The Pronunciation of English in South Africa

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Introduction

There is no one, typical South African English accent as there is one overall Australian English accent. The variety of accents within the society is in part a consequence of the varied regional origins of groups of native English speakers who came to Africa at different times, and in part a consequence of the variety of mother tongues of the different ethnic groups who today use English so extensively that they must be included in the English-using community.

The first truly African, native English accent in South Africa evolved in the speech of the children of the 1820 Settlers who came to the Eastern Cape with parents who spoke many English dialects. The pronunciation features which survive are mainly those from south-east England with distinct Cockney associations. The variables (distinctive features of pronunciation) listed under A below may be attributed to this origin. Under B are listed variables of probable Dutch origin reflecting close association and intermarriage with Dutch inhabitants of the Cape. There was much contact with Xhosa people in that area, but the effect of this was almost entirely confined to the vocabulary. (The English which evolved in the Eastern and Central Cape we refer to as Cape English.)

The next large settlement from Britain took place in Natal between 1848 and 1862 giving rise to pronunciation variables pointing more to the Midlands and north of England (List C). The Natal settlers had a strong desire to remain English in every aspect of identity, social life, and behaviour. Until well into this century, therefore, British English shaded into Natal English, an accent less well defined than Cape English. Of interest is the recent spread of certain features of Natal English through the community of native English speakers in South Africa.

Standard southern British English (SSB) (the so-called ‘received pronunciation’ of the well educated with high social status) became socially significant in South African society generally from 1880 onwards in the great flow of immigration from, mainly, Britain and Europe to the diamond- and gold-fields. In the new towns and cities in these areas it overshadowed all local ‘Englishes’ with a social meaning of authority and high social status in the stratified class societies which were evolving. It became the ‘standard’ to be imitated by all who aspired to higher status (Barney Barnato, the self-made mining magnate, was one of these). The social influence of SSB was retained in South Africa until the Second World War. Even in the 1960s and 1970s, news readers of the SABC were expected to speak in this way; a BBC correspondent as late as 1973 commented on the ‘impeccably upper middle-class’ accents of the announcers. In 1971, an English professor of Wits University commented cynically: ‘The English-speaking population is touchy only in its uncritical reverence for received English pronunciation.’ The

sounds of most vowels and some consonants of SSB are indicated in the lists of pronunciation variables in the Key to Pronunciation.

There is a residue of South African English (*S. Afr. Eng.*) variables, not obviously traceable to origins associated with lists A to C, with a high incidence of occurrence; some serve to identify South Africans abroad. Termed General *S. Afr. Eng.* variables (List D), a number are probably products of trends in language change arising within the pronunciation system itself.

The English speech of the Dutch in the Western Cape had an accent at least as old as that of Cape English, strongly influenced by Dutch pronunciation—usually in coexistence with high levels of competence in every other aspect of English usage. Afrikaans English today ranges from an accent heavily impregnated with features of Afrikaans pronunciation to what is basically a native English accent with only traces of the hallmarks of Afrikaans English (Afk. E). The latter are found in List E below.

Black South Africans make up the largest body of English users in South Africa with their own distinctive accent. African English (Afr. E) was initially a product of education in mission schools in the nineteenth century, mainly in the Cape, where an élite received a high-quality education. The industrialization of South Africa saw an ever-increasing number of people with a need for English and a growing number of private and state schools were meeting this need. Afr. E became self-fertilizing in the forty years of isolation created by apartheid and some obvious direct transfers from African-language pronunciation have hardened into an Afr. E pronunciation which the great majority of black South Africans are now using. A selection of the most prominent features is found in List F.

Indian English (Ind. E) was introduced by, or evolved within, the groups of indentured labourers and immigrants coming to Natal from 1860 onwards. Until well into this century, Ind. E pronunciation was characterized by variables typical of the Indian English of India. In recent generations, however, Ind. E has progressively moved away from the influence of Indian languages, coinciding with a shift to English as the language of the home. English is, in fact, the only language really known by younger South African Indians. The distinguishing feature of Ind. E today is the extent to which it excludes the most typical *S. Afr. Eng.* variables and approximates the local standard. Some surviving variables of Ind. E which may be heard are given in List G.

