

# South African English Impact on Cultural Identity Formation and Intercultural Communication

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## ABSTRACT

The study deals with the issues of intercultural communication and is targeted to demonstrate the specificity of multicultural and multilingual environment in the Republic of South Africa. The findings prove that intercultural communication processes are very dynamic as they are encouraged by the polycomponent society embracing numerous official and non-official languages with a high degree of internal variation. The role of English is constantly rising due to the socio-political context and the scope of communicative functions the language performs. Although the English language in South Africa is a heterogeneous system of subvarieties each of which is exercised by a particular cultural group, its role is significant in the formation of a hybrid cultural identity. The evidence is found in cultural contacts and interplay of language codes involved into interactions, particularly in foreign element dominance in the etymological composition of the English vocabulary, hybrid structure of words and phrases, formation of common speech behaviour patterns, etiquette clichés, and productivity of code-switching.

**Keywords:** *English varieties, South African English lexicon, multicultural communication, borrowing, code-switching*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Intercultural communication has always been an attractive subject in multidisciplinary studies. A lot of research has been done into the factors that determine the efficiency of intercultural communication including technological development, economical interdependency of social groups, geographical and professional migrations [1, p.137], etc. It seems that there is consensus among scientists that it is socio-historical development of the country that has most powerful impact on the way and results of interactions among representatives of various cultural and ethnic groups [2, p. 25].

### 1.1. Related Work

Understanding factors and mechanisms of intercultural communication contributed to the elaboration of complicated theoretical issues concerning communication modelling and its validation. Applying different tools and approaches, researchers agree on the key constituents of communication processes: a sender and a recipient of information, a channel of transfer, means and modes of content encoding [3, p. 269-271]. It is also recognized that verbal and non-verbal means always interplay in message encoding and decoding. That is why a low level of either

linguistic or cultural competence may lead to misunderstandings in interpreting a message or sometimes even to a complete failure of communicative acts. As interactions among speakers occur in a variety of social and cultural contexts [4, p. xiii], there is some interference that comes as a “noise” factor, i.e. a communication barrier caused by the dialectal variations of the language or socio-cultural behaviour of some ethnic groups. Many studies have demonstrated that the issues of communication become even more complicated in culturally and linguistically heterogeneous environment. In particular, the density of South African ethno-linguistic mosaic determines the extensive and intensive direction of research on how lingua-cultural traditions rooted in periods of colonialism and apartheid “have far-reaching implications for communication between South African groups as well as between Africans and the world” [5]. Mesthrie [6] and many other scientists remarked that a lot had been done to describe the specificity of multiethnic, multicultural, or multilingual composition of the population in South Africa. However, there is still a lack of studies on South African “interlanguage pragmatics”, and intercultural investigations are criticized for being limited to “reifying group distinctions through emphasizing cultural differences” [5].

## **1.2. The Purpose and Methods of Research**

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, it is to look into the issues of the English language variation in South African multicultural setting and the role it plays in forming South African hybrid cultural identity. Second, it is to trace and interpret the processes and results of intercultural communication through the lens of the English language in South Africa.

The research material consists of lexical units which were selected from dictionaries of South African English [7, 8, 9]. The etymological analysis was employed to examine their origins, the productivity of sources, and proportions among the donor languages — transported (English and other migrant languages) and indigenous (African) languages. The immediate constituents analysis was accompanied by the componential analysis to investigate the morphological structure of the lexemes, their meanings and degrees of assimilation. Contextual analysis helped to assess word usages in historical and cultural settings, detect occasionalisms and cases of code-switching while functional analysis was applied to refer to the role of code-switching in multicultural interactions in South Africa.

### **1.3. Paper Structure**

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 summarizes the historical background and the formation of linguistic and cultural diversity in South African society. It also deals with varieties of South African English as cultural identity markers. Section 3 investigates South African English lexicon regards traces of cultural diversity in the country, and looks into some important elements of everyday etiquette communication.

## **2. THE HISTORY OF LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA**

### **2.1. Formation of South African Multicultural Identity**

South Africa, known as a “rainbow nation” banding together diverse cultures, is a home to speakers of different indigenous and migrant languages [10, p.8]. The linguistic diversity of the country with 11 official languages reflects ethnic and cultural heritage layered during numerous migrations and settlement processes.

