People's English, codification, function, and logic

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A response to Pearl Ntlhakana, 'People's English', on the language situation in South Africa, in *ET*62 (16:2), Apr 2000

IF YOU have a non-standard local form of English, what do you do with it?

Pearl Ntlhakana gives a bold answer, supporting her arguments by reference to an article by Chick and Wade (1997), also on the South African situation. By "People's English", Ntlhakana means what is usually referred to as Black South African English (BSAE), the English that is said to be characteristic of the indigenous African population of South Africa. What she suggests is that "a restandardised variety would actually replace the current standard (White South African English with Southern British English as its model), performing the whole range of formal functions" (p.14).

Her suggestion, welcome for its boldness and blunt provocativeness, raises issues that need discussing. The debate is not only about the complex South African situation but about general matters of principle that are relevant more widely. The issues have to do with the term "People's English", with the logic of identifying a variety, with the nature of BSAE, with the functions that English performs in South Africa (and perhaps elsewhere) and with the logic of using a local variety instead of the international print standard. Pearl Ntlhakana also makes some doubtful statements of historical fact that should not go uncorrected, but those are dealt with in Note 1.

"People's English"

First let us deal with the term "People's English". It has a nice ring to it, but raises many questions, especially in the South African context. As already stated, what is intended is what is usually called "Black South African English" and the implication is that "the people" are the indigenous African population of South Africa. Who are "the people"? Even if one excludes the white population and harks back to the days of apartheid politics, there are problems. There is the Indian population of South Africa, by now almost entirely English-speaking except for some of the older generation, who were equally disadvantaged by the apartheid policy. The English they speak has a wide range from acrolectal to basilectal and at the basilectal level has some usages that make comprehension difficult for the uninitiated. The community ranges from the very prosperous and highly educated down. Are they all "people", or only the poor in the community? At any rate, a different English is in question, especially at the basilectal end of the cline, although much Indian usage would count as standard.

Then there is the "coloured population", Afrikaans-speaking and English-speaking, with again wide divergences of wealth, education and social class. Sometimes the English is standard, sometimes influenced to a greater or lesser degree by Afrikaans. And of course, there are also the Whites, English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking who, it is to be hoped will,

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in the fullness of time, come to be considered as people.

Finally, there are the blacks themselves who, in terms both of the English spoken and in socio-economic and educational terms, are not quite as homogeneous as the appellation "the people" might lead us to think. Are we thinking of the excellent standard English of for example Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki when they make public announcements? Are we thinking of the young blacks, admittedly a relatively small number, who have been to private schools or to the former "Model C" schools along with white pupils and whose English has been influenced by this contact? Are we thinking, sociologically, of the growing, upwardly mobile, black middle class?

When Pearl Ntlhakana speaks of "People's English", where on the cline is she indicating the cut-off: does it apply indiscriminately to all blacks merely by virtue of the colour of the skin, or is the variety mesolectal or basilectal, or acrolectal too? Is accent alone a distinguishing feature or are features of grammar and lexis also included. How does one identify a variety? Perhaps, in the end, the term "People's English" had better be abandoned as smacking too much of an excited and fading rhetoric, but thinking through the implications of the terms does lead one to consider the diversity of the South African scene and to contemplate, among other things, the way in which English in South Africa is community driven but with a strong element of what might in international terms be described as standard English, especially if one excludes accent.

One problem is the debate about the definition of Standard English as witnessed in the articles by Tom McArthur and Alan Davies in *World Englishes* of 1999. There are degrees of strictness or breadth in how Standard English may be considered. Among other things, the debate is about whether or not accent (and in particular Received Pronunciation) is part of the package, and the degree to which, in the final analysis, Standard English is a world-wide print variety, preserved by international publishing houses. In this regard, the closing paragraphs of McArthur's article, "The printed word in the English-speaking world", about the extraordinary consistency of the international standard and of its great importance, is worth citing (McArthur 1997:16).