The so-called Coloured community has had a use for English going back well into the nineteenth century. Col. E in the Western Cape is almost universally paired with Afrikaans in competent bilingualism and the majority of its many characterizing properties are in the majority similar to those of Afk. E.

The Variables of *S. Afr. Eng.* Pronunciation

Variables characterize accents and serve as differentials between different accents. As a term, ‘variable’ reflects the variation associated with each: the phonetic properties of a variable are

present in different degrees of prominence in different idiolects (the speech patterns of individuals). Moreover, a variable may, idiolectally, vary in prominence according to situation, for example, between formal and informal occasions. In the varying degrees of prominence in different speakers, a variable is often a point where the language is changing, a 'phonetic trend' advancing in successive generations (as in variable C8 below), or receding (variable A5 below).

The variables listed below are shown in their association with social or regional groups, or, in two cases, their probable historical origins. They are selected for their significance in differentiating accent types. They are described according to their articulatory properties, for example the position of the tongue in the mouth. Where symbols are used (between slashes) they are those found in some recent British dictionaries, such as the *Collins English Dictionary*, and represent the vowel and consonant sounds of SSB. SSB was formerly a significant accent in South African society and, in that it still exercises some control over native English speakers, it is provided as a basis for comparison. It supplies reference-points in the phonetic (articulatory) description of the sounds of English in South Africa.

Note Most English diphthongs, such as /aɪ/ in *time*, have two vowel qualities, the first being a recognizable vowel, the second a gliding movement of the tongue away from the vowel in the direction of /ɪ/, for example, in the case of /aɪ/.

A. Variables of British origin in Cape English

Cape English provides the basis of Extreme South African English (Ext. *S. Afr. Eng.*) which is widely distributed in the society and is the most typically local of native English pronunciation patterns.

1. /ɑː/ in *Martin, pass*.
   Tongue further back than in SSB and raised with weak lip-rounding. *Martin* is heard as 'Morton', *garden* as 'Gordon'. (George Bernard Shaw spelt Cockney 'r' as 'aw'.)
2. /eɪ/ (SSB has a more central vowel than the /e/ shown here.)
   In *play, Cape.*
   Tongue lower and further back (approximating 'u' in *but*) with greatly weakened glide. (Cockney '*pline Jine*' for plain Jane.)
3. /əʊ/ in *no, show*.
   Initial vowel is, as in 2. /eɪ/, a central vowel followed by weakened glide with no lip-rounding. (Eliza Doolittle's 'nah' for *no*.)
4. /aɪ/ in *nice, why.*
   Tongue further back and raised towards 'o' of *pot*. Shortened glide. (Cockney 'moy' for *my*.)
5. /ɑʊ/ in *round, cow*.
   Tongue further forward and raised, close to SSB 'a' in *hat*. Glide is weakened and unrounded. This variable has receded greatly in the past half century.

B. Variables of probable Dutch origin in Cape English

6. /r/ (In SSB a resonant sound without trilling having no sound in post-vowel position—except if another vowel follows.)
   In *press, Grahamstown, really, hairy*: a single strike of the tongue against the upper teeth ridge, but can be a trill (rolled).
7. /p,t,k/ In SSB these are aspirated—released with audible breath flow—when introducing a stressed syllable.
   In *pattern, attack, conquer*: unaspirated as in Afrikaans (no free breath flow after release).

C. Variables associated with Natal

8. /aɪ/ in *nine, slide*.
   Glide is greatly weakened or completely lost and the vowel is more fronted and tenser. (*Five times five* heard as 'faav taams faav'.)
9. The backing, bunching, and possible lowering of the tongue in vowels before a following /l/, which is word-final or followed by a consonant.
   Most noticeable in:
   cold with a vowel similar to *cock*
   bell, elf, the latter sounding like 'Alf'
   cull with an effect similar to *cold* above
   milk with a vowel closer to /ʊ/
10. /ɜː/ in *hurt, Durban*.
    The tongue is raised and fronted with some lip-rounding.
11. /uː/ in *you, too*.
    The tongue is central and high with lip-rounding largely lost.