According to Mesthrie [11, p.33], the Khoisan people are the earliest inhabitants in the region. Some of them shifted to the Bantu languages, which were brought to the region much later. Cultural and linguistic diversity increased with the arrival of the Europeans and the formation of the first colonies. Language became one of the tools of ethnic differentiation. The colonial era in South Africa gave rise to racial terminology when the white settlers established

Western culture and developed it in two separate dimensions — the Dutch and the British. Further migrations to the area and the arrival of Indian labourers stimulated racial mixing and gave birth to linguistically and culturally distinctive groups, such as *coloureds* a group formed on mixing of the indigenous African population with Dutch colonizers (first European settlement) and imported from Asia slaves [5].

African languages were stigmatized as “nonwhite” and marginalized in order to deprive indigenous peoples of their own cultural legacy paving the way to the colonizer’s “civilization” [12, p. 5]. Some African languages were cultivated by a segregation policy of the apartheid regime: “culturally similar black people [were divided] into nine groups on linguistic ground” [13, p. xiii].

Being in majority, the black population had to learn to interact with politically and economically dominating whites. Typical then master-servant relations left many traces in the English language vocabulary, for instance in terms of address: a white master had to be addressed with the help of formal and polite terms — *sir* or *boss*, while a black male, irrespectively of his age, was called a *boy* (as in *delivery boy*, *garden boy*) or by the generic name *John*. In the same fashion, black females were referred to as *girls* or *tea girls* [14, p. 45, 47]. Such diminishing terms of address were used to explicate disrespect, reduced importance or value, and stemmed from social inequality, cultural and language deprivileges [15, p.23]. In 1976, Soweto uprising, which erupted after Afrikaans-medium subjects had been introduced in schools, demonstrated all negative effects of one-language policy in the multicultural society [16, p. 9].

Nowadays, the political processes in South Africa are targeted at curing social injustice and disagreements of the past, focusing on cultural and linguistic equality instead of difference. Cultural, ethnic consciousness is regarded as building blocks of the South African nation [5]. However, group distinctions remain important [17] and are marked by languages, or their varieties, preferred for in-group communication. If certain linguistic features which serve as identity markers are neglected, marginalization of speakers increases.

Today, English is not a sole “identity carrier” in South Africa [18, p. 41]. It is rather used in the strongly multilingual context. While home languages are regarded as identity markers, English is a symbol of “modernity” and “education”. Its most important function is “instrumental” [19, p. 64]. It is also noteworthy that knowledge of an additional African language provides access to urban communities. In other words, “being multilingual [is the] marker of the South African identity” [18, p. 47].

Despite all efforts and measures of the official multilingual policy, there exists a hierarchy of languages [6]. Alongside with a large number of indigenous languages spoken in South Africa, Afrikaans and English are used as intranational lingua francas [20, p. 200], mostly spoken on workplace [21, p. 211]. Nevertheless, the role of Afrikaans is gradually changing due to associations with a former apartheid government and a currently increasing shift from

Afrikaans-English to English-Afrikaans type of bilingualism. The relations between ex-colonial and indigenous languages are diglossic [22, p.103].

Although African languages are widely spoken in various communicative situations throughout South Africa, they dominate in everyday informal interactions. For instance, Zulu, one of the widely spoken African languages, is used as the main means of communication by the black working-class in mining regions. In urban areas, where multilingualism is more common than in rural districts, language choice depends on a domain of usage and a type of addressee. The majority of population in South Africa is multilingual which provides cross-ethnic communication. The term “super-diversity” [5] refers to black urbanites. Interactions between speakers of mutually intelligible languages led to the emergence of koine languages (*Tsotsitaal, Iscamtho*) as symbols of the urban identity. Speaking a koine involves being loyal to a “paralanguage... the dress, the style, the attitude” [13, p. 77]. The workers of the mining settlements were coming from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Not being given any opportunity to learn English (or Afrikaans) adequately, they were “severely restricted with respect to job prospects” [23, p.10] and had to use mixed forms of communication (e.g. Fanakalo) as common codes. Today, the presence of indigenous languages is also prominent in media. In contrast, they are less visible in school curriculums [20, p.210] because of the conviction that “unlike English, [they do] not pay off” [24, p.71].

