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Post-Colonial Twilight: English as a Failed *Lingua Franca*

Robert Balfour

Lanham (1995) describes the influence of English in South Africa in the following manner: ‘Throughout its history...the formative and constraining influence on Black South African English (BSAfE) has been the English of mother-tongue speakers in South Africa’ (36). The implications of Lanham’s perspective continue to find further expression in the media, academic discourse, and government policy statements regarding the perceived status of English in South Africa after 1994. However, I do not wish to survey positions, articulated so often they have become clichéd (see, for example, McDermott 1998; Barnes 1999; Kamwangamalu and Virasamy 2000), but rather to contend that, far from supporting English as a *lingua franca*, the key arguments made for both BSAfE, and Standard South African English (SSAE), potentially misrepresent each other and obscure concomitant debates which must surely arise for standardised indigenous languages as well.

If any debate consists of centrist and peripheral (though that is not to say marginal) perspectives then this one is also no exception. Thus I wish, initially, to explore the implications of arguments presented by Alexander (1989, 2001), and Makalela (1998), and others for the use of Black South African English (BSAfE) as a *lingua franca* in South Africa. I then contrast these arguments with those made for the continued use of Standard South African English (SSAE) as presented by Wright (1995 in Lanham) and Lanham *et al* (1995). It is possible to suggest that the claims made for the defence or promotion of both varieties appear to exaggerate or at least simplify cited research. These distortions, in turn, provide some opportunity to explore assumptions made in the debate, if only to show where these cease to be useful for a constructive engagement with the issues. The debate concerning English as a *lingua franca*, as represented in paragraphs to follow, is selective of certain perspectives and, though I have indicated where points made within academic discourse are echoed or distorted in the media, it has not been possible to list and describe all the arguments to date.¹

A note: the intention of this paper is not an exposé of the positions adopted by one group in order to obstruct the purposes of another. If anything, towards the end of the paper I argue for an ‘ethics of debate’ since it seems that the issue of whose

English to legitimate, or pillory, obscures important implications for the development of indigenous languages. I suggest that by casting as adversarial the relationship between the Standard variety of English and other equally legitimate varieties, there arises the possibility of constructing such a relationship as damaging and competitive. Although it might seem somewhat specious to ‘debate the merits of the debate’ I hope to demonstrate that this is necessary because issues imbricated in the polemic serve sometimes to obscure the ‘merits’ of the arguments and their wider implications.

It is apposite to begin with an examination of Neville Alexander’s writing about ‘the language question’ because his contribution to the development of post-Apartheid language policy is significant. As early as 1985 (in *Sow the Wind*) Alexander made the point that if English was to function as a language accessible to South Africans it must be made ‘available’ to all (1985: 67). The need for a shared language appears to suggest in these early writings the need for a *lingua franca*. Not much later in *Language Policy and National Unity* (1989) Alexander articulates the vision he was to formally endorse later with the *Langtag Report* (Alexander *et al* 1994) regarding the development of a ‘language policy’ for South Africa. He writes, ‘...the language question cannot be separated from the fundamental problem of social inequality, national oppression, and democratic rights’ (1989: 39). Like many academics Alexander has helped to popularise the language debate in the South African media, engaging vigorously in discussion of issues on language education and language policy.

