

# **“Variety is the Spice of Life”<sup>1</sup>: a Qualitative Study of Attitudes towards South African Indian English**

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## **Abstract**

This paper focuses on the attitudes towards a non-standard L1 variety of English spoken in South Africa, namely South African Indian English (SAIE). The attitudes of the participants are considered against the backdrop of the socio-political history of this variety and its speakers, and in contrast to their attitudes to what is perceived as ‘good’ English. While the research methodology is primarily based on lengthy, semi-structured interviews with twenty young South African Indians (i.e. in-group members), the paper also includes a discussion of some of the linguistic features of SAIE, which is mainly motivated by methodological considerations. Through an examination of SAIE wh-questions, we show that the grammar of this variety differs systematically from that of standard English. Using examples of these wh-questions, we elicited grammatical judgments from participants and compared these judgments to the attitudes of the participants as expressed in response to open-ended questions in interviews. On the basis of the empirical data that we obtained and analyzed, we argue that the young South African Indian students who participated in our study have a profoundly ambiguous attitude towards the variety associated with their own ethno-linguistic group.

## **Introduction**

Studies of the linguistic features and sociolinguistic functions of different varieties of English have been a steady theme among South African researchers. The majority of linguists working on varieties of English in South Africa have focused on L2 varieties, such as Black South African English (e.g. Wade 1995, Gough 1996, de Klerk 1999). In this paper we focus on an L1 variety of English that exhibits systematic structural differences to standard English<sup>2</sup>, namely South African Indian English (SAIE)<sup>3</sup>. SAIE is a non-

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<sup>1</sup> “Variety is the spice of life. It’s the dialect that pisses me off”, a remark made by a South African Indian friend of one of the author’s on the subject of SAIE as a variety of English.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this paper ‘standard English’ is defined as a prestige variety of English that is afforded a certain degree of respect in society as a whole (Bex and Watts 1999). It is a term used to denote a form of English to which SAIE can be compared.

standard variety of English which over the past fifty years has become the L1 of the majority of South Africans of Indian descent (Mesthrie 1992a). SAIE is most widely spoken in KwaZulu-Natal, which is the province where most South African Indians reside and where our research was conducted.

In this qualitative study, we investigate the attitudes of South African Indian students on the Howard College Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Durban) towards SAIE, i.e. the variety associated with their ethno-linguistic group. While our research is primarily based on lengthy, semi-structured interviews with twenty young South African Indians, the paper also includes a discussion of some of the linguistic features of SAIE, which is mainly motivated by methodological considerations. As we show, the grammar of SAIE differs systematically from the grammar of standard English in a number of respects. Because of these differences, it is possible to collect or construct sample sentences which, though ungrammatical in standard English, are well-formed according to the rules of SAIE. By presenting the participants in our study with these SAIE examples (together with comparable constructions generated by the rules of standard English grammar), we were able to elicit grammatical judgments about these data and then compare these judgments with the attitudes of our participants as expressed in the subsequent interviews. It is partly through this methodology that we gained important insights into the profoundly ambivalent status of SAIE among this group of young, educated South African Indians.

This study, and indeed the development of SAIE, should be understood against the background of unequal power relations between speakers of standard South African English and speakers of SAIE that were established early on in the period of indenture. These unequal power relations persist in post-apartheid South Africa, though they are no longer as blatant and overt as they once were. In the next section we therefore provide a brief background to the socio-economic development of SAIE and its speakers. We then discuss some of the grammatical properties of SAIE in comparison to those of standard English, focusing in particular on a syntactic difference regarding the formation of so-called wh-questions. After outlining the methodology, we analyze and discuss the interview data and the most important results from our empirical study. Lastly, we offer some concluding remarks and suggest how this study could lead to further research in the field.

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<sup>3</sup> While we acknowledge that the continued use of race-based categories and labels such as SAIE in post-apartheid South Africa is problematic, we employ this term in this paper as it continues to be the most commonly used label to identify the variety associated with the South African Indian community linguistically and socially.

## **The history of South African Indian English**

The socio-historical and linguistic background of South African Indian English (henceforth SAIE) has been well documented (see e.g. Brookes and Webb 1965; Meer 1980; Bhana and Brain 1990; Mesthrie 1992a). Nevertheless, we provide a brief summary of the development of this variety and its speakers to provide a context for our study.

The system of Indian indenture was established in South Africa in 1860 and lasted until 1911, during which time approximately 152 000 migrants from north and south India arrived in South Africa to provide cheap labor for the Natal sugar cane plantations. Smaller numbers of so-called “passenger” Indians, traders mainly from western parts of India (Gujarat) who paid their own fares, followed after 1875 (Bhana and Brain 1990; Mesthrie 1992a, 2003). The linguistic background of these Indian migrants was diverse. The immigrants from the south spoke Dravidian languages (mostly Tamil and Telugu), as well as Dakhini (a southern variant of Urdu), while the North Indians spoke Bhojpuri, Awadhi and various Hindi dialects. Other languages were Gujarati, Marathi and Konkani (Mesthrie 1992a, 1992b, 1996). Importantly, none of these Indian languages were numerically or socially dominant enough to become a *lingua franca* of the Indian community in South Africa, and needless to say, none of these languages could be used for communication with white plantation owners or supervisors, or black laborers. Also, the vast majority of Indian immigrants had no knowledge of English on their arrival in South Africa. The working and living conditions surrounding indenture were similar to slavery (Tinker 1974; Mesthrie 1992a: 7). Although the South African government intended the Indian presence in South Africa to be temporary, and despite the poor living and working conditions and hostile legislation, many laborers chose to stay in South Africa and tried to make a living on the sugar cane plantations and mines, and by hawking, market-gardening and fishing (Naicker 1945: 27-28; John-Naidu 2005). Thus by 1886 there were already more ‘free’ Indians than indentured Indians in South Africa (Desai 1996). From 1860 until the early 1950s the process of learning English in the Indian community in South Africa took place in an environment of social, economic and political divisions along racial lines. This environment provided little opportunity for contact with L1-speakers of English, and consequently, English was learnt, often with poor quality, as a second or third language at school or work.