The situation is different with other migrant languages. Immigrants have to deal with weakening connections with a homeland by establishing ties with indigenous inhabitants. For the indigenous population, a contact with settlers is an opportunity to move towards multilingualism. However, the language shift is “unlikely ever to characterize the entire society with ethnic and social identities and varieties persisting” [25, p. 188].

The tendency to the linguistic variability is strong in English. While accuracy is preferred in an academic environment, deviations from the imported standard are recognized [26] as local varieties. Variance in English and the appearance of its indigenized form have become significant features of the cultural environment in the Republic of South Africa (the RSA) that mark the construction of the new identity [25].

## **2.2. English as an Identity Marker**

There is no shared variety of English in the RSA and “South African English” (SAfE) is an umbrella term embracing numerous variations [27, p.21]. Due to the fact that “South African Englishes” [21, p.212] evolved as contact-induced varieties, they exhibit specific features on all levels of language structure [1, p.145]. The considerable impact of South African multilingualism on English allows to distinguish SAfE varieties in terms of group identity regardless of their first (L1) or second (L2) language [27, p. 23-26].

Although common [27, 28, 29, 30] pan-ethnic labels (*white, black, coloured, Indian* [31, p. 6]) for SAfE varieties stimulate connotations with racial issues, they are recognized as descriptive names because ethnic and language boundaries are fluid [16, p. 9].

White SAfE varieties emerged out of the British English brought by the immigrants and soon modified under the influence of local ecologies. Lanham [32] combined social and historical criteria to distinguish among settler English (established in Cape of Good Hope Dutch community through mixing southern English dialects of the working- and lower middle-class migrants; Natal English (from the second migrant flow of the British upper- and upper-middle class migrations); English with RP infusion (after the discovery of mineral wealth). Thus, socially heterogeneous transported English established a continuum [29, p. 68] of more or less prestigious forms that include “conservative”, “respectable”, and “extreme” (L1) Englishes in Lanham’s trichotomy terminology [32]. These varieties are spoken by the white population alongside with Afrikaans English (L2) of the community that prefers Afrikaans as the means of the in-group interactions as well as the banner of cultural identity [33, p.101].

Formed before the Anglicization era, Coloured community uses English both as L1 and dominant L2 after Afrikaans [27, p. 25]. Due to such linguistic “weaving” [34, p. 216] code-switching and mixing have become an identity marker of the District Six speech community in Cape Town.

Linguistic diversity grew with the arrival of Dravidian and Indo-European Indic languages from India. They opened a new “sociolinguistic milieu” [35, p.161, 163] and accelerated the variability of the RSA language landscape by influencing mixation in Fanakalo (see [35, p.163]), using English in formal communication (education, public speaking) and substituting “pure Gujarati” by “broken English” in private spheres, especially among the youth [13, p. 115], [35, p.164]. Migrants from India had to learn English in a linguistically diverse society, “where mother-tongue models were not readily available” [13, p.117]. In the circumstances when by the educational policies Standard English was cut off from Indians, came up KwaZulu-Natal Indian English, different from mainstream SAfE [27, p. 26]. English of Indian South Africans is basilectal in private domains while it is more standard in formal contexts [16, p. 12].

A different kind of linguistic continuum is formed by heterogeneous Black South African English which varies from broader to more educated types, according to L1 of speakers and their competence in English. Striking “socio-pragmatic” [29, p.70] features of Black SAfE varieties are determined by typological differences and interference of African languages (used as L1), minimized contact with native English-speakers’ norm (see [36, p. 37, 41]) in complex with some other factors. Despite the absence of clear-cut borders among Black SAfE varieties, they exhibit traits relating them to pre-basilect (very low competence), basilect (poor competence), acrolect (well-educated), and post-acrolect (well-educated L1) types.