Alexander’s account of the ‘argument’ regarding English rests on assumptions informing almost every ‘progressive’ perspective on language varieties found in contemporary linguistics: ‘No language is inherently superior or inferior to another’ (52) (see also Chomsky 1965; Pinker 1994; Ashworth and Prinsloo 1994; Sampson 1997; Kachru 1997). More recently, academics such as de Kadt (2000) have supported the need for what Kachru (1997) has termed a ‘world englishes approach’ in which the relationship between the Standard and its varieties need not be hierarchical (de Kadt 2000: 25). In *Sow the Wind* (1985) Alexander spends some time describing the history of how one language/ dialect/ variety comes to dominate others, yet his vision in 1989, and 1994, of language equality remains somewhat utopian since it posits, *a priori*, a state of affairs where equally useful languages co-exist equitably within the State. Such arguments are interrogated by mavericks like John Honey (1997), or Sifree Makoni (2002) and revealed as flawed since in refusing to acknowledge the legacy of language politics in South African history and its consequences for the use of English and the wider prevalence of Afrikaans, for example, little distinction is made between languages used *in* the State (locally specific, cultural, religious, ethnic) and languages *of* the State (non-cultural, interethnic, political, intercultural). Other academics writing in the 1990s construct this distinction somewhat differently but still with the purpose of distinguishing quite clearly between the hegemony of English and the

consequent banishment of ‘other’ languages (for example, McDermott 1998). Luckett (1993) refers to the differences between indigenous legitimate languages and ‘metropolitan languages’ which in her view serve to perpetuate colonial practices of retaining power for the privileged elite:

...the ‘vertical medium’ for higher domains such as education, politics and law...seldom heard outside middle class contexts ... and African languages are typically used for the ‘lower domains’ such as family, sport, religion... [and]...are not considered suitable for higher education or for serving the needs of the modern state (39).

However, to return to my idea of the ‘utopian vision of language equality’: it is usually a precursor to another assumption which I simplify here: ‘since all languages are equal, the choice of one over another implies unequal relationships of power’. Thus, given the unequal relationship between English and indigenous languages, there is a need for language equity; in other words, for redress and further development of such languages or their varieties.² Somewhat surprisingly the writers who endorse such perspectives for equity and equality (of BSAfE as a legitimate variety) do not endorse a happy pluralism of languages in South Africa. Luckett (1993: 48), for example, continues to advocate the use of English as a medium of instruction in schools while Alexander and van der Walt (1998) advocate the use of a locally developed *lingua franca*. In all cases this language, or language to be, is not ‘metropolitan’, is indigenous, is not foreign, and if English, it is BSAfE and not SSAE.

Yet, such visions must always sit uncomfortably with other (utopian) ideologies operating simultaneously. Again it is useful to return to Alexander here; for example, ‘in the emergent Azania/ South African nation, the interests of the majority, i.e., of the black workers, are and should be paramount and we should, therefore, base our language policies at all levels of our society on this fact’ (Alexander 1989: 52). The ‘fact’ as portrayed by Alexander (1989), and affirmed later by Luckett (1993), assumes homogenizing significance when, for example, Luckett is able to advocate ‘additive bi-lingualism’ without problematising the inevitable hegemonic practices implicated in the selection of any language(s) as *lingua franca*. If language portends access to power, as critical and genre theorists such as Cope and Kalantzis (1993) would argue, then the choice of any particular language as *lingua franca* is an act of power in favour of one, but not another. It is the choice which needs to be problematised, not moral the integrity of the language or variety thereof. More blatant contradictions become evident in Alexander’s position; compare for example: ‘However, it is equally important for us to understand that the idea that each language bears a particular, unique, “culture” is equally *out of date*’ (1989: 47) (my emphasis) with the emergence of a new national culture arising out of the use of a *lingua franca*: ‘...this easier communication [using English as a temporary *lingua franca*] will in fact be the

mid-wife to a new (national) culture' (1989: 55). In each instance the understanding of what is meant by 'culture' is contradicted; suffice it to say that Alexander's later meaning seems premised not on the acknowledgement of the difference between languages and the groups that use them, but on the 'easy communication' between languages. In other words, it is the elision of difference which makes it possible and desirable for English as a *lingua franca*. Again, this (mis)understanding of the relationship between language and identity does not square well understandings offered by international theorists such as Kress (1995), Christie (1995) and Cope and Kalantzis (1993) who argue for an explicit acknowledgement of the relationship between language, difference (or the power of one variety over another), and access to power.