The other problem is how one determines any variety at all, including Black South African English (BSAE). What is error, what belongs to the local variety? Is one concerned with fossilized forms of interlanguage? If so, at what point on the cline from basilectal to acrolectal does one fix the new variety? If one admits acrolectal usage, to what extent does one in fact have a variety that differs from standard? Then one has to consider items of vocabulary stemming entirely from local use (although standard English has a capacious maw and takes in new words freely). Finally, as stated already, does pronunciation form part of the package?

Functions: a vital resource

Before one goes on to consider the possible nature of BSAE and its possible role in South Africa, one has to consider the various functions that English performs within and for South Africa. Pearl Ntlhakana talks of her restandardised variety's replacing the current near standard variety and "performing the whole range of formal functions". She quotes one of her sources as saying: "We understand the restandardisation of English in South Africa as involving raising the status of BSAE, currently a marginalised, non-prestige variety, so that it is regarded as acceptable in important and formal contexts such as in education, the media, business and government communication" (Chick and Wade, 1997: 279). It is necessary to try to set out the full range of functions of English in the South African context. In any situation involving the weighing and assessing of the uses of a local variety of English, a consideration of functions is necessary.

Firstly, English is the mother-tongue of a fairly small but diverse portion of the population, White, Indian and Coloured. The population is racially diverse and the English varied. Much of the English used is, however, little different from standard, accents excepted. Perhaps South Africa is fortunate in having this core of mother-tongue English-speakers, although it seems that it is the acrolectal standard of this group that Ntlhakana wishes to replace by a standardized BSAE. She considers this to be a white standard of usage but fails to record that this standard is used by very many Indians and Coloureds and by some blacks, too. At the basilectal level there can be difficulties of comprehension for the uninitiated. For example, "I stay next door to my mother only" is colloquial Indian usage for "I live right next

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door to my mother" (Mesthrie, 1996: 90).

As is the case throughout the world, there are in South Africa many more users of English as a second language than as a mother tongue. It must be pointed out, however, that a large number of the black population possibly may not know enough English for any worthwhile, practical use. English is, for the non mother tongue speakers, a very useful lingua franca, but it is far from being the only, or even the major, lingua franca. One would possibly reach more people through Afrikaans or one of the Nguni languages.

However, the great significance of English for South Africa is that it is a niche or domain language. It is the language of much government especially at the higher levels. It is the language of major business. It is the language of most tertiary level education. It is the language of science and technology. It is South Africa's window into the outside world. Most of the books in South Africa's significant libraries are in English. One sometimes hears the opinion expressed that the indigenous African languages should become the medium of instruction at university. The logistical problems are enormous. The Langtag (Language Task Group) investigation report, ignoring the representations of a group of tertiary teachers at its conference, briefly said this (Langtag: 130). However, it is a reasonable bet that textbooks written in, or translations of key works into, one or more of the nine languages in question will never replace with any kind of adequacy the sources of learning that are available in South Africa in books in English. It is the duty of the school system to teach English adequately to those with the potential to go on to tertiary education. The Report of the National Commission for Higher Education, in Section 10.10.3, took up the question of the medium of instruction, and stated that English should be the general language of tertiary education, but also made vague remarks about a possible future in which the African languages should be more prominent.

The variety of English used in all these functions approximates to the international standard. It would be wrong to say that all the English heard in the South African parliament conforms to this pattern (that would be too much to expect), although English of a sort (and much of it is pretty accomplished) is the language in which nearly all speeches are made. The small proportion not in English is mainly in Afrikaans. Broadly, South Africa is heavily dependent on English, and it is important and fortunate that English is well established in South Africa and has a basis in an English-speaking section of the population. English is a vital resource. The answer to the statement that South Africa is fortunate to have English is sometimes "at what cost", the point being that the possibility exists, because of the power and elitist domain uses of English, that the indigenous African languages may not come into their own. Indeed, there is a little evidence that a few middle-class black parents do not encourage their children to learn an African language.

