English in the world, in Africa, and in South Africa

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Some observations relating to the development of a South African model for teaching, learning, using, and identifying with the language

[The following article is an adapted version of the opening plenary address to the 1998 Conference of the English Academy of Southern Africa, held at the Johannesburg College of Education, Gauteng, South Africa, in September, 1998.]

AT THE END of the twentieth century the international language complex called 'English' has different features and functions – and therefore requires different descriptions and responses – at three geopolitical levels: the global, the continental/regional, and the national/local (with inevitable consequences for educational and governmental policies worldwide). In addition, at its various levels, English interrelates with a wide range of other languages at their various levels, within a dynamic and shifting global pattern of organizational, educational, media, and other activities. As a result, there can be no simple 'one fits all' social response to English, a state of affairs that requires adequate and appropriate provisions to be made in any community's policies and approaches to language use, planning, and education.

A pecking order among languages

Linguists generally list the world's languages as around five or six thousand in number, but the moment we seek to count them we have our noses rubbed in fuzzy boundaries and fluidity over time, as well as in such factors as culture, education, ideology, politics, and of course the affect of languages on one another. However, the model I am interested in discussing here is a blunt instrument which largely ignores all that: it simply imposes a three-level scale of 'top', 'middle', and 'bottom' – much as in the first elements of the linguistic terms *acrolect, mesolect,* and *basilect*, which wrap harsh social judgement in a veil of Latin orthography and Greek etymology. On this crude scale, the 'top-most' and 'bottom-most' languages present few

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problems; they can be assessed virtually on numbers of users alone. A language with, say, 350 million well-distributed native speakers is manifestly a top language and one with under 100,000 speakers is pretty close to the bottom.

My family has been involved with just such a language gulf throughout this century, between on the one hand an omnivorous World English and on the other a slowly vanishing Scottish Gaelic, which will enter the next century with maybe 80,000 speakers. All of which can be trying enough, but the *really* hard problem is ranking the contending languages in the middle.

A model like this is an exercise in rough-and-ready geolinguistics, and is subject as a result to all kinds of provisos and precautions, but it has the virtue of tackling reality head on. Such a reality is like the pecking order among chickens. Languages everywhere jostle for position, a condition that seems on the whole to be only mildly affected by social engineering, while from time to time the established order of things can be swiftly upset, as for example when Russian as an international language contracted with the collapse of the Soviet Union. People's responses to the social positions and roles of languages can be influenced by sense of self and community, by memories of past glories, or by hopes of future expansion and prestige, as well as by feelings about what ought to be rather than what damn well *is*. There is both pleasure and pain here, with overt or veiled triumphalism on high and loud or muted tragedy below.

A pecking order among Englishes

My second model is also geolinguistic, but this time it is Anglocentric. It focuses on the vast complex of English as a distinct – apparently unique – historical phenomenon, and it also operates at the three levels just discussed. It considers English in terms first of the world at large, then of whole continents and supranational regions, then of countries and parts of countries. English is worldwide and currently in some sense supreme (cf. Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 1997; McArthur 1998), but at the same time it repeats within itself the same tensions and uncertainties of my first, more general model: that is, there is a 'top' English and there are 'bottom Englishes', and there are all kinds of Englishes in between.

Acrolectally (shall we say, stretching a point), there is an English that is manifestly global (an 'International' or 'World' Standard English of the media, education, science, and the like), then mesolectally, there are Englishes which are powerful in continental or other large-scale terms (as where American English dominates Canadian English in North America, or British English overshadows Irish English), and there are basilectal Englishes whose condition and status are uncertain and hotly debated, such as in Jamaica or Singapore or indeed for centuries in Scotland, where the Scots vernacular – that wis ma ain mither's toung, though it is not officially my mother tongue. Scots, which some see as a fully-fledged Germanic language with its own glorious literature while others, including many Scots, consider it a clutch of biodegradable northern dialects, has hybridized with the usage of England and for long inhabited a linguistic limbo, from which it was mildly rescued in the 1980s by the EU's Bureau of Lesser Used European Languages, which has it on its list. So, as with languages at large, there are within English triumphantly large and vigorous varieties, and varieties that are doing quite well, thank you for asking, and varieties that feel the cold wind of low status and conceivable extinction. And all of these meet with and rub up against all other languages all over the world in a vast sociopolitical tangle.