To sum up, the multicomponent character of sociolinguistic landscape in the RSA resulted in a high degree of internal heterogeneity of English which is spoken natively and as a lingua franca. The RSA is on the way towards constructing a new identity with both distinct and unifying features. It appears that cultural identity in a multilingual and ethnically diverse society is not stable. The dynamism of South African cultural identity is realized in its hybridity, i.e. integration of original culture-specific and shared cultural traits and values.

### 3. INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION THROUGH THE LENS OF SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH

The polyphonic setting of the RSA with its integrational and disintegrational features is mirrored in various aspects of life in the country.

From a socio-political perspective, ex-colonial languages are proclaimed as “nobody’s primary” and socio-culturally neutral whereas indigenous languages are considered potentially divisive [23, p.11]. On the other hand, along with indigenous languages, variants of SAfE are functioning to express values of distinct cultures.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, the English expansion is changing parity of the local languages distribution in various domains which may lead to archaization of indigenous languages vocabulary [37, p. 115] with further loss of languages and cultures. However, people who acquired a new language “do not necessarily lose their cultural identity, or adopt the identity of those whose language they now speak” [37, p. 125]. Separate development of South African ethnic groups prevented their cultural and lingual convergence.

From an anthropological perspective, distinctive features and traditional elements of lifestyle will be preserved due to the centrality of “belonging” concept in the worldviews of African cultures. Africans see themselves “as part of nature within the groups to which they belong” [5], which is reflected in Xhosa *ubuntu* concept (*Umntu ngumntu ngabantu* “lit. a person is a person because of persons” [38, p. 93]), in Pedi *motho ke motho ka bangwe* “man is a man through others”, and in Zulu *umuntu ngamuntu ngabanye* “a person depends on others to be a person” [5].

In spite of the fact that “speakers of two languages belong to two different cultures, shaped by the cultures of their languages” [39], the rising role of English as a lingua franca and increasing “English + another language/s” bilingualism provide integrational trend toward shared linguistic and cultural elements. It can be assumed that they are encoded in the language and realized in speech practices of South Africans. Culture, as a system of beliefs, values and behavioral patterns, verbal and non-verbal code systems [4, p.10], is acquired through human interactions. Therefore, ethnolinguistic diversity of the RSA finds its way into the English language where it is accumulated and preserved as an important part of common South African heritage.

Manifestations of a hybrid South African culture are traceable in the etymological sources of the South African English lexicon, socio-cultural meanings of lexical units, and “discourse conventions” [40, p. 274].

It should be remarked that, due to the presence of specific items in subvarieties of South African English, it is hard to claim the existence of common SAfE vocabulary. The usage of many words proves the division of the SAfE vocabulary in cultural domains. For instance, *impimpi* “an informer” [8, p. 129] is known in Black South African English and culture but not found in other varieties. However, it is possible [28, p. 145], [27, p. 26-31] to trace important shared features [14, p. 221]. In what follows, we will focus on the hybrid nature of the SAfE lexicon rather than its specificity in subvarieties.

Firstly, the SAfE lexicon is culturally hybrid in terms of its immediate etymological sources. There are native English words and borrowings [7] (see Table 1). Compared to the native elements, borrowings from Dutch and its successor Afrikaans prevail, followed by the indigenous Bantu and Khoisan languages while other European and Asian sources are less significant.

**Table 1 The Etymological Roots of SAfE words [7]**

Source language	Amount
English	26.1 %
Afrikaans or Dutch	53.1 %
Bantu	11.7 %
Khoisan	2.3 %
European (German, Greek, French, etc.)	3.5 %
Asian (Indonesian, Javanese, Malay, etc.)	2.6 %
Fanakalo, Isicamtho	0.7 %

The intensiveness of intercultural communication is also evident from the lexical streams into the SAfE vocabulary [8, p. xxii]. The historically older stream of traditional terms naming African cultural realia (e.g. ancestors or deities — *Unkulunkulu, Tixo, Qamata, Uhlanga, abadala* “old ones” or *abaphansi* “those in the earth”) is supplemented by the modern stream formed of the townships jargons (e.g. *staffrider, spoiler, tsotsi, king, queen, pennyline* and other units colourfully established in magazines).

