



Linguistic Society of America

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Contact: Alyson Reed, LSA Executive Director
areed@lsadc.org; 202-835-1714

Gender, Race & Class: Language Change in Post-Apartheid South Africa

(Washington, DC) – A new study of language and social change in post-apartheid South Africa demonstrates that gender is a more powerful determinant than class among black university students. The study “Class, gender, and substrate erasure in sociolinguistic change: A sociophonetic study of schwa in deracializing South African English”, by Rajend Mesthrie (University of Cape Town) will be published in the June, 2017 issue of the scholarly journal *Language*. A pre-print version of the article may be found at: <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/Mesthrie.pdf> .

The article explores the extent to which the categories of race, class and gender were implicated in the degree of language change evident as schools that had previously been restricted to whites only were opened up to blacks and other racial minorities. With the end of apartheid education policies in South Africa in 1994, new flexibilities developed that enabled the author to study the relation between social change and language change. Mesthrie observed that a continuum opened up between traditional, second language varieties of English and the “crossover” varieties associated previously with whites. Focusing mainly on young black university students, the study demonstrates that social class (associated largely with type of schooling) does correlate with different types of English. The key variables that Mesthrie studied included the unstressed vowel, “schwa”, which is differentially realized in the traditional English varieties in South Africa, and the related property of the length of vowels. His study used the latest acoustic techniques emanating largely from the University of Pennsylvania and North Carolina State University.

The most important contribution of the paper is the statistical demonstration that sex differences are equally – and perhaps more – salient than social class in affecting language change. Young black women are more likely than young black males (of their respective classes) to acquire the crossover language varieties. For males on the whole, an “African solidarity” precludes too great a linguistic crossover, even for those who graduated from the more prestigious schools. In short, the black males did not want to sound “too white.” Mesthrie points to the success of young black women, who appear set to become the future prestige accent models on radio and television, for English anyway. The author sees this as a positive “deracializing” of the English language, so that prestige accents of the sort encountered on television are no longer associated with one race group (whites) alone.

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