
SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH : A LANGUAGE APART

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Abstract

When teaching English for Special Purposes, educators normally stress profession related vocabulary and perhaps some impacts of culture on language. This paper deals with the teaching of national expressions as ESP, illustrated with examples from South African English. The contention is made that more stress should be placed upon national variations of General English. The term General English is defined as the core of English usage which the major English speaking countries, i.e. Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, New Zealand and the United States, have in common. Each of these countries has certain expressions which are either peculiar to that country alone, or are not shared by all the others. If we have in our ESL classes students/professionals who are going to a given country, e.g. journalists to South Africa, they should be taught the special expressions of that country which deviate from General English. Although students/professionals will eventually learn the expressions when in the host country, they will operate much more efficiently, with less frustration and will reduce the aggravation of misunderstandings by being taught expressions peculiar to the target country. More emphasis should be placed in the classroom and in briefing sessions on national divergences from General English.

The English spoken in South Africa today is supposedly the Queen's English. There are no official South African grammars or dictionaries. The pronunciation of English-speaking South Africans is different from that of British Received Pronunciation but it is closer to it than Canadian, American or Australian English (Malong, 1982). Some of the vocabulary, however, is different from that of General English. General English is defined as those lexical and grammatical elements common to the speech of the principal English-speaking countries : Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, New Zealand and the USA, closely corresponding to what Kachru calls the "Inner

Circle" (Kachru, 1988). Most of the variant lexical items found in South African English have been borrowed from Afrikaans, but some have also been borrowed from Portuguese, Malay, Hebrew, Yiddish and the Bantu languages. Just what is it that differentiates South African English from General English and why bother dwelling on those differences? It is contended here that studying cultural and national varieties of English is just as an important part of English for Specific Purposes as is the specialized vocabulary of engineering, business, etc. Without specialized vocabulary and expressions, communication is impaired or may even break down.

The following text was composed to illustrate some of the specialized vocabulary of South African English. It must be kept in mind that in a natural dialogue one would normally not find such a concentration of South African English expressions as in this text. The text combines white English, black English and *fly taal*, the hip language of the *tsotsis*, black street thugs.

That dodgy oorlanse kaffir (munt) was driving his bakkie with the fat tackies down the pad voet-in-die-hoek. He was on his way home to a braai of boerewors and pap. Even though his pundos were tired he took the long way to avoid the skollies, tsotsis and die gattes. I know he had more than a zol of good dagga (atshitshi), he sure was gerook. While he was away some spooty dogs got his mealies and biltong. He stopped to get a doppie of mampoer and some utywala at his mushie mrezan's, a shebeen queen and a bit of a vet sak (mafuto). While the ou was parked next to the bioscope some picannin zolled (skitted) his should be dask type (magageba) and he didn't have zut left over.

dodgy = unpredictable

oorlanse = Black/Coloured person having White ways, < Malay = old person

kaffir = derogatory for a Black person, < obscure, perhaps < Arabic = infidel

munt = derogatory for a Black person, < Bantu, uMuntu

bakkie = pick-up truck, < Afrikaans, bak = container

fat tackies = wide profile radial tires, < obscure

pad = road, < Afrikaans

voet-in-die-hoek = flat out, < Afrikaans

braai = cook-out, barbecue, < Afrikaans

boerewors = country style sausage, < Afrikaans

pap = grits, < Afrikaans, perhaps < Zulu, *mpuphu* = fine meal

pundos = buttocks, < Xhosa, *impundu*

skollie = a coloured street hoodlum, < Afrikaans, perhaps < Yiddish or Hebrew, *skorriemorrie*

tsotsi = flashily dressed African street thug, < obscure, perhaps corruption of 'zoot-suit'

die gattes = police, < Afrikaans, *gat* = anus
zol = joint, i.e. marijuana, < Nguni, *i-zoli* = hand rolled cigarette

dagga = marijuana, < Hottentot, *daxa-b atshitshi* = marijuana, < obscure, used in *fly taal*

gerook = high on marijuana, < Afrikaans = smoke

spotty dog = hyena

mealie = maize, corn < Portuguese, *milho* = grain

biltong = jerky, < Afrikaans, *bil* = buttock, *tong* = tongue

doppie = a shot, a snort of liquor, < Afrikaans, *dop* = cup

mampoer = fruit brandy, usually peach, < Mam-puru, name of a Sotho chief

utywala = African beer, < Xhosa

mushie = great, super < Zulu

mrezan = girlfriend, < obscure

shebeen = speakeasy, < Irish Gaelic, *sibun* = bad ale

vet sak = fat person, < Afrikaans

mafuto = fatso, Bantu

bioscope = cinema

picannin = small African child, < Portuguese, *pequeno* = small

It can be seen that many of the lexical items are perhaps incomprehensible to speakers of General English since they come from a wide range of sources. In order to understand why these sources have particularly influenced the English of South Africa it is helpful to have an understanding of the history and current ethno-linguistic make-up of that country.