For the purposes of this conference, however, the levels in question are straightforwardly English in the world, then in Africa, then in South Africa, but they might equally well have been, say, English in the world, in Europe, and in the Netherlands, or in the world, Asia, and the Philippines – all of them engrossing for the people involved. Of English in the world, a great deal has been increasingly said and written in the last decade or two, and I will quote here only one observer, Professor François Chevillet of the Université Stendhal in Grenoble, France (cf. McArthur, 1998, Ch. 2):

> L'anglais n'est pas une *langue internationale*, à l'instar de l'espagnol ou du russe, mais c'est une *langue mondiale*, en raison de la puissance économique et culturelle du monde anglo-saxon (États-Unis) et du rôle croissant des médias. (1994, p. 118)

> [English is not an *international language*, after the fashion of Spanish or Russian, but a *world language*, a consequence of the economic and cultural strength of the Anglo-Saxon world (the United States) and the increasing role of the media: *my translation*.]

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It is more difficult to find comments on English in terms of continents alone, and certainly in pan-African terms, and one of the few available is the set of entries *Africa, African English, African languages*, and *African literature in English* in the *Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992), which the immediately following points derive from and extend.

What is 'African English'?

The term 'African English' is now fairly common. In principle, it should have only one meaning – something like 'the English language as used in Africa' – but like other such labels it suffers from uncertainty of reference and various anomalies. In its most general but probably least useful sense, it can mean English used regularly by stable communities *anywhere* in Africa – from the southern Mediterranean to the Cape of Good Hope. This would include, say, English as used by speakers of Arabic in Egypt, or Yoruba in Nigeria, or in the Republic of South Africa speakers of Xhosa, Zulu, and the like, as well as mother-tongue speakers of Afrikaans and of Indian languages, and of course by settlers of English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish, and other origins. In practice, however, this is not so. We do not generally suppose that Egyptians and South Africans of European or Asian backgrounds speak African English, although their black co-citizens do. It would seem from this that African English is only spoken – *can* only be spoken? – by the traditional inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa, for whom it is an imported language, much as that other world language Latin was once imported into Britain and spoken there for four hundred years before the coming *en masse* of the Angles and Saxons.

This indigenous sub-Saharan 'real' African English can be subdivided regionally into three convenient but rough-and-ready groups: (1) West African English (covering Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone as former British colonies, and Liberia with its unique separate connection with the United States; (2) East African English, covering Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, and perhaps Somalia and Sudan, with Rwanda as a special case because of long-term sojourns in Uganda by exiled Tutsi soldiers and refugees who have now – wonder of post-colonial wonders – made it an official language of Rwanda; (3) Southern African English, covering Botswana, Lesotho, Malawi, Namibia, Swaziland, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. In the case of the last locality, however, I pause just for a moment to consider whether one ought really to say something like 'South African African English', because for most people 'South African English' is manifestly *not* a subcategory of 'African English'; rather, 'African English' is for practical purposes a subcategory of 'South African English'.

This last is of course a special case because of South Africa's size, economy, distinctive bicolonial history, ethnic diversity, and a range of kinds of English associated with different communities, including a native-speaking community that is mainly but not exclusively British in origin, with comparable communities in places like Australia and Canada. It is however difficult to find anything quite like the language mosaic of South Africa anywhere else in the world, and it is certainly unique among those countries that have large native English-speaking populations of mainly European origin. Its language profile is nothing like the profiles of the UK, the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand – although, importantly, it shares elements with each. It resembles the UK in the core ethnicity of its Anglophones and aspects of its traditional standard speech and writing; it is like the US in having a history of racial tension and kinds of 'black' and 'white' English; it shares with Canada a bicolonial history, resulting in a tense relationship between two settler communities, English and French in Canada, English and Dutch-to-Afrikaans in South Africa; it is like Australia and New Zealand in aspects of its southern-hemisphere English usage and in degrees of tension with the longer-established peoples of the three territories and their languages – but on a much larger scale. And finally it has also shared a great deal with settler communities that were formerly well established especially in Kenya and in Zambia and Zimbabwe (formerly the Rhodesias).

