

South African English

This paper will explain the main features of South African English as one of the so-called “New Englishes.”

Background about South Africa

The Republic of South Africa is located at the southern tip of the African continent. In 1652, the Dutch East Indian company founded a refreshment station in the region that would later come to be known as Cape Town. It became a British colony in 1806, thus marking the beginning of a South African British culture which was strengthened with the arrival of the first settlers in 1820. In the late 19th century, there was a military conflict between a population of Dutch origin settlers and the British authorities, known as the Boer Wars. After that Apartheid, which is Legal racial segregation, was institutionalized in 1881 under the Pretoria Convention. As a result of this convention, the South African Republic regained self-government under British suzerainty. The country gained its political independence in 1961 when it was declared a republic. However, the Apartheid policy was only abandoned in 1990.

The languages spoken in South Africa

The first official language in South Africa was Dutch. In 1882 and as a result of a policy of Anglicization it was replaced by English. In 1910, English and Dutch became instituted as the country's two official languages. However, in 1925 Dutch was replaced by Afrikaans, which is the most widely spoken non-African language of South Africa. It originated as a dialect or a variant of Dutch. Later on it became a separate entity taking its shape as a formal language at the end of the 19th century.

In addition to English and Afrikaans, South Africa has other official languages: Ndebele, Xhosa, Zulu, Northern Sotho, Sotho, Tswana, Swazi, Venda and Tsonga. All of these languages are granted equal status by the country's constitution.

Towards the end of the twentieth century English became the most dominant official language that is used in the media, technology, commerce and government. It was also the most commonly spoken language in official and commercial public life.

South African English

South African English (SAE) is becoming more autonomous. There are projects and developments of dictionaries that aim at increasing the cohesion of their English and this reduces dependence on UK and US standards.

One of the characteristics of South African English is social variation, which has been divided into three groups:

- 1- Cultivated English: it is close to Received Pronunciation and is associated with the upper class.
- 2- General English: it is associated with the middle class
- 3- Broad English: it is associated with the working class in addition to speakers of Afrikaans who speak English as a second language.

Pronunciation

There are a lot of features that distinguish the pronunciation of South African English.

Vowels

- 1- Kit-bit split: South African English has a “kit-bit split” which can be considered as the most distinctive feature of SAE. It means that the words *kit* [kɪt] and *bit* [bət] do not rhyme. The sound [ɪ] is used when it occurs next to velars, as in the words *kiss*, *gift*, *lick*, *big*, *sing* and *kit*, after /h/ as in *hit*, at the beginning of a word as in *inn*, and before /ʃ/ as in *fish*. The sound, [ə] is used elsewhere.
- 2- Raised /æ/: In Cultivated and General SAE varieties the pronunciation of /æ/ is slightly raised as in *trap*. In Broad varieties, on the other hand, it is often raised to [ɛ]. A good example of this is *South Africa* sounds more like *South Efrica*.
- 3- High, back centralised [ʊ]: The /ʊ/ sound in the word *foot* is generally pronounced as high, back centralised [ʊ]. There is very little lip rounding in comparison to other varieties of English worldwide. The pronunciation of [ʊ] with added lip-rounding is associated with Broad SAE and with Afrikaans English.
- 4- Low and fully back [ɑ:]: The /ɑ:/ vowel sound in words such as *bath* is usually a low and fully back [ɑ:] in General and Broad SAE. This sound distinguishes SAE from other varieties like Australian English and New Zealand English.

Consonants

Plosives

In Broad South African English, voiceless plosives are generally unaspirated in all positions. However, in the other two varieties of SAE, Cultivated and General, voiceless plosives before a stressed syllable are aspirated.

Fricatives and Affricates

South African English is one of the very few varieties to have a velar fricative phoneme /x/. However, this only occurs in the case of words that have been borrowed from Afrikaans,

Xhosa, Scots and German as can be verified by the words *gogga* /xoxə/ meaning insect in Afrikaans or the word *Bach* in German.

Another distinctive feature of the South African English is the tendency for /θ/ to be pronounced as [f]. Thus, the /θ/ sound is merged with other sounds as in the case of the word *three* which is pronounced as *free*. This is a stereotypical Broad feature, and it is also associated with Afrikaans English.

Another tendency is to pronounce the sound /h/ as a voiced /ɦ/ when it comes before a stressed vowel. This is a feature of Broad varieties.

Sonorants

In the case of Broad and a number of General SAE varieties, the sound /j/ is strengthened to [ɣ] before a high front vowel as in the word *yield* [ɣɪːld].

South African English is non-rhotic. The /r/ sound is pronounced in only two situations: in syllable-initial position as in *run* and inter-vocally as in *barrel*. In such accents it does not occur post-vocally as in *beard*, *war*, and *worker*. However, the /r/ in the final position of a word will only be pronounced in the case of it being followed by a word beginning with a vowel sound as in *for a while*, *here and there*.

Also, there is no intrusive /r/ (law and order) [lɔːnɔːdə]. The intervocalic pause that is created by the absence of the intrusive /r/ can be broken by vowel deletion; by a glide [lɔːwənoːdə], or by the insertion of a glottal stop: [lɔːʔənoːdə]. The latter is typical of Broad SAE.

As far as Cultivated and General SAE are concerned, the sound /r/ is usually postalveolar or retroflex [ɹ]. However, in Broad SAE they have a trilled [r].

/l/ is clear [l] syllable initially, and dark (velarised) [ɫ] syllable finally. When /l/ occurs at the end of a word, but before another word beginning with a vowel, it tends to be realised as clear in Cultivated SAE.

Lexicon

Many words in the South African English come from Afrikaans. Some of these words are: braai (barbecue), Biltong (a type of dried meat), braaivleis (the meat cooked on the barbecue), bakkie (a pickup truck), tekkies (trainers). Other local African languages have also contributed to the South African English, such as the Khoi language which contributed the word: eina (the local word for ouch).

There are some words which are used currently in SAE and which were used in British English a long time ago but not anymore, such as: geyser (a water-heater or boiler), robot

(a traffic light), and, until the 1960s, bioscope (a cinema). Some English words mean something different in SAE: a bond is a mortgage, a dam refers to the stretch of water rather than to the wall, just now means 'in a little while', a packet is a plastic shopping bag, a café is a convenience store or corner shop, and (in the context of traffic) a circle is a roundabout. Non-lexical features of other South African languages have also made their way into SAE, as in indicating emphasis by reduplication (from Afrikaans), as in now-now, soon-soon.

Bibliography:

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Electronic resources:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South African English](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_African_English)

<http://public.oed.com/aspects-of-english/english-in-use/south-african-english/>