

South African 'Black' English: some indications

by A.D. Adey

The education for the future citizen of Africa must be a modern Africa education.¹

Unless the study of the vernacular is given its right importance, another cause will be added to those which tend to uproot the African without giving him a firm footing in a new and stable society²

Even in Africa cultural integration has not succeeded.³

H.C. Link, in his book, *The Rediscovery of Morals*, maintains that the artificial 'segregation of people in a separate nation ... is a step backwards'. One could also suggest that the extension of this balkanisation to the realm of education has had a profound effect on the development, both linguistic and cultural, of many 'Black' South Africans. The three quotations given above come very close to echoing what seems to be the reasoning of the Department of Bantu Education, which for a time, insisted upon the use of the vernacular as the medium of instruction in Primary Schools under its control. It is this policy which has given a certain impetus to the emergence of what has been termed a 'dialect' of English in South Africa — namely, 'Black' South African English.

'Dialect', as Professor L.W. Lanham points out, 'exists as a social group differential because of *differences* in language: differences in vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar'.⁴ Clarence Major, in *Black Slang: A Dictionary of Afro-American Talk*, extends this argument to include the sphere of politics: 'this is another ethnic aspect of a long, painful struggle toward human freedom'.⁵ Whichever view one holds in this regard, the 'dialect' certainly exists, and it would be both unfair and wrong to speak of this variation as an incorrect form of Standard South African English. 'Wrong' is a social judgement, as what is meant is: 'the best people use this form and not that form'. 'There are' maintains M.A.K.

Halliday, 'social conventions about language, and their function is that of social conventions: meaningless in themselves, they exert cohesive force within one society, or one section of a society, by marking it off from another'.⁶ Thus, in addition to the generally wide differences in economic, political and educational status between 'White' and 'Black' South Africans, there is also a tendency towards a separation induced by the differences (phonetical, morphological and syntactical) between 'Black' and 'Standard' English.

Clarence Major states very succinctly that 'to call this dialect an *aberration* is simply another kind of insult',⁷ as it is often the result of indifferent teaching, a policy of instruction through the vernacular, and 'interference' from the mother-tongue of the speaker.

At this stage it might be well to distinguish between 'slang' and 'Black' English, although — as Gilbert Seldes is quick to point out — 'there are few specifications about slang most people would agree on'.⁸ The major distinction is that slang is instinctive rather than cerebral. Indeed, M.H. Boulivare has called it a 'relaxation from the daily grind'.⁹ Major lists the following examples in his dictionary:¹⁰

Expense:	a newborn baby
Eyeball:	to look, to see
Eyes:	an expression of approval: 'I got "eyes" for her'.

The 'dialect' which, for the want of a better name, I have called 'Black' English is neither slang nor defective speech. Many people, unfortunately, view this 'dialect' as 'bad' English. A result of this attitude is, as one sociologist maintains,

*poor mental health on the part of pupils and learners of the language. A child is quick to grasp the feeling that while school speech is 'good', his own speech is 'bad', and that by extension he himself is somehow inadequate, and without value.*¹¹

It is important to remember that when anyone learns a new language, it is usual for him to try to speak the new language with the sounds and structures of the more familiar language. Furthermore, 'if a person's first language does not happen to have a particular sound needed in the language he's learning, he will tend to substitute a similar or related sound from his native

language and use it to speak the new one'.¹² In this way social and geographical isolation reinforces the tendency to retain old language habits. When one group is considered inferior the other avoids it, and the pattern of language differences is perpetuated.

Vowel sounds which differ in the 'non-standard' language:

Standard word	Non-Standard pronunciation
bird	băd
sir	să
him	hēm
hell	hăl
work	wěk
sad	sěd
bed	băd

Differences in structure

Unawareness of the infinite's habit of dropping the *to* after certain verbs leads to faulty sentences like:

'He makes him *to do* it.' (Analogy: 'He tells him to do it.')

Tense

Users of 'non-standard' English often confuse the past continuous and the simple past:

'He *was going to* work every day.' (He *went* ...)

Gender

The masculine gender is sometimes used as the sole agent of description:

'It is he that did it, that girl.'

Vocabulary

Although this aspect of 'non-standard' English does not always serve to confuse meaning for the 'standard' recipient, vocabulary differences — or deficiencies in the mother-tongue — often lead to unusual expressions and descriptives. In the following example the speaker is trying to express an awareness of seasonal change:

'After the spring rains the veld soon became *blue*.' (green)

Typical 'Bantuisms', or examples of 'Black' English phraseology and expression:

Does he *sit* on a farm? (live)
 I went there *with my feet*. (on foot)
Pass my regards to all at home. (give)
 Abiti was *putting on* a brown skirt. (wearing)
 Kome went home to *take* his books. (fetch)
 Whose pen is this? It is *for Zola*. (Zola's)
 Mr Zungu has *many* sheep than Mr Zide. (more)
 He stabbed the man *on* the leg. (in)
How is your house like? (what)
 I am *too* fond of my brothers and sisters. (very)
 My father made me *to work* very hard. (work)
 I *can be* able to ride a bicycle. (am)
 We all walked *on foot* to town. (*on foot* is redundant)
 I met *with* my friend in town today (omit *with*)
 I told him *all* what Jan had done. (omit *all*)
 He was *refusing with* my book.
 The *most thing I like* is apples.
 One must be kind to *his* pets *every time*.
They all hid away for me.
 She was carrying *a* luggage.¹³

In conclusion, I would add that these examples are meant to argue a simple point: that 'Black' South African English seems to be an established 'dialect' deserving the attention of linguistic and sociological scholars. Those too readily inclined to dismiss this 'dialect' as an annoying aberration — and, like the poor, always with us — might consider the dictum of J.B. Priestley: 'Standard English is like standard anything else — poor tasteless stuff'.¹⁴

REFERENCES

- ¹ UNESCO, *Final Report on the Conference of African States on the development of education in Africa*, Addis Ababa, 15–25 May, 1961, p. 3.
- ² The Nuffield Foundation and Colonial Office, *African Education, A Study of Educational Policy and Practice*, O.U.P., London, 1953, p. 80.
- ³ B. de V. van der Merwe: 'Social Education and the Changing Society', in *Fort Hare Papers*, Vol. 3, no. 6, p. 21.

- ⁴ L.W. Lanham: 'The Social Context of English in South Africa', in *Proceedings No. 1: 1964 (ISEA)*, p. 6.
- ⁵ Routledge, London, 1971, p. 10.
- ⁶ M.A.K. Halliday, et al: 'The Users and Uses of Language', in *Readings in the Sociology of Language* (Editor: J.A. Fishman), Manton, Paris, 1970, p. 167.
- ⁷ Clarence Major, *op cit*, p. 14.
- ⁸ *The New York Times Book Review*, July 27, 1947, p. 43.
- ⁹ M.H. Boulivare: *Jive and Slang of Students in Negro Colleges*, New York, 1947.
- ¹⁰ Clarence Major, *op cit*, p. 151. (These are examples of 'Black' American slang. I would be pleased to have examples of 'Black' South African usage from readers.)
- ¹¹ Dorothy Seymour: 'Black English', in *Intellectual Digest*, February 1972, Vol. 11, no. 6, p. 78.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ¹³ I am grateful to Dr A.S.V. Barnes for permission to use many of these expressions, taken from: *Modern Graded English* (3rd Ed.), Via Afrika, Cape Town, pp. 165–170. Readers are invited to submit further examples of 'Bantuisms'.
- ¹⁴ J.B. Priestley: *English Journey*, Heinemann, London, 1934, p. 290.