Due to the limited opportunities available to the Indian community to gain access to L1-speakers of English, exposure to the language in schools played a particularly important role in the process of language shift. However, exposure to English in schools was not without its own limitations. The quality of the schooling available to South African Indians during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was generally very poor, as the majority of teachers in Indian schools were non-native speakers

of English trying to teach in a language in which they were not fluent (Mesthrie 1995). Furthermore, according to Mesthrie (1992a: 20), the Indian-school inspector reported in 1886 that an estimated 90 percent of Indian children of school-going age did not even attend school. In short, for the first half of the twentieth century, the L2 variety of English to which Indian children and adults who had access to education were exposed (both inside and outside of the classroom) did not provide the appropriate input for the perfect acquisition of English as a second language.

By the late 1950s, there had been a dramatic improvement in the quality of education available to South African Indians. Moreover, the number of Indian children who attended school had increased. One of the consequences of these developments was increased exposure to English in schools during this period. As a result, English began to be introduced into Indian homes and communities to a greater extent than ever before, even though the variety of English that the majority of South African Indians were exposed to was still not an ideal model for second-language acquisition. In the 1960s and 1970s, English became the first language for the majority of Indian school children. The process of language shift can, thus, be thought of as having started in the 1960s (Mesthrie 1995, 1996). The distinctive character of SAIE today is largely the result of imperfect learning conditions<sup>4</sup> during the period of language shift, and the fact that opportunities to learn the Target Language were limited (Mesthrie 1996).

According to the South African Government Census (2001), the Indian community is a minority in South Africa, forming approximately 2.5% of the total population. The 2001 census suggests that 93.8% of the South African Indian population speak English as an L1 (they report English as the language most often spoken at home). This means that SAIE is becoming the second major variety of English as a first language in South Africa.

While the L1 of most South African Indians is English, the community is highly heterogeneous, due to religious, class and educational differences. The nature of South African Indian identities has been discussed recently (see, for example, John-Naidu 2005, Singh 2005, and Desai 1996) and will be addressed in more detail below. Suffice it to say at this point that the use of SAIE is more acceptable in certain contexts than the use of formal standard English, and that it may be employed as an identity marker (Mesthrie 1992b). On this point we would like to note that since this non-standard variety of English persists, it is not unreasonable to assume that it is associated with prestige of some sort, most

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<sup>4</sup> Imperfect learning occurs as a result of a lack of sufficient exposure to the standard variety of the Target Language (in this case, English), and limited opportunities to make use of the Target Language.

likely *covert prestige* (Mesthrie 1992a, 1995, 1996). However, the covert prestige of the variety must not be overestimated. There typically exist negative attitudes towards non-standard varieties of English, by both ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’ of the community (Andersson and Trudgill 1990; Milroy and Milroy 1993; Bex and Watts 1999). SAIE is no exception.

The low social and economic status that has been, and often still is, associated with the South African Indian community, and persistent racism in post-apartheid South Africa, as well as the status of SAIE as a non-standard variety gives rise to the perception of SAIE as inferior to standard English. How this perception manifests itself in the attitudes of a selected group of South African Indian students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal is illustrated by our study.

### **Syntactic features of South African Indian English**

The syntax of SAIE shows a number of characteristic properties that clearly distinguish it from the grammar of standard English.<sup>5</sup> While some of these properties are also attested in SAIE’s antecedent language in India, Vernacular Indian English (see Bhatt 2000, 2004 for discussion), other grammatical features of SAIE are the result of its shift from an L2 to an L1 under imperfect learning conditions, its contact with other forms (both L1 and L2 varieties) of English spoken in South Africa, and substrate influences from Indian languages (Mesthrie 2004). A good illustration of the latter is provided by Mesthrie’s (1992a, chapter 3) detailed discussion of various non-standard relativisation strategies employed by speakers of SAIE:

(1) [Which-car they supposed to give us], someone else got it. [Mesthrie 1992a: 75]  
‘Someone else got the car they were supposed to give us.’

(2) That's all [we had] trouble. [Mesthrie 1992a: 76]  
‘That's all the trouble we had.’

