

SOUTH AFRICAN INDIAN ENGLISH: SOME CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of varieties of English and Afrikaans in South Africa, Kruger (1986:27) makes the following claim: 'Afrikaans... has a whole range of sociolinguistically active non-standard varieties and vernaculars, e.g. 'Kaapse Afrikaans' (Coloured Afrikaans) and Black Afrikaans. Although SAE is a "mixed bag" it lacks sociolects equivalent to those in Afrikaans mentioned above.'

This is a surprising conclusion. In the first place, if Black Afrikaans is a sociolect, why is South African Black English not one (see e.g. Magura 1985)? And if Kaaps is a widespread vernacular sociolect of Cape Town and districts, should we not consider the English varieties of the Cape Flats - which share equal first language (L1) status with Kaaps or are fluent second languages (L2s) - as social dialects too? Secondly, should we attribute sociolectal status to second language speakers alone? Witness Lanham's (1978) careful distinction between 'Respectable', 'Conservative' and 'Extreme' varieties of (White) South African English in this regard. Kruger (1986:31) speculates further that the 'absence' of sociolects in SAE is attributable to 'colonial presumptions and blind adherence to them' on the part of English speaking South Africans. In fact, social varieties of English are not lacking even in Natal, that last outpost of the English empire. This article will focus on one such variety, which is now an L1 - Natal Indian English (or SAIE, as it has perhaps erroneously come to be called).

If I may be permitted a preamble about the ethnic labels used thus far, let me emphasise that these are descriptive tags and not starting points. That is to say, one shouldn't expect every ethnic group (however identified) to practise language or dialect apartheid. Instead one identifies speech varieties in terms of their linguistic characteristics and looks for social correlation afterwards. The fact that many of the sociolects happen to be ethnolects is a development enhanced by recent South African history. It is not clear, for example, that all persons labelled 'Indian' under current legislation speak the same variety of English. The English among Indians residing in the Cape is clearly distinct from the Natal variety of SAIE, and in Natal itself a few speakers speak varieties of British or American English, on account of extensive stays abroad (and other socio-psychological reasons). A few others would appear to command a variety of general SAE rather than SAIE, as a result of frequent contact with SAE speakers.¹

However, the majority of Natalians of Indian descent do share a common core of features which constitute a 'focused' variety (in the sense of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller [1985]), which for convenience I will label SAIE. Among the factors which have fostered this sub-variety of SAE are common historical experiences such as indentureship, petty trading and segregation in housing and education, as well as similar ancestral languages (belonging to the Indic or Dravidian families, which are themselves typologically quite similar). One can infer what the ancestral language of older speakers is from finer details of their English accent, but it is not always possible to do so for younger speakers, in whose speech certain stigmatised tendencies are being levelled out. Thus replacement of /h/ by a glottal stop (so-called h-dropping) or by [y] as in 'i'll for 'hill' (actually [?ill] or [yil]) is a well-known index of Dravidian (i.e. Tamil or Telugu) influence.² This stigmatised feature (common in dialects of English world-wide) decreases with age and social class. It still occurs with many lower class speakers of Dravidian language background, but it would be an overstatement to call it a general SAIE feature.

Another feature which is in the process of erosion is the retroflexion of /t/ and /d/, a striking characteristic of the English of the Indian subcontinent. It is present in the speech of older SAIE speakers, but decreases with age. When retroflexion does occur in the speech of youngsters it is usually to emphasise a particular word containing /t/ or /d/ (as in *I told you so*).

2. SOCIAL VARIATION

The impression should not be gained, however, that all features

of 'older' SAIE (at a stage when it was very much a second language) have receded now that English has clearly become the L1 of the community. Younger speakers are, instead, able to command a variety of styles, one of which has strong resemblance to the L2 English of their parents or grandparents. This I have called the basilect (Mesthrie, forthcoming) on account of syntactic similarities it shares with creole varieties of English. The basilect is for many SAIE speakers the true vernacular (in the sense of Labov 1972:208). It is the style favoured between friends, between parents and children, and between relatives. It is not, however, appropriate to use this style in public speaking, with professional people, in the classroom, or with strangers (unless it is the only style one has in one's repertoire, as with older rural speakers). Amongst males, especially younger ones, a basilectal syntax is overlaid by a large number of slang items when conversing with peers. Some examples of the basilectal style follow, with some details concerning speaker and situation:

1. They used to give little bit tablet an' all you know. (= 'They used to give us tablets and other medicines') 60 year old, male, 4 years of English education, informal interview.
2. Mother will say, 'What y'all frightened la' that - mustn't fright'. (= 'Our mother used to say, "Why are you so afraid - you needn't be afraid."') 52 year old, female, 6 years of English education, informal interview.
3. Ey, how that time, canoes an' all coming, how we moered them with tomatoes an' all. (= 'How about the time when we threw tomatoes at those approaching canoes'.) 22 year old, male, 12 years of education, conversation with friends, slangy style.
4. I said nemmain, let she get used. (= 'I said, "Never mind, let her get used to the job."'') 47 year old, female, 5 years of education, informal interview.

The basilectal style does not occur in ordinary writing, though dramatists have captured its rhythms and vigour fruitfully on stage.³ Within the contexts of its use, the basilect is the most appropriate style, and the standard 'translations' given above would sound artificial, formal and inappropriate in such situations. Not all speakers use the basilect, however. Social class and higher education dictate that some younger urban speakers (unconsciously) distance themselves from this 'older' style of speaking, and use forms more approximative of Standard English, with only a few constructions typical of basilectal usage. Such a variety I have called the acrolect, which differs from Standard English only in a few details, but is usually still accompanied by an SAIE accent. Thus, whereas older speakers often command

only the basilectal style, and a few urban, upper class speakers use mainly an acrolectal style, the majority of SAIE speakers use a variety of styles, including the basilect (or near-basilect) and acrolect (or near-acrolect) according to the nature of the speech situation (formal/informal), the person one is addressing (SAIE speaker or not, professional or not), and sometimes according to the topic. For the average young speaker a constant balance has to be struck between not sounding too basilectal in public (i.e. 'old fashioned' or uneducated) or too acrolectal (i.e. 'putting on airs').

In the following sections I will outline what seem to me to be the common core features of SAIE in terms of phonetics, lexis and syntax.

3. PHONETICS

Raising of the front short vowel series with accompanying centralisation of /I/ makes the SAIE vowel system a typically South African one (see Lass and Wright 1986). The reflexes are thus as follows:

SAIE	SAE	RP	Example
[ɛ]	[ɛ]	[æ]	bat
[e]~[ë]	[e]~[ë]	[ɛ]	bet
[i]	[i]~[ə]	[I]	bit

In other respects SAIE does not accord with typical SAE features; most notably it does not share the SAE propensity for glide weakening of diphthongs (see Lanham:1978:153). Thus SAIE [k ɤ it] versus SAE [ka:t] for *kite*.

Other differences between SAIE and SAE vowels are many, but beyond the scope of this article. Within SAIE there is also some variation according to social parameters: one example will suffice here. A short vowel [ɔ] is characteristic of words like *sports, court, horse, caught* in the basilect, whereas the acrolect favours a longer vowel [ɔ:]. An alternative form [q:] under SAE influence is favoured by radio announcers and public speakers.

As far as consonants are concerned, the most significant accentual difference includes the use of dental stops rather than fricatives: [t̪] for /θ/ in *thin, teeth* etc., and [d̪] for /ð/ in *this, weather, with*, etc. Some speakers in formal situations might occasionally produce intermediate affricates [t̪^o] and [d̪^ɔ].

/v/ and /f/ tend to be realised as approximants [ʋ] and [ɸ], rather than as true fricatives.

Equally distinctive are non-segmental characteristics, including stress patterns and rhythms. Bughwan (1970:308) observes that SAIE tends to be syllable-timed (like French and Indian languages generally) rather than stress-timed. This is especially true of informal and in-group speech, which to outsiders may seem to proceed at bewilderingly fast pace. Other seemingly random differences in stress patterns of individual words are recorded in Bughwan (1970:256).

4. LEXIS

This is a significant area of difference from other varieties of SAE, though mainly in informal speech. Some SAIE items have made their mark on Natal English and SAE generally. Words like *biryani*, *dhania*, *masala*, *samosa*, *bunny chow*, *roti*, and *dol* are no longer restricted to SAIE speakers.⁴ Within the SAIE speech community, the number of lexical items from Indian languages now used as English words is considerably larger. As with the phonetic variants, one can point to a common core of items used (or understood) by most speakers, as against others varying according to ancestral language. Thus *iseɪ* (a winged termite) is used by all SAIE speakers, and is commonly supposed to be an English word. Its source is in fact Tamil (*icaɪ*) and Telugu (*isuɪɪu*). Many items known to derive from an Indian language now pass as English words, either because there is no English equivalent, or because the English term lacks the connotations of the more specific SAIE term. Cooking terms, and terms for sweetmeats, desserts and seasonings, especially, fall under this category, e.g. *poli* (a crescent-shaped snack usually filled with grated coconut), *dosa* (a sweet thin pancake), etc.