For South Africa, according to Alexander (1989), '[w]hat would appear to be a most likely scenario is one where English is universally accepted as an official language together with other languages, which would enjoy official status' (54) and later 'English should be promoted... in the short term' (63). This 'short term' is what seems particularly problematic in light of *South Africa's Language Policy* (1997) since it allows for two equally problematic eventualities. First, it allows for the continuation of the 'dominance and hegemony' of (SSAE) English at the expense, for example, of other less prestigious varieties or other languages (van der Walt 1998: 45). The hegemony of SSAE is thus disguised in a policy promoting the 'equality of languages'. The second eventuality is that English is perceived widely as a 'failed' *lingua franca*, not really accessible to the majority of people, not adequately supported by the government, and thus it becomes a convenient disguise for other problems. For example, wakaMsimang (1998) has suggested in popular newspapers that the use of English as *lingua franca* and medium of instruction is responsible for the erosion of other languages.

These two eventualities were always evident in writing about English especially since the popularisation of the language question by Wright (1995), Titlestad (1996), and Alexander (2001). Yet few commentators explore in much detail the significance of the Apartheid legacy in the choice of English as a future *lingua franca*. In *Sow the Wind* (1989), having spent so much time outlining the history of language politics in South Africa, Alexander, as does Wright (1995), fails to consider the implications of the systematic reduction of English, and the systematic advancement of Afrikaans for black South Africans over four generations. Afrikaans was made (brutally for many) to be accessible, whereas access to English was always limited even though it was an official language. Thus 'short term' development when applied to English as *lingua franca*, while the other languages are being cultivated, is itself problematic since no *lingua franca* can ever prove its use if used 'temporarily'. Furthermore, what of the future for varieties associated with that language? By short term development does Alexander mean ten years, or at least a hundred? If the 'cultivation' of Afrikaans is worth consideration in this respect, the 'short term' is at least half its history in

South Africa; maybe three hundred years or so? In the meantime (twelve years since 1989) English has increasingly been held responsible for everything from the erosion of Zulu culture (wakaMsimang 1998: 6) to poor Matriculation results (Moreosele 1998: 11).

To return to the problematisation of choice and perception. In 1989 Alexander could claim (after Heugh) that English had always enjoyed a positive image in South Africa owing to its not being the language of the Apartheid regime (56). This simplified version of language history in South Africa misrepresents English as somehow being free of taint when, if Soweto 1976 means anything at all now, it is not the struggle for access to English in 1976, but rather the struggle for 'choice' as represented by English. Inevitably the choice by government of English after 1994 as a *lingua franca* must represent to some at least, its prescription, the reason perhaps for alienation from the language. Twelve years after Alexander's (1989) polemic it is clear from media and academic coverage of the issue, that the position of English was, and continues to be, much more ambiguous; resented as an inaccessible *lingua franca*, envied as a 'gateway to progress'. In 1989 Alexander claimed, in respect of the choice between standards and varieties, that it was the black South African intelligentsia who had 'set the standards' for English thereby settling the question of ownership, and by implication, 'favoured variety' (61). In 1994, if English was indeed been chosen by some as the *lingua franca* in South Africa one would expect that this choice could only legitimately, as suggested by Alexander, have been made by South African black intellectuals (the inheritors of Soweto 1976), since it could not have been the choice of Afrikaner nationalists during the negotiations in 1994, nor would it have been a choice made by the politically insignificant group of mother-tongue English speakers in South Africa. The support for English, constrained as it was by a need for a common language relatively free of ethnic, tribal, or political affiliations, by government might imply its acceptance and endorsement in the form of BSaFE. Crucially however, this variety of English was never chosen explicitly as *lingua franca*; indeed no such choice between varieties was ever made officially. Yet Alexander (1989) implies that the choice *would* have been for BSaFE (and not SSAE). If indeed this is true, such a choice would have to be tempered by an acknowledgement by policy makers and their advisors, of the constraints operating on the 'standardisation' of one variety of English in a context where the implications are great for determining comprehensibility and intelligibility between groups using this variety (BSaFE) or another (SSAE).

