

Social Class Differentiation in South African Indian English: A Sociophonetic Study of Three Vowel Variables

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Since Mesthrie's (1992)¹ pioneering work on South African Indian English (SAIE), very little work has been done on SAIE exclusively. Therefore enough time has passed to test his findings and postulations with current data, new variables, and new techniques. In particular the paper draws on progress in acoustic sociophonetics in the description of the vowels of the GOOSE, NURSE and THOUGHT sets, and basic statistics.

During apartheid, various legislations (e.g. the Group Areas act of 1950) dictated that the four racial groups within South Africa lived in separate areas and attended separate schools and universities. Due to the lack of inter-group contact and interaction, four broad dialects of South African English developed: Black South African English (BSAE), Coloured South African English (CSAE), South African Indian English (SAIE) and White South African English (WSAE). Since the end of apartheid in 1994, we have seen a change in community structures and interaction as a result of the abolition of apartheid and its legislations. This has resulted in all South Africans attending schools together, living in the same neighbourhoods and speaking to each other on a daily basis. What seems to have emerged is what Mesthrie (2010)² terms a 'deracialisation' of certain vowels within the English phonetic system by speakers across racial lines, with a 'neutral' accent starting to emerge. This neutral accent is becoming a feature of class as opposed to race. What I am investigating is the extent to which the accent 'deracialisation' is occurring in the Durban Indian community in terms of social class.

In gathering data for this study, 24 speakers were interviewed following Labov's (1972)³ well known sociolinguistic method. The study is situated in Durban, KwaZulu Natal (the

¹ Mesthrie, R. 1992. *English in Language Shift: The History, Structure and Sociolinguistics of South African Indian English*. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP

² Mesthrie, R. 2010. Socio-phonetics and social change: Deracialisation of the GOOSE vowel in South African English. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. 14(1):3-33.

³ Labov, W. 1972. *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

birthplace of SAIE). There are twelve SAIE speakers each of middle class and working class, and 4 speakers of WSAE as a control group. Each group has very a similar number of male and female speakers. The speakers are between the age of 16 and 24, since this age group represents the first generation experiencing non-racial schooling. Following Mesthrie (1992), SAIE is placed on a continuum borrowed from creolistics, since SAIE is a variety of English that has moved from being a second language (L2) to a first language (L1) with minimal contact with the target:

pre-basilect	>	basilect	>	mesolect	>	acrolect	>	post-acrolect
small number of 2 nd /3 rd generation speakers – very limited command of English		older speakers with little education. English acquired as L2, but is spoken with L1 fluency		mediates between extreme basilect and extreme acrolect		fairly close to the norms of the target variety.		Highly educated speakers who do not follow a SAIE system

Sociophonetic and statistic analysis of the data shows a differentiation between the Middle and Working Class speakers, with the Middle Class (acrolectal) speakers moving toward a ‘deracialised’ lect more so than the working class (mesolectal) speakers (although both classes are indeed moving up the continuum). These findings confirm Mesthrie’s (1992:221) hypothesis that SAIE will “continue to exist as a continuum of varying lects, [with] the extremes between the basilect and acrolect becoming less pronounced”. Indeed, the data shows that middle class and working class speakers have different norms: the working class speakers retaining backer variants of GOOSE, resisting middle class lowering of NURSE, and displaying allophonic variation of THOUGHT.