(1) depicts a so-called ‘internally-headed’ relative clause; the relative clause (in brackets) *includes* the head noun *car*, which is linked to the anaphoric pronoun *it* in the main clause. As Mesthrie (1992a) notes, this type of relative construction resembles the correlative relativisation strategy found in Indian languages such as Gujarati. Another non-standard relative construction in SAIE is illustrated by the

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<sup>5</sup> See Mesthrie (1992a, chapter 5) for a discussion of morphological, phonological and sociolexical differences between SAIE and standard English.

example in (2), in which the relative clause *precedes* its head noun *trouble*. Mesthrie (1992a) observes that prenominal relative clauses without relative pronouns exist in Dravidian languages such as Tamil. Constructions such as (1) and (2) therefore illustrate the substratum interference in the target language English. Other distinguishing aspects of SAIE grammar noted by Mesthrie (1992a, 2004) are: a preference of parataxis over hypotaxis, the intrusion of features otherwise associated with head-final languages (such as the existence of postposition-like elements, clause-final conjunctions, etc.), the non-progressive use of auxiliary *be* + *-ing*, and the frequent use of topicalisation structures (for more detailed discussion and further aspects of SAIE, see Mesthrie 1992a, 2004).

Our study of speakers' attitudes to SAIE explores another grammatical difference between SAIE and standard English noted in Mesthrie (1992a, 2004), which concerns the word order in questions. As is well known, standard English requires the inversion of the subject and the finite auxiliary, copula or modal verb in non-subject *wh-* (= content) questions:

- (3) a. **John** *will* meet Mary tomorrow.  
b. Who *will* **John** meet tomorrow?  
c. When *will* **John** meet Mary?

Subject-auxiliary inversion also takes place in Yes-No (= polar) questions:

- (4) *Will* **John** meet Mary tomorrow?

In simple tenses without auxiliaries, copulas or modals, standard English requires the insertion of the dummy auxiliary *do* in order to meet the inversion requirement ('*do*-support'). Tense and agreement are then realized on *do* while the lexical verb form is non-finite:

- (5) a. **John** *bought* a car yesterday.  
b. What *did* **John** *buy* yesterday?  
c. When *did* **John** *buy* a car?

- (6) *Did* **John** *buy* a car yesterday?

In striking contrast to standard English, SAIE neither has subject-auxiliary inversion nor *do*-support in content or polar questions:<sup>6</sup>

- (7) a. Where **you** *are*? [Wiebesiek 2007: 110]  
'Where are you?'  
b. What **I** *must* do? [Mesthrie 1992a: 47]  
'What must I do?'  
c. What **I** *said*? [Wiebesiek 2007: 110]  
'What did I say?'  
d. How often **she** *goes* to her mother's place? [Mesthrie 2004: 979]  
'How often does she go to her mother's place?'
- (8) a. **You** *can* play tennis? [Wiebesiek 2007: 112]  
'Can you play tennis?'  
b. **You** *bought* cheese, Farouk? [Mesthrie 1995: 257]  
'Did you buy cheese, Farouk?'

As the examples in (7) show, wh-questions in SAIE pattern with standard English in that they also require fronting of the questioned wh-constituents. However, in SAIE, this sort of wh-fronting is not accompanied by subject-auxiliary inversion or *do*-support. In (7a) and (7b), the copula and modal verbs still follow the subject. The examples in (7c) and (7d) lack *do*; the lexical verb follows the subject and is inflected for tense or agreement (*said*; *goes*). This later point demonstrates that these examples do not simply imply phonological deletion of a (potentially inverted) form of *do*; rather, (7c) and (7d) show that the grammatical operation of *do*-support genuinely does not apply in SAIE.<sup>7</sup> Finally, (8) illustrates the absence of subject-auxiliary inversion and *do*-support in polar questions, which means that their word

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Vernacular Indian English also lacks subject-auxiliary inversion and *do*-support (see Bhatt 2004). This suggests that this aspect of SAIE was inherited from the antecedent variety. However, according to historical records, up to 90% of Indian immigrants arrived in South Africa without any previous knowledge of English (Mesthrie 1992a: 12; 2002: 339). Consequently, Mesthrie (1992a: 17) does not rule out the possibility of convergent developments in both varieties as a result of comparable substrate influences and similar processes governing the acquisition of the L2.

<sup>7</sup> Mesthrie (1992: 48; 2004: 978) notes that SAIE behaves like standard English in that it has *do*-support in negation contexts (*I don't know this*), which supports the view that *do*-support is a last resort operation which can be independently triggered by different syntactic requirements in different contexts.

order is identical to that of declaratives in SAIE.<sup>8</sup> (In the remainder of this paper, we will use the label ‘Subj-Aux inversion’ as a cover-term for both subject-auxiliary inversion and *do*-support.)

It is worth mentioning that the absence of Subj-Aux inversion, in contrast to the relatively rare non-standard relativisation strategies illustrated by (1) and (2), is quite a prominent characteristic of SAIE. For example, Mesthrie (1992a) observes that this aspect of SAIE is occasionally even mentioned by people who have come in contact with the variety for the first time. The corpus of 111 examples of this construction, collected on the basis of observation by Wiebesiek (2007), also supports the view that the absence of Subj-Aux inversion is a common feature of the speech of South African Indians.<sup>9</sup> This property of SAIE is therefore an excellent illustration of how two mutually intelligible varieties of a language can differ systematically with respect to some of their core grammatical operations. Some linguistic theories (such as Chomsky's (1986, 1995) *Principles & Parameters*-approach) assume that the particular form of the grammar of a language is determined at least in part by the specific values of certain parameters, which are set in the process of language acquisition on the basis of linguistic experience. For proponents of such theories, the grammatical operation Subj-Aux inversion would be associated with such a parameter, and the difference between the grammars of standard English and SAIE with respect to the formation of interrogatives would simply be analyzed as the result of different parameter settings.<sup>10</sup>

Importantly, as we show in the next section, the absence of Subj-Aux inversion in SAIE makes *wh*-constructions a useful tool for our study of the attitudes that English speaking South African Indians have towards SAIE.

