians arrived in South Africa, most of them as indentured servants, to work on the sugar cane plantations of the Colony of Natal, founded by the British in 1843 after they had annexed the Boer Republic of Natalia. The Indians were mostly of Bhojpuri<sup>4</sup> or Tamil/Telegu ethnicity, the latter from south India. They now number well over a million people and represent about 2.5 per cent of the population of South Africa. For most of the twentieth century the Indian population in Natal, especially the rural population, was engaged in a process of shift (see Posel and Zeller, Chapter 14 in this volume) from their heritage language to English, a process documented in detail in Mesthrie (1992) and other publications by this author. The result has been a continuum of varieties gathered under the label South African

<sup>3</sup> See Deumert and Mabandla (2013) on the effect in rural areas of recent Chinese migration to South Africa.

<sup>4</sup> Bhojpuri, spoken mainly in Bihar, is closely related to Hindi, as is Awadhi, spoken in central Uttar Pradesh, speakers of which also emigrated to South Africa. There were also some Urdu speakers from the same region of North-East India.

Indian English,<sup>5</sup> which in its most vernacular forms shows many linguistic traits (Mesthrie 1996; Hickey, Chapter 13 in this volume) owing to transfer from background languages and to the situation of unguided adult language acquisition without significant exposure to first language English because of the rigid racial and ethnic segregation under the apartheid regime.

### 1.3 Development of English in South Africa

Although English arrived in the south of Africa almost 150 years after Dutch, it has nonetheless gone through some two centuries of development during which it has adopted a unique profile within the constellation of Southern Hemisphere Englishes. The forms of English taken to the Cape region at the very end of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century were of a general southern English character, as were those of the 1820 settlers in the Port Elizabeth/Grahamstown area of the Eastern Cape. These varieties would appear to have shown many prominent characteristics of English at that time, notably a lack of rhoticity (no non-prevocalic /r/, cf. *car* [kɑ:] and *card* [kɑ:d], for example, and a raising of short front vowels in the TRAP, DRESS and KIT lexical sets with the latter also centralising. The period of exonormative orientation (Schneider, Chapter 2 in this volume) would seem to have lasted until the beginning of the twentieth century, at which time, according to Schneider, the nativisation of South African English<sup>6</sup> began when the Boer republics (above all the Transvaal and the Orange Free State) increasingly came under the influence of English. During the nineteenth century the regions of what is geographically the Republic of South Africa today showed differential settlement patterns by various white groups. Between 1848 and 1862 (Lanham 1996: 21) a wave of settlement occurred in the region of present-day KwaZulu-Natal on the Indian Ocean in the east with a

<sup>5</sup> For the major varieties of English in South Africa, the specifier is the first item followed by 'South African English', as in 'Black South African English' or 'White South African English'. Mesthrie (1992) used the label 'South African Indian English' but later changed to 'Indian South African English' for Mesthrie (2008a, 2008b). However, for Mesthrie (2010) he reverted to the original label 'South African Indian English' while clearly stressing (Mesthrie 2010: xxvi) that South African Indian English should not be seen as a transported form of Indian English but as a variety *sui generis*. To conform to Mesthrie's majority usage, the label 'South African Indian English' is used in this volume.

<sup>6</sup> This term is used in a broad and a narrow sense: either to refer to the common core of features of English spoken in South Africa in general (Jeffery and van Rooy 2004; Coetzee-Van Rooy and van Rooy 2005) or to refer to the set of varieties spoken by the non-black, non-coloured population in the country (see Bowerman 2008a, 2008b, 2012).

substantial input from the north of England, from Lancashire and Yorkshire. In addition to native speakers there were large numbers of indentured labourers from India (see Section 1.3). In the north, in the Transvaal, the South African Republic existed as an independent country from 1852 to 1902, when it was defeated and dissolved by the British after the Second Boer War (the South African War). The language of administration in the South African Republic was Dutch but with the discovery of gold in the mid 1880s large numbers of foreigners entered the country and used English as their means of communication. (See Bekker 2012, 2013 on the significance of English in this area for its later development in the remaining regions.)

Part of the endonormative reorientation of English in South Africa has been the appearance of features unique to this country, lexical features (Wasserman, Chapter 4 in this volume), but also phonological features such as the KIT-BIT split (Bekker 2014), a development of the KIT set where the words *kit* [kɪt] and *bit* [bɪt] show different vowels. These are conditioned by the consonantal environment, with the higher vowel occurring in the environment of velars (*kit*, *lick*, *gift*), in word-initial position (*it*, *in*), after /h/ (*hit*, *hick*) and usually before /ʃ/ (*dish*, *swish*). The schwa vowel typically occurs before anterior consonants (labials and alveolars), e.g. *swim*, *tin*, *sit*, *sip*, with a particularly retracted variant occurring pre-laterally, e.g. *bill*. When compared to the two other major Southern Hemisphere Englishes, Australian and New Zealand English, South African English has a more retracted BATH vowel (Mesthrie, Chevalier and Dunne 2015). This may have been part of the nineteenth-century input, but its presence in Afrikaans would point to the prior existence of [a:] in South Africa.