D. General *S. Afr. Eng.* variables

These variables are distributed widely in native English accent patterns in South Africa, being major contributors auditorily to the 'South African accent'. The source and phonetic development of these variables is less clear than those in other lists:

12. /ɪ/ in *spirit, limit, sit*.
    Central and lower tongue /ə/ in *S. Afr. Eng.* In *S. Afr. Eng.* /ɪ/ complements /ə/, occurring when adjacent to the consonants present in *kiss, sick, ring, rich* and after 'h' (*hit, his*) and when word-initial (*in*). There are exceptions to and variation in this complementation, notably either /ɪ/ or /ə/ in *pin, wind*. For /ɪ/ see variable 19.
13. /ɪ/ word-final in *happy, any* is /i/ which is raised, tenser and longer.
14. /ɛ/ in *head, bent*.
    Raised tongue; *yes* is heard as 'yis'.

15. /ɛə/ in *there*, *scarce*.
    The vowel is shorter, the glide is lost. The vowel is the same or similar to that in 14 /ɛ/.
16. Word-final, unstressed syllables in SSB *chicken*, *wanted*, *candid* are stressed (louder) and have a prominent lower central /ə/ vowel.
17. /ɔː/ in *forty*, *paws*.
    Raised tongue, shortened, more lip-rounding.
18. /ɔɪ/ in *boy*, *point*.
    Vowel similar to variable 17 with higher, tenser, more prominent glide.
19. /ɪ/ complementing /ə/, in *kiss*, *ring*, *hit*.
    Raised tongue, more front and tenser. Approaching Afrikaans 'ie' in *siek*.

E. Variables of Afrikaans English

20. High diphthongal glides /aɪ/, /əʊ/, /eɪ/. (See variables 2, 3, 4.)
    The glides are high and prominent, to /i/ and /u/. /a/ is low, fronted and tense. /ə/ and /e/ are, phonetically, low fully central /ə/.
21. /r/ (See variable 6.) In Afk. E it is trilled (rolled), but may be just a single strike of the tongue. It is sounded word-finally, and after a vowel before a consonant (*four*, *part*), which is distinctly Afk. E.
22. /h/ word-initial in *hair*, *hot*.
    /h/ is voiced as in Afrikaans with some breathiness.
23. Intrusive /h/ between vowels in sequence.
    (The /h/ is voiced and breathy.) As in 'cha(h)os', 're(h)act'.
    Often the only evidence of the Afrikaans mother-tongue in highly competent English users, hence a shibboleth identifying Afk. E.
24. /æ/ in *carry*, *happy*.
    Tongue raised higher than /ɛ/: *cattle* heard as *kettle*.
25. /ɪ/ Tongue is high front and tenser /i/ in *ticket*, *rich*, complementing lowered, central /ə/ in *sit*, *little* as with variable 12.
    In stressed monosyllabic words it may be a long vowel, e.g. *It is* is heard as 'Eat ease'.

F. Variables of African English

26. /ɜː/ (a central vowel in SSB and *S. Afr. Eng.*) in *sir*, *heard*, *nurse*.
    A front vowel close to SSB /e/ (*head*) substitutes in Afr. E together with loss of length hence *nurse* is heard as 'ness'.
27. The vowel length distinction of native English is lost in apparently random alternation of long and short versions of a vowel, hence:
    heat heard as 'hit'
    pull heard as 'pool'
    sport heard as 'spot'
    heart heard as 'hut'
28. Unstressed syllables with /ə/ quality in the last syllables of *teacher*, *wanted*, *enter*, and the first syllables of *attack*, *return*, are fully stressed with an /a/

quality vowel or a pronunciation spelling, hence:
in *father* both syllables have the same vowel quality, the same stress and the same length; similarly *return* with the same two /e/-quality syllables.

29. /ɪ/ The central vowel /ə/ complementing /ɪ/ as described in variable 12 in, for example, *sit*, *simple*, *did*, is absent in Afr. E. Both are pronounced with /ɪ/ or tongue-higher /i/. Hence the variable in *live*, compounded with the loss of vowel length, is heard as 'leave'.
30. /æ/ in *cat, matter* has the /ɛ/ quality of African languages, hence the loss of distinctions such as *head* : *had* and *kettle* : *cattle*.