## Methodology

Our study is based on lengthy interviews that were conducted with twenty participants individually.<sup>11</sup> During the interviews, valuable data were elicited on the attitudes of a particular group of South African Indian participants towards SAIE. All participants were students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

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<sup>8</sup> In Yes-No questions, this strategy is also used in informal English and in other non-standard varieties of English spoken in South Africa, cf. Mesthrie (1992: 47).

<sup>9</sup> An interesting complication, which we ignore here, concerns the fact that both SAIE and Vernacular Indian English exhibit Subj-Aux inversion in embedded questions, i.e. in exactly those contexts where standard English does not have them (see Mesthrie 2004: 979 and Bhatt 2004: 1020).

<sup>10</sup> For an influential analysis of Subj-Aux inversion within the *Principles & Parameters*-theory, see Pesetsky and Torrego (2001). Wiebesiek (2007) discusses the absence of Subj-Aux inversion in SAIE in light of Pesetsky and Torrego's theory.

<sup>11</sup> Given the qualitative nature of this study, this sample size yields sufficient data for the argument of this paper. See Kehler and Martino (2007).

(UKZN) in Durban during the time of the interviews. The interviews, which were recorded and transcribed, were semi-structured and proceeded as follows: Each participant was first asked to perform a type of grammatical judgment task which involved presenting the participant with three sentences involving wh-constructions and asking them to choose a response to each sentence from a list A-D. In order to establish whether the mode of presentation affected the responses of the participants, ten of the participants were presented with written and ten with spoken data.<sup>12</sup> Below we provide an example of a set of three wh-questions, as well as the fixed responses A-D from which every participant could choose:

- i) Where you are?
- ii) When you did that?
- iii) Why didn't you tell me?

*Responses* (based on Trudgill 1983: 15):

- A I use this kind of grammatical construction myself.
- B I don't use this grammatical construction, but other English speakers do.
- C I've never heard anyone use a construction like this, but I would guess that some native speakers do use it.
- D Nobody would say this.

As the example shows, the first two of the three sentences we used to elicit data were always examples of interrogatives without Subj-Aux inversion. The third sentence, a wh-question exhibiting standard English-type Subj-Aux inversion, was the control.

Since the absence of Subj-Aux inversion is a systematic and common characteristic of SAIE, the use of wh-constructions without inversion in the grammatical judgment tasks allowed us to present the participants with the linguistic variety associated with their community without having to state explicitly that they were being interviewed about SAIE. (It should be noted that care was taken to ensure that none of the participants had studied linguistics in the past, or were studying it at the time.) At the same time, response B gave the participants the freedom to acknowledge that they were familiar with the non-

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<sup>12</sup> The written data was printed on a response sheet. Rather than presenting the participants with a recording of spoken data, an Indian research assistant read out the sentence in the data set in an effort to keep the interviews as informal as possible.

standard variety, while still allowing them to distance themselves from it. Once the participants had completed the grammatical judgment task, they were engaged in a discussion about their responses. The general strategy of the interviews was to use the grammatical judgment task to establish whether or not the participants identified the wh-constructions that they were presented with as a feature of SAIE in a formal setting. The grammatical judgment task further provided an entry point into a discussion about SAIE and standard English. It is in contrast to the participants' attitudes towards standard English that their attitudes towards SAIE become particularly clear.

The sociolinguistic variables were largely controlled through participant selection of *age, level of education, L1* and *gender*. Selecting all of the participants from the South African Indian student population at UKZN ensured that all of the participants were of approximately the same age (between 18 and 24), and had achieved the same minimal level of education (at least a matric). As an important facet of our argument is the role of formal education in the development and perpetuation of language attitudes, level of education was a particularly important variable. As noted above, English is the L1 for the majority of South African Indians (Census 2001), and of all the participants in this study. To keep gender a stable variable, ten of the twenty participants were male and ten were female. While selecting all of the participants from within the same context effectively controlled the social variables, it did give rise to context-specific results. However, our arguments are confined to our participants. We make no attempt to generalize our discussion and findings outside of the context in which the study was conducted.

Given that the main researcher is white, we took into account the potential effect of her 'outsider' status on how candidly the participants would possibly respond to questions about SAIE. We engaged an Indian research assistant with whom the main researcher conducted all of the interviews, thereby allowing the participants to direct their responses to the researcher or the research assistant.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

In this analysis we are primarily concerned with participants' perceptions of SAIE vis-à-vis standard English. We focus on unraveling how young South African Indian students on the Howard College campus of UKZN perceive SAIE, the linguistic variety that is widely associated with their ethnic community. The analysis is organized according to themes that emerge from the comments and offers an emic, rather than an etic, perspective. In other words, we foreground participants' own perceptions and attitudes, in order to expose linguistic and social consistencies and homogeneities as well as conflicting evidences and contradictions. Several of the quotes demonstrate a noteworthy rejection of SAIE as an available speech variety. The constructions of identities displayed in most of the comments are that of

highly educated and future upwardly mobile South Africans who want to be associated with speaking standard English rather than a variety of English that carries an ethnic and socio-economic tag. It is important to note that the participants' responses to the grammatical judgment task are not always consistent with their responses to the questions in the rest of the interview. This inconsistency suggests that the participants' attitudes towards SAIE are ambivalent, or that they do not have a concrete set of attitudes towards SAIE; rather they are fluid and can, in certain (social) circumstances, change or be renegotiated (see comments from P18 below).