#### 1.4 Research on English in South Africa

Significant research on English in South Africa reaches back to the 1960s,<sup>7</sup> when Lanham produced a monograph on the pronunciation of (White) South African English and a decade later another book (with MacDonald) on the standard of South African English. Apart from this work there was little published in the 1980s, with the exception of studies of specific issues, such as Lass and Wright (1986), an investigation of contact versus

<sup>7</sup> There are a few earlier studies, such as Hopwood (1928).

endogeny in the development of South African English,<sup>8</sup> or Mesthrie (1989) on the origin and forms of the pidgin Fanagalo.

The early 1990s saw Mesthrie's seminal study of South African Indian English (1992) and a few overview publications, such as Branford (1994) which is reflective of older scholarship on language in South Africa.<sup>9</sup>

A major change came with the volume edited by de Klerk (1996), which provided an overview of issues surrounding English in the new South Africa that was accessible to an international audience. Among the issues treated here were Afrikaans English (Watermeyer 1996), Cape Flats English (Malan 1996; see also Finn 2008; McCormick 2008) and Black South African English (Gough 1996).

The 2000s have seen a great expansion of scholarship concerning forms of English in South Africa, indeed into language in that country in general, e.g. Mesthrie (2002), Webb (2002). Diachronically oriented studies began to appear, such as Lass (2004), a trend which continues to this day; see Rossouw and van Rooy (2012) and Bekker (2014, 2017).

The vocabulary of South African English was investigated during the 1970s in Beeton and Dorner (1975) and a later treatment given in Silva (1996), with a theoretical discussion the following year in Silva (1997). Vocabulary has also been the subject of some specific studies (Mesthrie 2002; Wasserman, Chapter 4 in this volume).

While older literature, such as Lanham (1996), tends to view English in South Africa as geographically undifferentiated, there has been more recent work on regionality (O'Grady and Bekker 2011; Du Plessis, Bekker and Hickey, Chapter 5 in this volume). Variation is also found today in written forms of English, which can vary by register and type (Kotze, Chapter 6 in this volume).

The major focus of research in the past two decades has been on Black South African English, often on Xhosa English, which has been investigated by de Klerk (1999, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006), Mesthrie (2006; 2008a), Deumert (2013), Deumert and Masinyana (2008), Minow (2011) as well as van Rooy (2000, 2006, 2008a, 2008b) and van Rooy and van Huyssteen (2000), the latter studies examining a range of features from phonology and syntax. Zerbian (2012, 2013, 2015) has dedicated her research to the prosody of Black South African English, while Kasanga (2006) has treated its pragmatics. Street youth language from mixtures of Afrikaans, English and Bantu languages, known as *tsotsitaals*, have been

<sup>8</sup> This issue has been taken up again, see Mesthrie (2002) and Mesthrie (2011).

<sup>9</sup> See his discussion of older or offensive terms such as *kaffir*, which were typical of the apartheid era.

investigated by Mesthrie and Hurst (2013) and Brookes (Chapter 9 in this volume). South African sign language has also been scrutinised; see Reagan (2008) and Wehrmeyer (Chapter 18 in this volume).

South African Indian English has been the lifelong focus of Rajend Mesthrie's work, spanning at least two decades of publications. See Mesthrie (1992; 1996; 2005; 2008b, 2008c) and Mesthrie (2010) on vocabulary; on language attitudes, see Wiebesiek and Zeller (2011).

A dedicated journal issue on South Africa appeared in 2013; see Mesthrie and Upton (2013) in the special edition of *English Today*. A presentation of South African English for a general audience can be found in Mesthrie and Hromnik (2011).

English in adjoining countries has also been the focus of scholarly work, though not to anything like the same extent as in South Africa. There is an older overview by Schmied (1996), which examines English in the countries to the north of South Africa, namely Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi. Arua (2004) is a dedicated study on English in Botswana and Makoni, Brutt-Griffler and Mashiri (2007) is a similar study for Zimbabwe, as are Mlambo (2009) and Fitzmaurice (2010, 2013, 2015a, 2015b); Buschfeld and Kautzsch (2014) and Stell (2014) examine English in Namibia.

### 1.5 Changing English in South Africa

Sociolinguistic developments in late twentieth-century South Africa have been analysed by a number of scholars, for instance McCormick (2002) in her study of language in Cape Town's District Six, which was dissolved by the apartheid regime in the 1970s. In their contribution to the present volume (Chapter 7), Dowling, McCormick and Dyers offer an overview of the linguistics of language contact in Cape Town as a whole.

Mesthrie (2010) has shown how an increasingly large section of educated black people are adopting the pronunciation norms of middle-class white South Africans, e.g. in the use of their vowel values. The prosody of Black South African English remains distinctive (Zerbian, Chapter 16 in this volume) and may well move towards that of more mainstream forms of white South African English if the process of adopting the norms of this latter variety continues.

Linguistic change in the twenty-first century is of a more global character, with features characteristic of the broader anglophone world surfacing in the speech of young urbanites in South Africa; see the contribution by Chevalier (Chapter 8) on the reversal of the traditional raised front vowels of South African English. The issue of globalisation and its effects on



language planning and use is a theme pursued in the contribution by Kaschula. These larger, public issues include multilingualism and their role in education and social life; see the contribution by Heugh and Stroud (Chapter 11).<sup>10</sup> It is these external factors surrounding education and the public domain as well as language attitudes by the majority non-anglophone population which will determine the course of English in South Africa during the twenty-first century.

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<sup>10</sup> Education and the English language also interfaces with South African Sign Language, the topic of the contribution by Wehrmeyer (Chapter 18).



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