The position of English in school education needs explaining. After the Soweto upheaval of 1976, English became the medium of instruction in black schools under the then Department of Education and Training, although the very early years were still conducted in the child's mother tongue. Dr Verwoerd's "Bantu Education" had, up to that point, succeeded in bringing about mother-tongue education up to the end of primary school, but had at the same time by the under- funding and under-training of teachers brought about a general decline in standards. The disturbed conditions consequent on the Soweto uprising further exacerbated the general state of education in black schools and the whole long-drawn-out decline is only now beginning to be reversed.

Some educational theorists are now strongly advocating a longer period of education and cognitive development in the mother tongue but at the moment English is still the medium of instruction of most South African school pupils after the very early years. Thanks to the combined effects of Verwoerdian education from 1953 and of political upheaval from 1976, English, as well as education generally, has suffered, a point to consider if one embarks on the course of codifying and restandardising towards black usage. Ntlhakana mentions the possibility of English improving with improved education. This "improvement" could only take place towards the international standard. This would make restandardising at this stage undesirable. It also indicates that some of the features of BSAE, the fossilized interlanguage, may not be permanent. English was probably one of Verwoerd's targets: it would be a strange irony if he triumphed from the grave because of the enthusiasm of some sociolinguists.

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A new language?

What is Black South African English, and can it perform all the functions outlined above? These functions require, on the whole, an acrolectal English, frequently an English that conforms to the international print standard. We are faced with a problem of logic and of definition. If BSAE is close enough to the print standard to perform all these functions, is it a separate variety that may be called Black South African English? How will it be distinguished from international English? If, on the other hand, this variety is distinctively different over a wide range of vocabulary and grammar, will it be able to perform the functions required of it, and, as Ntlhakana says, "actually replace the current standard (white South African English with Southern British English as its model) performing the whole range of formal functions".

Does Ntlhakana mean only pronunciation? One is reminded of what Lord Quirk wrote in 1993: "There is the myth, for example, that Standard English entails a particular accent – 'talking posh'. It does not. Only a trifling minority of Standard English speakers have any such accent and Standard English is spoken equally well by Bill Clinton, Paul Keating, Virginia Bottomley and John Smith – not to mention Nelson Mandela and F.W. de Klerk." The trouble is that Ntlhakana does not go into definitions of BSAE or of Standard English, nor does she show how she conceives BSAE. Nor, for that matter, does she consider the matter of functions, except in the very broadest sense. One of her sources, the article by Chick and Wade that has already been mentioned, does have a very limited set of quoted characteristics, partly based on a small questionnaire used by Roderick Wade. The most authoritative account of BSAE available to Ntlhakana at the time of writing was probably that by David Gough in *Focus on South Africa*, edited by Vivienne de Klerk (1996). It is not in her bibliography. Some more useful research has been done more recently, which will be referred to a little later. However, what must be emphasised is that a lot of work still has to be done to establish and define BSAE, and then to determine its uses, whether as one of a number of local varieties or as a variety that can take over all "formal functions", to use Ntlhakana's term.

What Ntlhakana does do is to quote the oft-quoted, in fact clichéd, statement of Njabulo Ndebele of 1986, "South African English must be open to the possibility of its becoming a new language. This may happen not only at the level of vocabulary... but also with regard to grammatical adjustments that may result from the proximity of English to indigenous African languages".

To quote this statement has become a piece of ritual obeisance characterised by little critical thinking. Professor Ndebele was delivering the Keynote Address at the conference of The English Academy of Southern Africa, and probably wanting his audience to feel either alarmed or jubilant. But the statement needs treating critically, and interrogating along the lines that are being suggested in this article. What are the details and how do these accord with the functions that English has to perform in South Africa? Are we talking of a variety for local use or are we talking of a medium for academic and international use? Professor Ndebele's own usage, as evinced by the address, is eloquent standard English.