### ***Results of the Grammatical Judgment Task***

As outlined in the methodology section, participants were presented with three sentences (two SAIE non-subject wh-questions and one standard English control) and were then asked to choose a response from a list of four options (see responses A-D above). There were two significant patterns of responses. Eight participants, of whom five were presented with written and three with spoken data, chose the answer pattern BBA. Choosing BBA allowed these participants to acknowledge the existence of a non-standard way of forming wh-constructions without identifying *themselves* as users of this kind of construction, or as speakers of the variety with which its use is associated. The other significant pattern was AAA, which was chosen by six participants. One of these six was presented with written sentences, while five provided judgments on spoken data. In choosing AAA, the participants admitted using non-subject wh-questions that lack Subj-Aux inversion, thereby identifying themselves as speakers of SAIE. The remaining six participants each chose a different pattern of response. Three of these six gave the response patterns BAB, BAA, BBB respectively, which shows inconsistency with respect to the two SAIE-sentences and an unexpected rejection of the standard English wh-construction by two participants. Only three of the participants judged the SAIE wh-questions as clearly unacceptable in comparison to their standard English counterparts, by producing response patterns BCA, DDA and DCA. The total number of Bs chosen by all twenty participants for the first two sentences was twenty-one; the total number of As chosen for these sentences was fourteen. This shows that the majority of the participants is at least familiar with SAIE. These results are summarized in Table 1 below:

**Table 1. Grammaticality judgments of participants to sentences 1) - 3) in the data set.**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20
i)	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	B	A	B	A	A	A	A	D	B	B	B	D	A
ii)	C	B	B	A	B	B	A	B	A	B	A	A	A	A	D	B	B	B	C	A
iii)	A	A	B	B	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A

\*Rows are numbered i) - iii) for the sentences in the data set.  
Columns are numbered 1 to 20 for each of our participants.

As noted above, the participants who chose response A for all three sentences thereby identified themselves as speakers of a non-standard variety of English that has little prestige outside of the South African Indian community, and differing levels of prestige within the community as is illustrated by the ambivalent attitudes of our participants to this variety. It is noteworthy that five of the six participants that chose pattern AAA were presented with spoken data. This asymmetry is not unexpected, since non-standard constructions appear more marked in written language, which is both subject to stricter standards of correctness than spoken language and generally more formal than spoken language. It is also worth mentioning that the participants who chose the BBA pattern in the grammatical judgment task in general gave much longer answers to questions in the subsequent interview.

Table 1 shows the close correspondence between the number of participants that chose AAA, thereby acknowledging use of the non-standard wh-construction, and the number of those who chose BBA and therefore distanced themselves from the non-standard variety. This illustrates the ambivalent attitudes of our participants towards the variety of English associated with their ethnic group. Further, it illustrates that although these young, educated South African Indians seem to be *familiar* with the variety of English associated with their ethnic group, they do not, in general, take *ownership* of this variety by identifying it as the way they speak themselves.

***Standards of correctness***

There is a clear sense from the majority of our participants that SAIE as a variety of English is not associated with ideas of correctness, ‘good’ and ‘proper’ English. Participant 1 stated that “there’s a lot of grammatical errors in the way, *umm*, Indian South Africans speak and it’s usually things like that: ‘Where you are?’”. Similarly, participant 3 said of SAIE that it is “bad English. You know what I mean? Especially when it’s, like, grammatically wrong.” The following comments from participants 4 and 6 provide further examples of this association:

“it’s not...proper English” (P4)

“I don’t think it’s grammatically correct” (P6)

Similarly, when asked what the term ‘South African Indian English’ meant to her, participant 16 replied: “improper English”.

During the interviews, we investigated the contrast between the participants’ attitudes towards SAIE and their attitudes towards their ideas of ‘good’ and ‘proper’ English. Participant 2’s value judgments on ‘proper’ English and SAIE illustrate this contrast:

they [speakers of SAIE] really don’t consider the fact that they’re using the wrong type of English [and] in most instances it’s people [who speak the kind of English this participant thinks is good English] that are more intelligent because they consider how they come across, and people who are more exposed to that kind of English. Someone who speaks that way is not exposed to people who speak proper English.

In reference to value judgments of speakers of ‘improper’ English, participant 1 claimed that “people who speak proper English, *ummm*, do think less of people who don’t.” Similarly, when asked if people are judged on how they speak, participant 14 responded that, “if people don’t speak proper English they think they are lower class or even have a low status but if you speak really proper English it goes with a higher status or they’re rich”.

Our data show that the young South African Indian students who participated in our study draw a clear distinction between ‘proper’ English and SAIE. Importantly, this distinction implies (when it is not explicitly stated) the perception that SAIE is ‘improper’ English, although SAIE is an L1. Of course, from a strictly linguistic point of view, such a view cannot be maintained. As was noted above, SAIE and standard English count as different (albeit mutually intelligible) linguistic varieties, since aspects of their grammars can be formally distinguished. SAIE differs systematically from standard English in that certain parameters (including the one that controls Subj-Aux inversion) are set differently in this variety. From this perspective, SAIE is not inferior to standard English. Speakers of SAIE are native speakers of English and, as Andersson and Trudgill (1990: 111) state, “native speakers do not make mistakes. Native speakers for the most part speak their native language perfectly”. Hence, native speakers of SAIE do not speak ‘bad’ or incorrect English, but simply a different variety of this language.