Other terms are restricted to specific sub-groups, with various 'competing' forms in SAIE. The term for 'paternal aunt', for example, is *periathe* in traditionally Tamil-speaking households, but other households might use forms like *phua* (from Hindi), *phuppi* (from Urdu) or *foi* (from Gujarati). Because they are used mainly with relatives in domestic settings, these terms are rarely known among all SAIE speakers. They nevertheless qualify as English words on account of their continued use even by the youngest children no longer acquainted with an Indian language.

Direct reliance on Indic or Dravidian sources is not the only lexical option available to SAIE speakers. There are instances of neologisms, calquing and semantic shifts involving English words. Thus *curry-leaf* (a seasoning) is a translation (a calque) of Tamil *kari-pule*; *oil-bath* is a neologism for the ritual bath in oil undertaken by some Hindus; and *healthy* (a euphemism for 'overweight') is an example of semantic shift.

SAIE slang has been reported on by Barnes (1978, 1986), though the impression given there that these are all peculiarly SAIE phenomena needs to be corrected. An examination of Bailey (1985) and of a dictionary of slang (e.g. Partridge 1961) shows that a large number of items are in general currency in Natal and even have their impetus outside South Africa, in British and American slang of the early twentieth century.

5. SYNTAX

I have written in greater detail about SAIE syntax elsewhere, and hope I may be forgiven for this bald outline and the references to my own work. At the acrolectal level, used in formal situations by educated speakers (and by some speakers even in informal situations), SAIE syntax is little different from standard English based on British norms. The few differences that do occur (and are below the level of social consciousness) include the following:

- a) Use of a second person plural pronoun form *y'all*. Its genitive form *ya'll's* is also widespread, though less frequent in acrolectal style. This attempt at remedying a deficiency in the standard language is common to many other dialects (c.f. *y'all* in Southern U.S., *yous*, *you guys*, *you okes*, etc.)
- b) Ordinary question order retained in indirect questions involving the verb *be*: Examples of this are *Do you know where's Krish*, *I don't know what's that*, etc. Some speakers do produce the standard equivalent, but in doing so sound consciously formal and 'public'.
- c) The use of a partitive genitive with *too much* as in *too much of trouble/money/detail*.

At the basilectal level, characteristic of people with little English education or some educated speakers at their most informal, the divergence from standard English increases greatly, so much so that I have argued elsewhere (Mesthrie, forthcoming) that the basilect is a 'creoloid' (in the sense of Platt 1977 and Trudgill 1983). It would be repetitive to go into detail here, but, broadly speaking, basilectal SAIE, like many other English 'interlanguages' (i.e. varieties characteristic of groups of second language learners) can be shown to have many of the properties associated with creole languages, especially variable use of tense and number endings, deletion of a great number of unstressed elements, reduplication, transfer of items from one word class to another, greater use of aspectual categories for verbs, etc.

Three other phenomena broadly characterise basilectal SAIE syntax: its predilection for parataxis above hypotaxis, its 'OV-ness', and topic prominence.

5.1 Parataxis

This denotes a general tendency to favour loosely co-ordinated strings of simple sentences rather than the (hypotactic) use of subordination characteristic of educated and formal English. Some of the impetus may come from the ancestral languages, especially Tamil and Telugu, but it must be noted that parataxis is in use in many informal varieties of British and American English. If my hunch is correct, SAIE nevertheless uses this device to a much greater extent. The following is an excerpt from a 60 year old fluent male speaker's narrative (as it is not easy to distinguish sentence breaks I use '/' for a short pause and '// ' for a longer one):

Then the doctor filled me up// gave me a note/ I had to go to Dr X / in Umzinto//then Dr X he saw all this thing and he tried me/ put the tape an' all this thing/ he said, 'no give me the form to fill'// I went to Derek/ Derek filled that thing/he sent it/I think after six month I got the grant

5.2 'OV-ness'

By this I mean that SAIE sometimes shows the word order preferences of the ancestral languages. All the languages of India regularly place the verb at the end of a sentence, the main exception occurring when special emphasis is desired. Following from the work of Greenberg (1966), we can expect that the syntax of these verb final (or OV) languages shows other preferences in phrase and word order clearly different from S-V-O languages like English.⁵ SAIE, whilst being very much in accordance with the usual English order S-V-O, nevertheless shows traces of OV influence. A few examples follow, and for further details the reader is referred to Mesthrie (1987):

5.2.1 *Verb-final sentences*

In casual basilectal speech objects may precede verbs, to a greater degree than in other English dialects.