Some BSAE details

There is no space to review all the linguistic details that have been said to indicate BSAE, only to consider a few critically. Pronunciation raises the question, already raised, of whether this should be included in a consideration of what is or is not standard English. If only accent constitutes a new English, then BSAE not only exists but is already used in formal contexts. The excellent English of Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki is witness to this, so is some of the English heard on the South African Broadcasting Corporation, when the general American of soaps and thrillers is not in question. The general characteristics are lack of central vowels, rhythm affected by syllable timing, uncertainty about stressed syllables, lack of vowel reduction and uncertainty about length of vowel. The general effect can sometimes affect comprehensibility. The problem with the proposition that standard English can accommodate variation in accent has to be accompanied by the warning that the accent must still be widely comprehensible. However, this is not where the important questions lie.

Some more important questions lie in the region of lexis. If one has explained to one that "my father is late", the possibility is that he might be dead rather than *en retard*, a semantic extension from the standard collocation "my late father". One needs to be in on the secret for

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this kind of thing, otherwise misunderstanding can result. Certain questions follow. Do we cultivate two kinds of English, in other words do we exist in a bidialectal or multidialectal situation (which is perfectly possible)? If so, what do we teach in school, or put into textbooks and dictionaries? Are we speaking to a local audience (in the hope that they are all equally multidialectal) or are we talking for international consumption? In other words, we are faced with questions of appropriateness and function. The real problem comes when local use begins to obscure the international to the extent that users no longer know what is appropriate and English begins, little by little, to cease to fulfil one of its most important functions, that of the medium of contact with the outside world, and begins to become only one more local form of communication.

Many words, however, are an addition to the language locally, for example a skoroskoro for a jalopy (or a *matric dance* for the same!). Some words of this kind have a way of finding themselves taken up into a broader English: *necklace*, the burning tyre round the neck, was in the *Shorter Oxford* by 1991. The English of white South Africans is larded with borrowings, some already ancient, from either Afrikaans or the African languages. South Africa already has its authoritative *The Dictionary of South African English on historical principles*. What we have forming lexically may be a broad South African lexis which may cease to be specifically black. Two warnings are necessary. Firstly, the users of this vocabulary must know that it is local and not expect, except occasionally, to be understood by the English-speaking world generally. Secondly, as hinted at already, some of these words may become part of standard English.

Grammar

Grammar is the most contentious area. The usual (even by now classical) method of determining the grammatical features of a new form of English has been to note, or try to determine, what fossilized errors have come to be widely used, used even perhaps by the teachers themselves. One wrestles here with the question of error or correctness and often asks whether with a little better teaching or teacher training the fossilised error might not disappear. Ntlhakana, towards the end of her article, mentions the possibility of improved school teaching of English. In this case, would some of the fossilized errors be dislodged, and would usage become closer to the standard? At any rate, one is dealing, in South Africa, with the situation in which white usage (to the extent that it can be relied on!), or at least usage in the more reputable newspapers and in books, might constantly offer alternative forms to BSAE usage.

One wonders about those blacks whose usage does not contain these features: must they unlearn the "correct" details and conform? One wonders, too, what to do about school textbooks, especially as schools become more integrated (although the great majority of schools are always going to be entirely black). There is also the question of marking pupils' or students' work. If one knows that a non-standard form is totally ingrained, does one try to do something about it? The question becomes most acute at tertiary level. There is also the question of how a local variety or varieties of English may hinder the student from understanding what is read in books, or in listening. In other words, access to knowledge may be disrupted. It all depends on how far the process goes of admitting fossilized features as a new standard. What, with time, could be the consequences?

The lists of details of BSAE at the moment do not seem to indicate that great disruption of comprehension and of comprehensibility are to be feared, although some features would certainly leave the user of standard English groping. If, however, a concerted effort at restandardising were to become the order of the day and nationalist linguistics and sociolinguistic enthusiasm were to abolish the controlling influences of education and international use, there is no telling what the distant future might hold. Ndebele's "new English" would be a very mixed blessing. It is the duty of the educational system to prepare those who have the talent for tertiary education or the talent to go into the various domains in which international interest is required, by teaching them adequate English. This is a task in which a good foundation must be laid in the early years and is not something that can be suddenly achieved just before the matriculation examination.