The first White settlers arrived at the Cape in

the 17th century from the Netherlands. They did not intend to colonize the area but rather to set up a supply depot for Dutch ships on their way to the East Indies. Since there were almost no women at first and since nights on the veldt can be lonely, the Dutch men mated with the local Black women. The children of those liaisons now form the so-called Cape Coloured. Later Malaysians were imported and there are still many Moslem Malays in Cape Town. There was also an influx of French Huguenots at the end of the 17th century (Daggs, 1970). The Dutch language spoken by the settlers has evolved differently from the language of the Netherlands and is now known as Afrikaans. The two languages are nevertheless for the most part mutually intelligible. During the Napoleonic wars the British seized the Cape in 1806 and annexed it permanently in 1814. Natal Province was also annexed and British settlers were sent to South Africa. Most of the Afrikaners decided that they could not live with or under the British and during the period from 1835-1848 they left to settle the interior (Daggs, 1970). After conquering and living alongside the local Blacks, they founded the Orange Free State and the Transvaal. Things might have remained that way if gold had not been discovered in 1867 in the Transvaal. The British began to encroach on Afrikaans territory and finally drove the Afrikaners into the Boer Wars of 1888 and 1899-1902. In spite of the resistance of the Boers, the British won and in 1910 created the Union of South Africa. In 1934 the Union gained sovereignty. The Boers, who were in the majority, managed to take control of the government. In 1948 the Nationalist Party took over and in 1961 the Republic of South Africa withdrew from the Commonwealth. The government set about creating Black homelands, four of which are independent: the Ciskei with 660,000 inhabitants, where the main languages are Xhosa and English; Transkei, 2.4 million, English, Xhosa and Southern Sotho; Venda, 400,000, Venda, English and Afrikaans; Bophuthatswana, 1,325,000, Setswana, English and Afrikaans (Africa South of the Sahara, 1989). Another six have yet to become independent: Gazankulu, Lebowa, KwaNdebele,

Qua Qua, KwaZulu, KaNgwane. The independence of the homelands is generally not recognized outside of South Africa.

Today South Africa, nearly five times the size of Great Britain, encompasses about 1,221,037 sq.km. There are about 29 million inhabitants (1987 estimate) and including the Black homelands (6 million) about 35 million. There are about 5 million Whites, 3 million Coloureds and 900,000 Asians overwhelmingly Indians, the rest are Blacks. It is not easy to determine how many Blacks there are because of the system of census taking, i.e. which Blacks are South African citizens and counted, and which are not. 54.2% of the Whites speak Afrikaans and 35.4% speak English, but both groups are to a greater or lesser degree bilingual. The remaining 10.4% of the Whites speak both English and Afrikaans at home, or some other European language. The Coloureds are also bilingual; the majority tended to speak Afrikaans at home but recently the trend is toward English. In addition to their Indian languages, the Indians speak English well and Afrikaans to a greater or lesser degree. The Blacks speak Afrikaans, English and, of course, almost all speak one of the nine major Bantu languages (South Africa, 1986)

Regarding the juxtaposition of Afrikaans and English, it can be noted that there was a mutual influence. When two different language cultures are forced to live next to each other, there is often a great borrowing of lexical items, as exemplified by the large number of French words borrowed from the Normans by the English speakers of the British Isles. We have also seen many borrowed words in our sample text. However, there were also many loan translations and borrowed syntactic structures, as can be seen from the following examples:

The children were hiding **under** the sheep.
 The children were hiding among the sheep.
Die kinders het hulle onder die skape weggesteek.

She hit him **through** the face.
 She hit him in the face.
Sy het hom deur die gesig geklap.

to hold thumbs

to cross ones fingers

duim vashou

What subjects do you give?

What subjects do you teach?

Watter fakke gee jy?

He farmed with wine grepes for six years.

He farmed wine grapes for six years.

Hy het met druiwe vir 6 jaar geboer.

I spend a lot of time riding on water for my sheep.

I spend a lot of time transporting water for my sheep.

Ek bestee baie tyd om water na my skape aantery.

He walks to office.

He walks to the office.

Hy loop kantoor toe.

A. Would you like another cup?

Wil jy nog 'n koppie he?

B. No thanks, I still have.

No thanks, I still have some.

Nee, dankie ek het nog.

They coming to fetch just now.

They are coming to fetch us/me /etc. just now.

Hulle kom net nou hall.

Sometimes an Afrikaans word will be used in a way different from its use in Afrikaans and without other General English equivalents, e.g. my derms (<Afrikaans, 'guts') are clapping or flapping together, meaning 'I am hungry'. Also,

though many words have been taken directly from Afrikaans, Bantu languages or other languages, occasionally a new word will have two different sources, e.g. outa < Afrikaans, *ou* meaning 'old' and Nguni, *ta (ta)* meaning 'father'. It is a mode of address to an elderly, usually Coloured or African man, used often by children as a mark of respect for age.

Before one gets the idea that South Africans cannot speak English at all, be assured that the Queen's English is alive and well and living in South Africa. The bottom line is this : In South Africa and in all the English speaking countries there are many lexical items and a few syntactic structures which differ greatly from General English. When teaching English as a foreign language these differences should be taken into account. After teaching General English we often teach specific vocabulary depending on our target group, e.g. we might teach financial terms to a group of business people, aviation terminology to foreign pilots, etc. The contention here is that we should do the same for target countries. If we are to teach English to business people going to America, they should be taught specific Americanisms; if they are going to South Africa they should be acquainted with common South African expressions. A short course in country specifics would save time and minimize misunderstandings and frustrations. Ethno-cultural language differences must be mastered if there is to be true communication.

The author

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