In this respect Wright (1995) argues that supporters of BSaFE have not examined 'in any depth questions concerning its intelligibility and comprehensibility and that (these) questions... are being passed over or trivialised' (2-3). The *fait accompli*, as presented by Alexander, is problematised by Wright when discussing suggestions to harmonise Nguni and Sotho languages. Wright makes it clear that such a project cannot foreclose on the relationship between

BSAfE and SSAE (Standard South African English):

A hasty attempt to implement [these] proposals in an environment where English already has a foothold would be to destabilise the authentic African languages and encourage a proliferation of unstable local varieties (1995: 2).

Yet it is Lanham (1995) who examines the implications of such claims more dispassionately, arguing not for the 'purist' pursuit of SSAE for all learners, but rather for a more considered understanding of how SSAE might still inform or exist in relation to BSAfE. This is important for my article since an affirming relationship between one variety and another ensures that they remain mutually recognisable to each other. Lanham (1995: 12) suggests that the standardisation of BSAfE has implications for its international applicability in terms of two concerns mentioned earlier: 'comprehensibility' and 'intelligibility'. In this respect four studies are cited and discussed: Osisanwo (1989), Strevens (1965), MacDonald (1990), and Bobda (1991). Without summarising these studies I wish to note that Lanham's findings are confirmed in recent findings from IELTS testing with University of Natal students (Balfour 2002). In short, the test results on listening exams show that students experience difficulty regarding the comprehensibility of English as spoken by other different non-native speakers, or by native speakers of the language.³ Of particular importance is Strevens' finding that non-native speakers of English are less aware of loss or lack of comprehensibility. Lanham (1995) confirms what many South African native and non-native teachers of English will have already experienced: the lack of comprehensibility between speakers of English (native to non-native dialect, or non-native to non-native dialect) requires that meaning has always to be mediated by more explanation or accommodation, and that meaning is often lost or retarded by this process (26). These findings suggest that beliefs regarding both BSAfE and SSAE need more scrupulous consideration and that relationship between the two needs to be more affirming than Wright might suggest. For while it is true that '[t]here is no need for native-speaker custodians' (Widdowson 1997:144 in van der Walt 1998) it is not true to suggest that the Standard is dependent solely on its powerful 'custodians' in the USA or the UK for its survival in South Africa. Might it be feasible to argue, as Honey (1997) does, that the Standard by virtue of its complexity and versatility, has a valuable role to play in the development of other varieties and has itself to develop further in relation to these varieties?

Yet misapprehensions do not apply only to those associated with the arguments presented by Alexander or Wright. Lanham (1995), apparently responding to the Alexander's assertion regarding 'standards and the black intelligentsia', states that: 'The most serious misapprehension is the apparent belief that a 'new English' can be imposed on communities of native English users numbering millions' (39). His concern seems misplaced; the market place will take care of such questions irrespective of language policy. Furthermore, if BSAfE was to be formally taught

and endorsed in South Africa (itself a huge undertaking in terms of short term 'cultivation') it could only be regarded by native speakers in the same light as native Zulu speakers might (and most educated South Africans) regard, for example, 'fanagalo' as a 'dumbed down', 'second class', and uneducated, anglicised Zulu. To 'standardise' BSAfE, as suggested Makalela (1998) is to imply that another local already existing standard has no applicability here – a folly South Africans might come to regret if what is desired is maximum accessibility. From this perspective van der Walt's (1998: 45) criticisms of Wright appear somewhat sharp. Neither Alexander's or van der Walt's (1998) suggestions, nor Lanham's or Wright's concerns, appear reasonable since both sets presuppose either (for Alexander and van der Walt) the absence of a very substantial international community of native users of English supported by vast intellectual, popular media, and print resources, or (for Lanham and Wright) the disappearance of a substantial proportion of educated South Africans (with post-secondary qualifications) who are competent users of SSAE and BSAfE. Surely what is desirable is that access to both be possible depending on the appropriate context, but that one form is more desirable than others in contexts requiring formal language use?

