

*Of coconuts and kings - accelerated change towards middle-class elite varieties of English amongst young 'non-white' speakers in post-apartheid South Africa.*

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The demise of apartheid in South Africa has ushered in a new sociolinguistic flexibility amongst young people. Whereas previous policies severely constrained peoples' social networks from birth (the hospital one was born in) to death (the segregated cemetery), young people in the new order have a plethora of languages and varieties to draw upon and position themselves within. The present paper draws on ongoing research project focussing on changing English norms in a deracialising society, based in 5 cities, with Cape Town as the main base. It focuses on the true beneficiaries of social change thus far: young middle-class students who constituted the first generation to enjoy education within a non-racial schooling system. Whereas Black English prior to 1990 was very much a second language, it has become the dominant language of the middle-classes (in a multilingual repertoire). The term 'coconut' is a disparaging one used by some people to express uneasiness with the pace of behavioural and linguistic changes amongst the young middle classes. Yet this is a growing class of people in the forefront of racial and social transformation and likely to be the models for success in the near future (if not already). This paper examines three phonetic variables to see whether such young Black speakers are simply adopting key variants from the White middle class, introducing subtle changes of their own, or are resisting change. The variables are the vowels in GOOSE, PRICE and KIT, analysed within a quantitative framework, using 'Labovian' interviews, PRAAT and VARBRUL. The main variants are: fronting of GOOSE, glide weakening of PRICE and lowering of KIT (the last is a change in velar environments not reported in the traditional phonetic literature on South African English). The fronting of GOOSE is prominent amongst Black, middle class, female speakers bringing them in line with White norms: in effect deracialising the variable and turning it into marker of class (middle) and age (youth). With PRICE, matters are more complex: a 'matching' with White norms according to class (upper-middle vs. lower-middle) is taking place, determined largely by the networks prevailing at private (= largely upper-middle class, formerly White, high fee-paying schools) versus "Model-C" schools (= largely lower-middle class, formerly White schools with moderately high fees). There is variation between [ai] and [a:], with higher scores of the former amongst the upper-middle classes, though the latter variant is also prestigious (and associated with White speech). The PRICE variable thus raises questions about the inter-relation between class and race and finer gradations within them, as young speakers position themselves in symbolic phonetic space. The third variable KIT is interesting as a new one that may well postdate apartheid and hence not have prior racial connotations. It is possible that this is a region-based (Johannesburg), change being introduced by upper-middle-class females, irrespective of race. This issue is still being investigated.