English as an African language

The term *African English* is open to two further interpretations: It may refer either to all forms of English used since the establishment of trading posts in the seventeenth century, including trade jargons, pidgins, and creoles, or it may refer only to the forms spoken and written by educated Black Africans after some territories had begun to be administered by the British (as

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with Ghana and Nigeria) and/or settled by them (as with Kenya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa). If the first sense is adopted, English has been in Africa for nearly 400 years, which is as long as it has been in North America. If the second sense is adopted, English in Africa dates from the early nineteenth century (nearly 200 years). This fits a broad global pattern in which a diverse but limited island language off the west coast of Europe entered its so-called 'Modern' period in the seventeenth century at the same time as it began to spread thinly around the world's coasts. It began to be standardized in the eighteenth century on patterns set mainly by Latin tradition, French prestige, local gentility, and the revolutionary impact of typography, was consolidated in significant ways in many parts of the world in the nineteenth century through parallel British and American activities, and built up towards its current global role in the course of the twentieth century.

However the term is interpreted, the reality and integrity of a comprehensive sub-Saharan African English (with such varieties of its own as Kenyan English and Nigerian English, and perhaps also 'Nguni English' and 'Sotho English' in South Africa) are controversial matters, asserted by some, denied by others, advocated by some and denounced by others. English is in daily use for many purposes in at least eighteen sub-Saharan countries (including as a lingua franca), and reflects all manner of local and regional influences. It is also taught as a second language in Arabophone, Francophone, and Lusophone countries. To discuss such matters, the use of 'African English' as a comprehensive pan-African term seems inescapable, although a difficulty remains with regard to what one can or should call the English of the descendants of British settlers in especially South Africa as opposed to the English of the indigenous peoples. The contrastive terms 'white English' and 'black English' are in common use (along with 'black languages' and 'white languages'), but the political incorrectness and indeed the stark inherent gracelessness of such terms might be made clear if one were to risk calling the English of Chinese and Japanese speakers 'yellow English' and of Indian subcontinental speakers 'brown English'. Yet the application of the terms 'black' and 'white' to language as well as race is profoundly common and unlikely to change.

Is English in all its African embodiments an African language? If 'African language' means a language that is indigenous to the continent, like Berber, Hausa, Swahili, and Setswana, then no, it is not and can never be. But if 'African language' means a language that is used in Africa by a wide and diverse range of communities covering millions of people for all kinds of purposes then it certainly is. I have just completed the co-editing of a collection of papers called 'Lexicography in Asia' (forthcoming, 1998b), and in my own paper attempted there to assess whether English is an Asian language. I concluded that it must be, because: (1) It has been used in Asia for as long as in the Americas: that is, as stated earlier, since the 17th century; (2) In recent years, Australia has been 're-branded' as an Asian country, and is often listed as such in international periodicals, and English is the official language of Australia; (3) English is the language that Asians need not only for purposes of communicating with other continents and engaging in worldwide scientific and other activities whose dominant medium is English, but for intra-Asian communication: Thais with Japanese, Koreans with Indonesians, Gulf Arabs with Indians; (4) English has highly significant and long-standing official roles in Asia, for example in the Philippines, Singapore, and massively at several levels in India. Every one of the above four points is also true for Africa.

Psychologically the descendants of the European settlers of southern Africa are not unlike the majority of Australians, who now find themselves becoming Asian in addition to Australasian. It seems to me that like them, southern Africa's transplanted Europeans have either already got used to being in an important sense African or will need to do so, regardless of whether the response of the indigenous peoples is favourable, hostile, or indifferent, because this is a matter of self-image, not images imposed by others. Yet even so the question keeps coming up: In what sense are languages like English and Russian 'really' Asian languages, and in what sense are languages like English and Afrikaans 'really' African languages? Perhaps in the same sense that English is a European language. Because it is there and has been there for a long enough time. What other sense is there, ultimately? Long-term geographical location is not a matter of opinion.

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Cultural and communicative strengths

Such European diaspora languages as Portuguese, Spanish, French, and English came to the fore in global terms because of inventions that included gunpowder, the magnetic compass, and the printing press – as Francis Bacon pointed out in his *Novum Organon* in 1620. In turn, the English language complex, in terms particularly of its foremost political and institutional varieties or sublanguages – British English and American English – gained precedence because of their users' success (for good and/or for ill) in empire-building, frontier-building, and colonizing, in ship-based commerce, in industrial development, in military success, in mass education and publishing, combined with such Euro-American technologies and services as the telephone, photography, the cinema, television, the computer, and the Internet. In terms of human history, this is a formidable package.