In South Africa, however, what is understood to be 'English' (let alone SSAE or BSAfE) is problematic because the quality of language instruction is dependent on social-economic as well as geographical variables. Although controversial, the notion of semi-lingualism cannot be discounted in South Africa because of the damaging legacy of Apartheid, and in some cases, missionary education. It is well known that the standardisation of indigenous languages occurred with their transcription by missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What is often forgotten is that this process was not accompanied by an increase in the rates of literacy for speakers of indigenous South African languages because of colonial, and later, Apartheid restrictions on access to education. What is damning in post-Apartheid South Africa is that speakers of indigenous languages possess only a partial awareness of their 'standard' languages, as increasingly do speakers of English, and hence very little confidence or ability to use its full complexity. The gap between Standard Zulu and popular Zulu is so wide, my students tell me that learning Zulu (as native speakers) is like learning another language! This is an educational problem and not an ideological one. It is obvious, and documented extensively in Ellis (1994), for example, that deficits in mother-tongue knowledge make it extraordinarily difficult for learners to acquire a target language. If the tools that enable syntactical and grammatical awareness exist only partially in the mother tongue, transference or learning will be retarded in another language. Linguists such as Pienemann (1985) refer to partial learning under these conditions as 'semi-lingualism' and I think that it explains why many learners of English (native and non-native alike) attain a level of competence which some language researchers would characterise as an 'interlanguage'.

Ironically, this perspective has been endorsed albeit in a somewhat backhanded manner by scholars such as Makalela (1998) who argue, mistakenly, that non-native errors in English relate to irresolvable differences between the native and target language, and that these differences are sufficient grounds for the standardisation of a variety. Quite how this is to occur is not addressed in his article. Makalela (1998) conducted a study of the first year English used by university students; he notes that if English is to become a real medium for intercultural communication, then new varieties ought to be accepted because 'while varieties of English may not be intelligible to native speakers, it is also noteworthy that Standard English has also tended to be unintelligible to speakers of these varieties - the reason why they deviate from it' (1998: 69). This is not true; the deviance arises primarily because of the influence of the mother tongue. Makalela suggests that in schools:

Learners and teachers are torn between the prescribed English grammar books and the English, which is abundant in their everyday communication. In this context it would be wisest for educators to merge the curriculum outside and inside the classroom (1998: 69).

It needs to be stated that the abundance of exposure to English depends on the context in which it is used. In the context to which Makalela refers (rural and township schools) English is not likely to be used in 'abundance' at all. Yet the 'common sense' of Makalela's (1998) argument, despite being based upon research, is misrepresented as an orthodoxy in articles found in the *Mail and Guardian*, *The Sowetan*, and *The Natal Mercury*, the instances of which are discussed later.

One does not have to read much around the area of second language acquisition to find, for example, that such positions are contradicted by research elsewhere such as in the United Kingdom by Booth *et al* (1982), for example, and problematised in South Africa by Sebakwane (1997: 196).⁴ Using these examples from the literature on language acquisition (both local and international) it is possible to see that 'research' is sometimes positioned according to ideological perspective and that findings from one project can contradict findings from another. The implications of the following kinds of research need to be explored if English is to succeed as a *lingua franca*. It is well known that proficiency in a target language decreases in proportion to how little it is used, or that near-fluency in a foreign language sometimes entails deteriorating competence in the home language (Ellis 1994). Odlin (1989, 1990) has noted, for example, that in contexts where languages are mixed (as must be the case in South Africa), language transfer between the target and the first language is likely to be negative precisely because the focus is less on target language usage than on 'communication needs'. Ellis (1994: 319) notes that such situations are normative in settings where the target language is an official language of the country, while Kellerman (1977) points out

