

## **Gender and substrate erasure amongst young, black, middle-class South African English speakers.**

Rajend Mesthrie (*University of Cape Town*)

This paper analyses the sociophonetic dynamics of the acquisition of a prestige variety of English in post-apartheid South Africa. New economic and educational opportunities have seen the rapid growth of a black middle-class, part of whose making is having children study at elite schools previously reserved for whites. The paper documents the differences amongst younger black peoples' English from the traditional L2 of their parents' generation, using three related sets of variables: the realisation of schwa as a full vowel, and neutralizations involving the shortening of (standard) long vowels and the lengthening of (standard) short vowels. The data base comprises sociolinguistic interviews with 69 black students at university as follows: (i) Group A comprising 12 students interviewed in the early 1990s, who were the first generation to be allowed into formerly 'white' universities in the apartheid era, (ii) Group B comprising 20 students interviewed between 2008 to 2012 who had not been to elite multiracial schools, and (iii) Group C comprising 29 students also interviewed between 2008 to 2012 who *had* been to elite multiracial schools. A quantitative study of 14 126 tokens shows a dramatic decrease in the use of traditional black South African English variants between groups A and C, to the extent that speakers of group C can be said to speak a crossover variety, previously associated with whites. Whilst this variability (showing a degree of substrate erasure) thus correlates with type of schooling, there is a consistent gender effect among young people, in contrast to the previous generation's English. The results may be summarised as follows, reflecting t-test results set at  $p < 0.05$ :

- (a) There is no gender differentiation in Group A (interviewed in the 1990s) in the three vowel categories studied (males and females show high use of traditional variants).
- (b) There is no gender differentiation in Group B for two of the vowel categories (both show a moderate degree of lengthening and shortening), but there was a difference for schwa with males realising schwa as a full vowel more often than females ( $p = 0.01$ ).
- (c) There is no gender differentiation in Group C (the students who had been to elite multiracial schools) for two of the vowel categories (neither shows lengthening nor shortening to an appreciable degree), but there was a difference for schwa with males realising schwa as a full vowel more often than females ( $p = 0.04$ ).

The paper explores the indexical associations of this gender differentiation in groups B and C, via commentaries in the press as well as young peoples' own attitudes. The role of women in sociolinguistic variation is revisited, giving support for Labov's observation (2001:291) that 'when change begins, women are quicker and more forceful in employing the new social symbolism' is strongly supported in this context of new dialect acquisition.

### **References**

Labov, William. 2001. *Principles of Linguistic Change Volume 2: Social Factors*. New York: Blackwell.