The two most extensive surveys of what are thought to be the well-established features of BSAE are those by David Gough (already mentioned) and Professor J.L. van der Walt, based on the work of one of his MA students M.P. Roodt. Gough's grammatical conclusions are

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based on only a small sample of twenty teachers in the Eastern Cape around Grahamstown. Van der Walt and Roodt worked in the North-Western Province with a much larger sample of third-year college students. There are some interesting variations. For example, van der Walt puts the resumptive pronoun in the 50% to 64% category, while Gough's survey shows total correction of this construction.

Where is BSAE? Perhaps the English around Grahamstown is better than that of the North West Province. Perhaps the examples used in Gough's survey were more obviously in need of correction: "The man who I saw him was wearing a big hat". Must Grahamstown conform to the North West, or vice versa? If such a construction were to become established there would be problems of international confusion. Should we actually teach it in schools and put it in textbooks? Chick and Wade suggest "other... others" in place of "some... others". Again the outsider would be baffled. Van der Walt has this construction among his highest frequency constructions; Gough does not have it.

The kind of chaos that could occur if one adopts putative "black" usage is well shown by a detail in an unpublished paper by Dr Liesel Hibbert in which she used Hansard to observe the usage of South African parliamentarians. She records three distinct uses of "to that extent", all meaning different things and looking very much like mere padding or verbiage, none corresponding to the logic of standard use. Do we record this as BSAE? This is the road, *pace* Jean Aitchison (1986), to language decay.

Let us end on a yet more sombre, if somewhat unscientific, note. The writer of this article, from long general observation of South African usage as a teacher and member of the public, has the uncomfortable feeling, unsubstantiated by any formal survey, that a set of constructions could be devised which (if tested as van der Walt and Gough have done their tests, by recognition of deviation) could produce some startling results. These would indicate widespread confusion of tenses and the impending demise of the Present Perfect, also the demise of *Do* Support, loss of any distinction between Continuous and Simple Present, and confusion in pronoun gender and articles, in addition to the features already considered to belong to BSAE. The standardisation of a new English which has been determined by the method of failing to spot errors in sentences could lead with time to a local English that would impede the understanding of educated international usage, and the enthusiasm of sociolinguists could lead to an educational and communicative disaster in which South Africa would lose an essential language resource, standard English. ■

Note

Pearl Ntlhakana (p. 11) says that the British Colonial government lasted from 1795 to 1948. She nowhere mentions the Boer Republics, nor that in 1910 South Africa became the Union of South Africa, uniting the two former Boer Republics and the British Colonies of Natal and the Cape Colony into an independent country under its own parliament. British Colonial government gave no recognition to either Dutch or Afrikaans, which obtained recognition after 1910.

On page 13, she gives statistics of 1991 (although she writes in 2000) to the effect that 71% of students at the University of Cape Town were white. By 2000, UCT probably had 47% black students. Also on page 13, she mentions Fort Hare University as one of the creations of the Afrikaner Nationalist government in 1960. In fact, Fort Hare has a distinguished record dating from 1916 and includes Nelson Mandela as a graduate (1940). Fort Hare was, of course, forced to conform to the apartheid policy in 1960.

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The Football Fight

In certain affairs transatlantic
We sometimes get rather pedantic
And cannot agree
On which side will be
The leader in matters semantic

E.g. there have been many fights
Over which side possesses the rights
To the meaning of *football*
For both of us put ball-
Games high on our list of delight

Now *football* I find a misnomer
As practised, that is, in Tacoma
For it's played with the hand
Which is totally banned
In Manchester, München or Roma

And what I call *football* is *soccer*
In the land of linebacker and blocker
Well thanks, but no thanks
To all of you Yanks
I'll keep it away in my locker

(And then there's the spelling of *soccer*
You've got to admit it's a shocker
Two c's, it's agreed
Should be soft, like *accede*
Not hard like the 'ck' in *knocker*)

— Roger Berry,
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