This theoretically supported view stands in harsh contrast to the perceptions disclosed by our interviews. It can be seen from the comments of participants 2 and 14 (quoted in this section) that attitudes towards varieties of English reveal how different groups of people are evaluated differently on the basis of language in terms of the social structure of society and their social standing. An important difference between the comments of participants 2 and 14 is that participant 2 is making a value judgment about speakers within her own ethnic group, while participant 14 seems to be remarking on value judgments directed at speakers of non-standard varieties from the 'outside'. This difference illustrates how ambivalent and/or negative attitudes towards SAIE as a non-standard variety are leveled against its speakers from outside of the South African Indian community and from within the perceived 'in group'.

### *Distancing and 'Othering'*

Fought (2006) discusses how linguistic variation is significant for individuals within one language group as they seek to express who they are in relation to ethnic identity. Different varieties of English index different identities. While the use of SAIE may indicate an 'Indian' background, the use of standard English is associated by most people with a higher educational status, a higher socio-economic class, and in South Africa is linked (perhaps more and more mistakenly) to the white community. Because of what appears to be a diglossic situation with standard English as H-variety and SAIE as L-variety, some of our participants claimed to have made a conscious choice and a concerted effort not to speak SAIE. The comment by participant 6 below illustrates this point:

[...] led me to make that decision because I don't speak like that but there are, there would've been **other** people in, in the classroom or people of different backgrounds *err*, that, that do use that sort of grammar. (P6)

For Carter (1999), to become a speaker of standard English is problematic as it entails becoming a speaker of a clearly marked, socially symbolic variety, since non-standard usage is very often a marker of an individual or group identity. On this view, "[t]he shift from non-standard to standard dialects can also become one which implies a devaluation of one dialect (and the identity derived from its use) in favor of another" (1999: 163). The above comment by participant 6 and the following comment by participant 5 support this view:

[...] I probably used to speak like that, when I went to a Model C high school, and then I was, not corrected, but I heard it being spoken around me and people would giggle if I were to speak in that sort of grammatical sentence and I had to influence myself to

change it, so I don't really look upon them as, like, inferior or, or as if, like, I should correct them, I just, like, leave them alone (P5)

This participant explained that it was his 'decision' to speak standard English rather than SAIE and also described how some people ridicule speakers of SAIE, due to its association with lower education and socio-economic situation. Edwards (1982) argues that the function of language or a particular linguistic variety as a boundary influences how we perceive and position ourselves in life. If a linguistic variety is closely linked to a certain ethnicity or a particular socio-economic class, but there are members of this ethnic group who do not or at least claim not to speak the variety, then these members are likely to see themselves in a different position than the average member of this ethnic or socio-economic group. Unsurprisingly, then, many of our student participants made a point in the individual interviews to distance themselves from the use of SAIE and describe those who speak it as 'others':

...to **them** that, that's right. That's the way **they** were taught and that's the way **their** parents spoke at home and that's the way **they** were brought up and **they** feel that that's right because that's what **they** were exposed to. What I was exposed to was something different so I feel that what I'm saying is grammatically correct. (P6)

...it's just, like, the way Indian people are brought up, their culture, so **they** learn to speak like that. Not because they have a choice...other people around them speak like that so **they** learnt it themselves. **They** picked it up from people around them speaking like that and that's what I think (P12)

While participants 6 and 12 evidently did regard SAIE as a less prestigious variety of English and consequently did not consider themselves members of this group of speakers, they acknowledged nonetheless that speaking in this way is fairly 'natural' in a particular social environment. In other words, they themselves did not take any ownership of SAIE but did think South African Indians are the owners of this variety, resulting in participant 12, for instance, making a direct link between language and culture. Participant 3 commented explicitly on a sense of ownership of English for speakers of SAIE:

[i]t's sort of like the English language has become **their** own that, like, it's become **their** own language. You know **they've** taken it and...done things to it that makes it **theirs**. *Ummm*, you know, grammar, like, you know might as well add in that accent and stuff like that. **They've**, like, changed English to become, like ... South African Indian English.

(P3)

This response, however, suggests in some respects that in the process of making it “their own”, something ‘went wrong’ to yield this ‘improper’ version of English.

Indeed, the use of pronouns such as *they* and *their* is striking in many of our participants’ comments. Participant 14 claimed that SAIE is “a combination of English broken down into simpler forms of English [...] and I’m sure Indians break down language and don’t use the full extent of the word”. It is evident from this comment that for participant 14 the sense that she has of SAIE as ‘incorrect’ is part of the reason for her distancing from the variety. Participant 10 went so far as to state that he sometimes has difficulty understanding speakers of SAIE: “Indian speakers, they don’t particularly care about their English, I mean half the time you really don’t know what they’re saying unless you’re actually from the same area as them.”

### ***Ambivalence***

In this section we discuss how SAIE and standard English can be seen as “taking on subjective values in different contexts” (Garret, Williams and Evans 2005). While the participants whose comments we discussed in the preceding section distanced themselves from the use of SAIE, a number of participants exhibited a noteworthy ambivalence towards SAIE. This was revealed, first, by their mixed use of the third and first person pronouns during interviews, and second, by inconsistencies between their responses in the grammatical judgment tasks and their responses to more detailed questions in the interviews. This shall be described in more detail below.