G. Variables of South African Indian English

31. Reduction of certain diphthongs. Most dipthongs in SSB and *S. Afr. Eng.* have prominence and length on the vowel before the glide. Ind. E reduces the vowel in length and prominence in an overall faster tempo.
    /aɪ/ in *my*, *five* is noticeably shorter with equal prominence to /a/ and /ɪ/.
    /eɪ/ in *Bombay*, *taking* is reduced to a pure vowel with the quality of phonetic /e/.
32. /v/ and /w/ in *vine*, *wine* are conflated in a labial articulation (the lips approaching each other) lacking both the friction of /v/ and the raising of the back of the tongue of /w/.
33. Shift in the main stress in words. Examples:
    'inter*e*sted' instead of *in*terested,
    'cele*brate*' instead of *cel*ebrate.

Distinguishable Accents in South Africa

SSB pronunciation conveyed high social prestige and correctness in speech behaviour to a wide sector of South African society until the Second World War. The ability to use and distinguish this accent from a 'local standard' is now given to but a few by virtue of age, British associations, or theatrical aspirations. The local standard, termed Conservative South African English, is recognizably South African, but remains close to SSB. However, a pronunciation pattern apparently conveying to post-war generations all the social meaning of Cons. *S. Afr. Eng.*, now includes the 'Natal variables' (List C). Variables C8 and 9 are advancing with considerable prominence in all native English communities in South Africa. Television commercials give evidence that in 1995 they have reached the speech of young children: 'faav' for five in the Stasoft commercial and 'Malrose' as the name of Melrose cheese. The term Respectable *S. Afr. Eng.* is applied to this version of local 'standard English' and the Natal variables widen the phonetic gap between British SSB and Cons. *S. Afr. Eng.*

With a long history of social stigma, which the mining society firmly entrenched, Extreme *S. Afr. Eng.* comprises essentially the Cape English variables (Lists A and B) complemented by General *S. Afr. Eng.* variables (List D) and, variably, Afk. E variables. This accent type is receding in SA society; variables A5 and B6 have been significantly reduced in recent

generations. It is maintained in groups which value the ‘macho’ image (schoolboys, in particular) and the ‘typical South African’ identity. It is still common in the older generations in the Eastern Cape where it has long been the local vernacular.

An overall Afk. E pronunciation pattern typified by the variables of List E is less and less the speech pattern of native speakers of Afrikaans. An increase in competent English–Afrikaans bilingualism coincides increasingly with native English accent types described above with, nevertheless, variables such as E23 often remaining as markers of descent-group identity. In the 1990s a uniform Afk. E pronunciation with all the variables of List E in prominence is likely to correlate with one, or a combination of, the following: age over 50 representing socialization at a time when the English–Afrikaans divide cut deepest into white South African society; low socio-economic status; residence in predominantly Afrikaans-speaking communities with little contact with native English speakers.

In the 1990s the English pronunciation of black South Africans (Afr. E) covers the whole range from virtually native English pronunciation of a small minority to a pronunciation pattern taken over almost entirely by African-language norms. Many intermediate versions exist, but the majority of idiolects present the characterising variables in List F which are drawn from a central core of Afr. E pronunciation norms, being the variables most likely to mark even highly competent Afr. E.

With the ascendancy of English as the home language of the Indian community, Ind. E has rapidly shed its salient Indian-language features and in pronunciation

approximates more and more to a local native English pattern. For the better educated this comes close to Cons. *S. Afr. Eng.* It is noteworthy that the Natal variables are not usually in evidence and there is little or nothing of Ext. *S. Afr. Eng.* Traces of the earlier Ind. E are found in the variables of List G which also occur in the English of India.

Variables for the English of the Coloured community are not listed although the pronunciation pattern is readily recognized in South Africa. The basis is Afrikaans, although there are characterizing variables of Coloured Afrikaans which, however, are not usually carried over into English. There is a good deal of variability within Col. E with certain Cape English variables, notably A3, to be found in the speech of those who would claim English as home language—usually in the higher socio-economic ranks. Col. E intonation remains the main characterizing feature which is not derived from English or Afrikaans. It is, in sound, the sustained high pitch of terminal syllables in assertions as well as questions.