6. Customer you got. (= 'You have a customer') (15 years, female 9 years of education).
7. My mother's sari I wore. (23 years, female, university educated.)

8. So beautiful it is. (21 years, female, 7 years of education).
9. Lakker sister you got. (16 years, male, 10 years of education, slangy style).

5.2.2 Kinship title after proper name

Referential and vocative terms like *Johnny uncle* and *Rani aunty* occur in informal speech. The more usual English forms *Uncle Johnny* and *Aunt Rani* would be used in formal speech and writing.

5.2.3 Relative clause order

Unlike normal English order, basilectal SAIE permits the relative clause to precede the main clause (there are also differences in detail concerning the form of the relative clause marker, as the sentences show):

11. Who won money, they're putting up a factory next door. (= 'The people who won money are the ones putting up a factory next door') (48 years, female, 5 years of education).
12. Which faller scored the most, he must go in the goals. (= 'The person who scored the most number of goals must now play goalkeeper') (18 years, male, 7 years of education).

These forms never occur in the acrolectal variety, however.

5.3 Topic Prominence

This refers to the preference some languages have for bringing certain elements of the sentence (not necessarily the grammatical subject) into first position. Although English does display topicalisation as in *Cats I love*, *Cats - I hate them*, *Jenny I would die for*, it is not a topic prominent language (in the sense of Li and Thompson 1976). Neither are SAIE and the ancestral Indian languages 'topic prominent'. Topicalisation seems to me, nevertheless, to play a significant role in basilectal SAIE, as with other 'new' varieties of English like Fijian English and Sri Lankan English (see Platt et al, 1984:119-121).

A subject noun phrase may be topicalised by remaining in its usual sentence-initial position and followed by its pronominal equivalent:

13. All my brothers too, they never used to work. (60 year old, female, 5 years of education)

14. The weather too, its cold. (50 year old, female, 5 years of education)
15. My brother and myself, we were fishing at the pier one day. (20 year old, male, 12 years of education)

Almost as frequent is the topicalisation of direct objects. These may simply be brought to the front of the sentence, resulting in the order O-S-V (as in 16 and 17), or brought to the front and repeated in object position in the form of its pronoun equivalent (as in 18).

16. Ginger too we should plant. (= 'We also used to plant ginger') (50 year old, female, 5 years of education)
17. Before that only asthma I had. (60 year old, male, 4 years of education)
18. This farm I gave it on lease. (60 year old, male, 4 years of education).

6. Conclusion

I have tried to establish, in outline, some of the more interesting features of one sociolect of South African English. It should be kept in mind that SAIE speakers rarely use the forms described above in educated formal speech, and prefer a more 'standard' syntax. Purists all too willing to write off any dialectal variation in English as aberrant or as an abuse of the language might be reminded that many of the phenomena described above already exist as tendencies in informal manifestations of the standard language, and can be expressively used by creative writers. For example:

Milton: Him the Almighty Power hurled headlong.... (*Paradise Lost*, Book One, lines 44-5, showing object topicalisation.)

who best bear his mild yoke, they serve him best... (*Sonnet 19, On his Blindness*, lines 10-11, showing a relative clause preceding the main clause.)

Eliot: A cold coming we had of it... (*Journey of the Magi*, line 1, showing object topicalisation.)

Shakespeare: There is a man haunts the forest. (*As You Like It*, III.2.375, showing parataxis).

NOTES

1. The existence of SAIE speakers who are not of Indian descent is also a possibility to be entertained.
2. This does not imply that all (or even the majority) of Tamil and Telugu speakers 'drop' their aitches.
3. One such play, *The Lahnee's Pleasure* by Ronnie Govender, is available in print.
4. In this section I exclude words of Indian origin borrowed by the British in India (*bangle, bungalow, juggle*, etc.).
5. Here 'O' stands for Object, 'S' for Subject, and 'V' for Verb.

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