Participant 13 indicated that she uses SAIE by choosing AAA in the grammatical judgment task. However, she distanced herself to a degree by saying “I think it’s, like, [err], like, the type of English that **we you** [sic] learn, like, as you growing up or something, like, [err] your type of family, like, the area which you come from [...]” Participant 18, who is quoted below, ultimately admitted in the interview to speaking SAIE in some contexts and with certain family members despite having chosen the BBA pattern of response in the grammatical judgment task.

A lot of people on this campus, their parents don't have the education per se that **we** do and when **they** spend a lot of time during the holidays with their parents **they** tend to speak like **their** parents. **I** know **I** start to speak like my mum, like, 'it's paining'. On campus **I** would never use - **I**'ve got a degree in English, right? (P18)

The above comment aptly illustrates the context-dependent nature of SAIE usage. While participant 18 admitted to speaking SAIE with her mother in the domestic setting, she regards it as absolutely unacceptable to speak in this way at the university where she obtained her degree in English. However, what seems particularly noteworthy in our specific data set is the contradiction in participants' responses. It can be assumed that some participants reflected on their own attitudes towards SAIE vis-à-vis standard English for the first time in the interview. Participant 7's responses are noteworthy in this regard: This participant's response to the grammatical judgment task was BAA, which means that she did not consistently identify examples of SAIE non-subject wh-questions as part of her own linguistic repertoire. Furthermore, she claimed first that older people like her great grandmother would use SAIE wh-constructions, whereas younger people would not because they are "more prone to speaking English". However, despite this distancing, she made the following statement: "...I mean **we** speak English the way **we** speak it. And other people speak it differently but **we** don't speak it the way it should be spoken...".

Similar inconsistencies emerged in the interview with participant 12, who is already quoted in the preceding section. Remarkably, although this participant chose AAA during the grammatical judgment task, thereby acknowledging the use of a characteristic feature of SAIE, he distanced himself from the use of SAIE through the consistent use of the pronoun *they* to refer to SAIE speakers during the remaining parts of the interview (see the above quote). There are hence interesting mismatches between participants' reported language uses and their reported language attitudes.

Moreover, we also noticed a mismatch between the *observed* and the *reported* language use with some participants. When participant 4 was questioned about the use of wh-constructions without Subj-Aux inversion after the grammatical judgment task, he responded: "...well for me, my group of friends or any people I associate with don't usually talk like that, so the only time I've ever seen that is, like, people who are not native to this country." However, both the main interviewer and the research assistant had clearly overheard participant 4 talking to a friend before the interview, asking "Where I must meet you?", and thus producing exactly the type of wh-construction without Subj-Aux inversion which he later ascribed to non-native speakers and denied using himself. Interestingly, the response of participant 4 to the grammatical judgment task also reflects this inconsistency: his chosen response pattern was BAB.

Participant 10's reported speech behaviour was also contradicted by his actual language use. This participant chose BBA in the grammatical judgment task and remarked on the first two SAIE-sentences that "[i]t's sad [...] that people speak like that". However, he went on to say: "...when people ask 'when you got your license?', 'how did you know this?' and stuff like that. I would say 'when you went to get your license?' ". Despite this participant's attempts to distance himself from the use of SAIE, this comment clearly indicates that he does, in fact, use wh-constructions formed in a way characteristic of SAIE.

Not all the interviews with our participants revealed this kind of discrepancy between reported and actual language use. For example, participant 11 chose AAA in the grammatical judgment task. During the rest of the interview he stated that "it's mostly the Indian race that speaks like that" and went on to say "I know that I do use these kinds of constructions". Nevertheless, our results suggest that the majority of the participants do not actually see themselves as speakers of SAIE, due to the negative perceptions often associated with this variety. However, even with those participants who claim to use predominantly standard English, we observed that the SAIE wh-question formation strategy slips into the speech of some of the participants (e.g. participant 4) from time to time. It is not unlikely that in certain social contexts, (in particular in a non-university environment, in conversations with family members and friends, etc.), even the young educated South African Indians who participated in our study use SAIE or at least certain grammatical features associated with this variety. This obviously does not imply that these participants have been dishonest or deliberately misleading during the interviews. However, we have good reason to believe that the self-assessment of the students questioned about the usage of a non-standard variety in a formal setting such as a university may not always be consistent with their actual language performance, particularly in less formal contexts.

### ***Education and class***

In contemporary South Africa, there are generally great differences between the English spoken by learners educated in former DET (so-called 'Indian' or 'Black') schools, and the English spoken by learners educated in multiracial schools (so-called 'ex-Model C') schools. Until the end of 1990, Model C schools were completely funded government schools, which admitted white learners only. In 1991, these schools were converted into state-aided schools that also admitted Indian, Black and Colored learners. It is these schools in particular where impeccable standard English is being taught and which are rightly associated with a 'better' standard of education. Many Indian and Black schools are notoriously under-

resourced, and their staff consists of less qualified teachers. Not surprisingly, standard English is associated with ex-Model C schools :

I probably used to speak like that, then I went to a Model C high school (P5)

I went to a Model C school, not a private school or a government state school but a Model C school which is a mixture of *err*...students of different incomes whose parents are in different income groups. So [...] I don't speak like that... (P6)

In fact, in most of our data, the association of standard English with good education (and by extension, intelligence) stands in contrast to the association of SAIE with a lack of good education and intelligence. Several participants mentioned that those who speak SAIE are probably not as educated as those who do not, or as those who choose not to speak SAIE in certain contexts, at university for example. Participant 1 explicitly stated that SAIE is 'usually spoken in communities where people haven't been fully educated'. Participant 7 claimed that people who don't speak standard English should learn to speak it, because otherwise people "think that you aren't educated".