Secondly, vocabulary that comes into the SAfE lexicon from various cultural domains is easily recognizable due to the specificity of its adaptation (see [41; p. 200]). Many borrowings retain the original elements of their structure and remain partly assimilated in English. These features are found in prefixation of original markers of plurality (*itongo* “an ancestral spirit” < Xhosa and Zulu *ithongo*, plural is formed with prefix *ama-*); loanblends, that is compounds made of native and foreign morphemes (*anmtree* “a species of tall thorn-tree” < Nama *ana-* ‘name for this tree’ + English *-tree*); loan translations, borrowed structures represented with the help of native language elements (*yes-*

no “a vague expression of agreement or assent” < Afrikaans *ja-nee*).

Borrowings result from the need to fill the cultural gaps (*quagga* “cross-breed of zebra and horse” [13, p. 67]); tendency towards economy and expressiveness of language means (*lekker* < Afrikaans “pleasant” [7, p. 419]; *ammadio* “cry of surprise” [9, p. 4] ); social solidarity between members of the society (*totsiens* < Afrikaans “till we meet again” [7, p. 729]).

According to the accommodation theory, “a sender who wishes to gain a receiver’s approval may choose vocabulary items thought acceptable to that person” [41, p.201]. In a multilingual context, a speaker’s language repertoire is flexible and from the point of view of the speaker is made of “unified language features pooled together and treated as a single linguistic system” [42, p.92].

Thirdly, in the multilingual society with intensive cultural exchange among speakers, the extended pool of vocabulary items is especially important. The availability of various cultural sources encourages interlocutors to adopt lexical material together with cultural concepts, priorities and speech behaviour practices, for instance, addressing and naming people, greetings [43], [44, p. 259]. Various conceptualizations of plurality, found in greetings in the indigenous Nguni languages, entered SAfE and the worldview they represent (*sanibonani* in Zulu, *dumelang* in seSotho and seTswana, *molweni* in Xhosa). These are derived from the collective style of *ubuntu* world perception: “the person greeting perceives the greeted as an embodiment of a larger clan or community to the extent that the one greeted is not seen in isolation from the rest of the clan or community” [42, p. 98]. Plurality markers in greetings may not necessarily refer to many people, they also show high respect or are used towards elder interlocutors (as in Xhosa greeting *molo* (Afrikaans *môre*) [43], or Zulu *babba* “father” [44, p. 259]). Such lexical adaptations from the African culture etiquette transfer particular patterns of behaviour, attitudes and wisdom into the English-speaking culture.

Another amazing result of intercultural communication becomes evident in such models of cultural behaviour as addressing and naming people. In addition to the indigenous names Africans may have Christian or school names (Zulu *igama lesiLungu*): “What’s your school name, Mafika?...I was baptised Petrus but it’s not used in the family” [14, p. 50]. When someone’s name is unknown in informal situations Zulus use *mfowethu* “my brother” and *dadewethu* “my sister” as well as slang terms *buti* (a short form of Afrikaans *boetie* “brother”) and *sisi* “sister” [45]. The polyphony of naming practices is realized through the adaptation of traditionally European names (*Josefa*, *Davidi*, *Lisbethe* in Zulu).

The impact of cultural exchange among South African cultures is evident in the etiquette practices of greetings and farewells.

It is well known, that in many varieties of English throughout the world the English expression *how are you?* is a greeting rather than a question. It requires a friendly *I’m fine* routine phrase without real answer about person’s

matters. But sometimes a question-form preamble is omitted and communication starts with *I’m fine, and you?*. In response South Africans give an affirmative no-sentence *No, fine*, which reflects common in local languages practice [14, p. 10]: in Afrikaans, *nee* “no” is used in this way; in Xhosa, the question *Kunjani kuwe?* “How are you?” is followed by the answer *Hayi, ndiphilele, enkosi* “No, I’m fine, thank you” or the reply to *Usaphila?* “Are you well?” would be *Hayi, ndisaphila* “No, I’m well”. Another automatic response to this salutation is can’t complain (from Afrikaans *kan nei kla nie*) as it is common among Afrikaners not to complain [14, p. 12]. When there is nothing to complain about, the reply “I am doing fine” is less appropriate than “I can’t complain”. English salutation *how is it?* being influenced by Afrikaans and Bantu languages got a contracted form *Howzit?* Similarly is formed Afrikaans greeting *Hoe gooaan dit?* “How are things going / How are you?”. The term *sharp, sharp* is an informal greeting and an expression of approval [14, p. 16].