The ultimate story is however older than that. It appears to have started in Africa itself, with the development of speech, which was augmented some five thousand years ago in Asia, specifically in Sumer in southern Mesopotamia, by the first writing – wedge-shaped marks on clay tablets. Prior to the development of such writing, however, humankind had formulated traditions of what can be called *orature*, a word whose unwitting co-invention in the 1980s I am proud to share with Micere Mugo in Kenya. Orature refers to matters that continue to be more widely known as both 'the oral tradition' and 'oral literature' (which is a considerable contradiction in terms: see Ong 1982). Ruth Finnegan, in a book of that name in 1970 also graphically referred to it as 'the unwritten literature of Africa'.

The human race appears to have gone through at least four revolutions in its capacity to communicate: processes which I call 'communicative shifts' (McArthur 1986, 1992). The first is speech (including the kind of formulaic and mnemonic 'storage speech' that underlies the world's unwritten literatures), the second is all the writing systems of the world, the third is printing by means of a rotary press and movable type (as well as such ancillary arts and crafts as typography: cf. Eisenstein 1979), and an explosive fourth in our own time centres on the computer with ramifications and connections in radio, television, cinema, and telecommunications. It is in relation to such shifts that languages have tended to lose or acquire kinds of prestige and social significance. English has ridden the crest of this particular wave in addition to whatever other social forces have propelled it into its current prominence. And while this was happening, certain languages in Africa were continuing the most ancient tradition of all – orature or 'unwritten literature' – but with little or no prestige attached to its attributes. Indeed, while seeking to sustain such skills and information, the indigenous peoples of Africa have had – mainly under the mixed blessings of missionary influence – to acquire at the fastest possible pace the skills of three further shifts, virtually all in one go: writing, printing, and the computer-and-telecommunications complex: perhaps one of the greatest crash courses in human history that at the same time endangers one of the greatest and oldest collective oral traditions in history.

Social, linguistic, and educational engineering

It is at this point that we come up against the full force of the sociocultural pressures currently operating in sub-Saharan Africa in general and South Africa in particular. In this vast region not only do we find all the pressures of two interlinked pecking orders (of the world's languages and of the world's Englishes), but also all of the great historical communicative shifts rubbing up hard against each other. For indigenous Africans it is not only a question of what to say and how to say it (in any language) but for a majority there is the continuing social momentum of rhetorics that have for millennia been conditioned by orality, not literacy – traditions to which the centuries-long outcomes of the world's scribal and print traditions (reading and writing) have only relatively recently been added. And this in milieux where the European mediums of instruction have been diverse and the systems of schooling have been subjected to the immense stresses and strains of social, cultural, political, educational, and economic imperialism in the continent at large plus a devastatingly severe racist governing culture in South Africa in particular. In such a situation, sifting the nuggets from the dross is a labour that puts Sisyphus and Hercules together.

My specific awareness of the linguistic and

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educational situation in South Africa (which draws upon, among others, Lanham 1985, Branford and Branford 1992, Mesthrie 1993, de Klerk 1996, Görlach 1996/98, and Titlestad 1998) indicates that there can be no quick fixes, and maybe not even medium-term fixes, and when we think in terms of what governments and schools might do, we move beyond the relatively simple idea of 'language planning' into the complexities of social and indeed language *engineering* of a kind that has already proved to be immensely destructive under authoritarian conditions and remains an intensely uncertain matter in a democracy.

One hesitates to offer either condolences or would-be constructive comment, but at the same time it would not be helpful just to smile, nod, and turn away. So let me risk saying that if I were a language engineer in southern Africa at large – and South Africa in particular – a major concern would be consciousness raising across the board, an opening of minds to the immense richness of the language heritage of all the regional peoples: a heritage that on the deeply African side goes back to the dawn of human language itself and runs from the praise-singer to the World Wide Web, and in linguistic terms runs from local and national through regional and continental to world language. The ingredients are all already present. South Africa has before it a great trek in social and educational terms, but one whose ultimate prizes somewhere in the next century are immensely worth the effort. All human life is there. ET

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KALEIDOSCOPE 1

An 'r' in the mouth

It is notable that a large proportion of international call centres are based in UK regions where the local accent is 'r'-pronouncing. Whether this simply reflects the lower cost of labour in peripheral areas, or whether Scottish or Irish accents are more acceptable to US callers remains an interesting question.

'Language is key to telephone based service industries', British Council GEN: Global English Newsletter, 2 (electronically distributed 1998).

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