Participant 2, however, appeared to disagree. She claimed to know doctors who "speak wrong English". She did, however, qualify this statement by saying "actually, in most instances it's people that are more intelligent [who speak 'proper' English] because they consider how they come across...". While this participant did not explicitly mention education, there is an implied connection between language use, education and intelligence.

Education is often associated with class or economic status in South Africa, since wealthier families tend to send their children to schools where they are more likely to receive a good quality education in standard English. Participants 3, 6 and 14 directly linked class or economic status to education and, by extension, language use. Participant 6 suggested that people from a lower income group who have had poor quality education use SAIE. The same holds for participant 3, as the following quote demonstrates: "I guess it kind of depends on their upbringing and education [...] I'd just narrow it down to a lower income group, *err*, which may not have the same quality of education as others." Participant 14 did not mention education, but was quite clear that "if people don't speak proper English they think they are lower class or even have a low status but if you speak really proper English it goes with a higher status or they're rich".

Commenting on language attitudes relating to the use of standard and non-standard English in education, Edwards (1982: 27) argues that: “[i]t is the educational setting [...] where such attitudes may have the greatest importance [...] In particular, the school encourages and reflects ‘Standard English’ practices and, consequently, the way in which it deals with those whose dialect is non-standard may be of some relevance”. The clear equation in our data of the use of ‘standard English’ with education, and the use of SAIE with a lack of or a poorer quality of education illustrates how ‘standard English practices’ in education, particularly in the context of ex-Model C schools and at university, may foster ambivalent or even negative attitudes towards SAIE in contrast to standard English.

Participant 18 spoke at length about the connection between SAIE and education. She stated:

[W]hen they were telling me that they were ‘look aftering someone’ then I’m like ahhhh no! I’m like ‘on the light and off the light’? So I’m like huh?! When people talk sometimes you want to say, you know, you got that education, why do that? And if you know that’s wrong why keep using it? (P18)

These attitudes are informed by the idea that a good education gives speakers access to the standard which they then have an obligation to speak. This participant seemed to disregard the fact that a particular speech variety may also be employed in order to demonstrate solidarity and belonging. For this participant and others quoted above, the use of SAIE is not consistent with an appearance of being well-educated. Since speakers gain access to the standard through education, the assumption is that the choice of SAIE over standard English is an indication of poor education and, more generally, lower socio-economic standing.

## **Conclusions**

According to Fishman (1972: 142), language attitudes are more strongly adhered to in a multilingual setting where the knowledge of a particular language or linguistic variety is associated with a particular ‘social’ or ‘economic type’. This is salient in South Africa, as proficiency in standard English is widely associated with a certain socio-economic environment and a good educational background. Furthermore, language behaviour in a multilingual, multicultural setting such as South Africa is closely related to language choice. The decision of an individual to speak or not to speak any particular language variety or a negative behaviour towards a language variety, even the one associated with his/her own ethnolinguistic group, is a matter of choice and potentially represents an act of identity.

The present study indicates that the differentiation of standard English and SAIE as linguistic varieties that traditionally or historically carry certain identities surpasses a simple 'white' versus 'Indian' dichotomy in contemporary South Africa. There seems to exist a group of young, educated South African Indians who regard those who speak SAIE as 'others' and do not consider themselves as part of the in-group of SAIE speakers. Those for whom standard English is the main medium of communication appear to consider themselves in a different 'category' to those whose main medium of communication is SAIE, both socio-economically and metaphorically. They choose to speak a variety of English which is more prestigious than the one ordinarily associated with their ethnolinguistic group because it is believed, at least by some, that it indicates a higher socio-economic standing and better education. In this way, standard English can act as a dividing agent in the South African Indian community, creating a boundary between those who speak it and those who do not.

It is noteworthy that some of our participants feel ambivalent towards SAIE. While most acknowledge its existence and its association with the Indian community, the majority of the participants in this study distance themselves from the use of SAIE. Those students who did admit to making use of SAIE in certain settings only did so with apparent reluctance. SAIE is clearly positioned ambiguously. Not only did attitudes among the different interviewees vary to a large extent, but individuals had contradicting views concerning the position of SAIE.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that the specific design of this research and the fact that the students were interviewed in a fairly formal setting played a role in the data and results obtained. This study was based on a group of university students as participants and the research setting was relatively formal. Hence, we would recommend expanding on this line of research on SAIE with a different methodological frame. It might be valuable to replicate this study by conducting more informal interviews (in participants' homes, for example) with participants of the same age group who have no access to higher education. It can be hypothesized that the data elicited in this setting will, at least to some extent, yield different results in comparison to those generated by our study. Further, it would be worthwhile to explore the link between attitudes towards and the (non-)use of SAIE and the construction of identities (which we only marginally addressed in this paper).

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