Farewells also come in various fashions and expressions which is illustrated in Branford [14, p. 15-17]: *go well* is a translation from Xhosa *hamba(ni) kahle* the correct reply to which is *sala(ni) kakuhle* “stay well”; *enjoy your day further* comes from the Afrikaans *lekker dag verder* “nice day further; *greet* (from Afrikaans *groet* “say goodbye”) means not only “hello”, but is said when leaving (*Go and greet granny now – we must be off*).

The issues of the influence of the English-speaking environment on other languages and cultures of the RSA go beyond the tasks of this paper and deserve to be an object of a separate research. However, here it is necessary to summarize a few points concerning the adaptation of English vocabulary and its use by the speakers of other languages in the RSA.

Lexical material from English is borrowed into Afrikaans and African languages [41, 46]. However, its nativization is not very strong and is restricted to certain words, some of which have already been ousted of active usage in English.

Among borrowings from English that survive in other RSA languages, in particular Afrikaans, loan translations are dominant due to the competition between these two languages and a strong tendency to linguistic purism in Afrikaans environment (see [38, 41, 47]). Obviously, it is for social reasons that the dependence of Afrikaans on English is notable in swear-words (*blerrie* “bloody”), farewells (*koebaai* “goodbye”) [41, p. 209].

In a multilingual community code-switching and mixing are common [34, p. 217-218] and speakers are able to use varied verbal strategies from a linguistic pool [48, p. 98]. The alternating use of “material from two (or more) languages or dialects” within the same conversation is common in the RSA: “the high status of English accounts for the relatively large frequency of English in code-switching” [49, p. 237]: English-Swati “He is talking about two schools out of how many? *Kudlalelwani kojwa vele ngabatali labangasebenti?* (...Why are unemployed parents made fools of?)” [22, p. 93]. Apart from code-switching, which occurs in longer structures than a word,

there are cases of word infringements, i.e. code-mixing: English-Zulu "...up-there song and hit the chart, we *yenz' imali*, gain their confidence, *yenzi* album *abanye bayithandayo* (up-there song and hit the chart, we make the money, gain their confidence, make an album that other people enjoy)" [13, p. 86-87]).

According to Mesthrie, "you can't just code-switch at random" [13, p. 82]. McCormick [34] investigates alteration in language codes of the District Six speech community in Cape Town where long coexistence of English and Afrikaans resulted in a stable mixed code. Ethnically varied ancestry group of the District Six did not facilitate the construction of a single English or Afrikaner group identity. Cover term *kombuistaal* is used for non-standard Afrikaans dialect, recognized as imperfectly

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The results of the study demonstrated the specificity of multicultural and multilingual environment in the Republic of South Africa. Intercultural communication processes are very dynamic and encouraged by the polycomponent society embracing numerous official and non-official languages with a high degree of internal variation. The role of English is constantly rising due to the socio-political context and the scope of communicative functions the language performs. Although the English language in South Africa is a heterogeneous system of subvarieties each of which is exercised by a particular cultural group, its role is significant in the formation of a hybrid cultural identity. The evidence is found in cultural contacts and interplay of language codes involved into interactions, particularly in foreign element dominance in the etymological composition of the English vocabulary, hybrid structure of words and phrases, formation of common speech behaviour patterns, etiquette clichés, and productivity of code-switching.

Integration of original culture-specific and common cultural traits and values in multicultural societies is calling for more interdisciplinary research into South African and other social environments.

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learned local English variety and spread in the community mixing and switching forms.

Many cases of code-switching and code-mixing should be attributed to insufficient linguistic and/or cultural competence of interlocutors. Nevertheless, not all of such cases. Some Xhosa-English code-switching stems from the speakers' desire to achieve a greater degree of unfamiliarity [49, p. 240]. In certain occurrences code-switching fulfils a referential function bridging the lack of appropriate terminology [50, p. 346].

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