that the distance between the target and native language can act as a barrier to transfer. This point is further problematised by Kachru (1986: 17) who suggests that the very term ‘native speaker/ native language’ is unhelpful in contexts where learners of a target language learn from other non-native speakers of that language. I would like to suggest, like Zobl (1980) and Ellis (1994), that acquisition is not only dependent on a thorough understanding of the L1 but also on developmental and social factors; a kind of nature-nurture dynamic. For example, Zobl and Ellis suggest that learning a target language can be retarded when a transitional structure which arises early in the interlanguage corresponds with an L1 structure. In contrast learning might be accelerated when an early transitional structure is not reinforced by a corresponding L2 structure (Ellis 1994: 332). However, the subtlety of this understanding, and its implications for the need for effective language pedagogy, is lost in the politics of the debate concerning English, its varieties, and indigenous South African languages.

Information such as this has profound implications for how and why we should teach competence in the L1, and in what contexts and for what purposes English (BSAfe or SSAE) is appropriate. It illustrates my implicit intention in this paper regarding the need for a greater degree of intellectual honesty in this debate since it seems damaging to privilege some research and thereby suggest to readers, as do critics and researchers cited in this paper, that any applied linguistic research has the status of scientific fact, whereas it clearly does not.

Journalists make it clear that their understanding of the debate is a reflection of the beliefs of experts in the field.⁵ Moreosele (1998: 11), for example, in the *Sowetan* reports the opinions of so-called language experts visiting South Africa. Ekkerhard Wolff and Ayo Bamgbose believe that there is a direct link between the use of English and high failure rates: ‘The politics of Apartheid (which favoured English) crippled the perception of African languages. That is why there are low matriculation results... English instruction is like a form of self amputation’ (Wolff, E. in Moreosele 1998: 11). While the first statement might be historically verifiable, the subsequent claim derives from popular opinion and is not easily substantiated. Although English, its teachers, and prospective speakers are represented by clichéd phrases such as ‘the detriment to languages of the soil’, and a ‘stigma attached to African languages’, most of these articles stop short of a rigorous investigation of issues which do affect pass rates such as, teacher absenteeism, indiscipline, inadequate resources and staffing, all of which are well documented in the *School Register of Needs Survey* (1997) and the *Education Crisis Committee Report* (1998).

If we can accept the need for an ethics of debate then we can support the need for the adequate cultivation of Standard English, the acceptance of its varieties, but, more importantly, the rejuvenation and re-standardisation of indigenous language orthography and pedagogy, which seems to me to be an altogether more important priority since competence in the L1 has already been highly correlated

with competence in the target language (please see Fuller *et al.* 1995 and Ellis 1994).

In light of the above Alexander's call to liberation 'from Anglocentric values' in a 2001 issue of the *Mail and Guardian*, and van der Walt's allegations against Wright, are unhelpful since they misrepresent opposing positions as elitist and removed from the social, political, and material realities of South Africa: 'Above all, we have to stop being held in thrall by Anglocentric delusions and realise that we live in Africa and that our children, like children throughout the world, can be taught in their own language and be proficient in the global language, English...' (Alexander 2001:29). It is a paradox to note that for Wright *and* Alexander English is the barrier to participation in the 'charmed circle of enhanced social status, economic benefits and political power', and the means by which citizens, 'exercise more fully their democratic rights' (Alexander 2001: 21). Equally mistaken are perspectives which regard the benefits of English as visibly manifest to all. Wright (1995), for example, claims that 'English is the language of western success' (3). Yet it helps to interrogate claims on their own terms since any criterion invoked to give substance to 'western success' must surely be equally true for other 'universal' languages like Mandarin or Spanish. English is no more the language of western success than French is the language of love! In other words, one's social group, if confident and able to exercise the full capacity of the language, will perceive it as adequate for all important functions.

De Kadt (2000) has argued recently for an alternative perspective; one in which varieties of English are acceptable insofar as they enable South Africans to 'communicate successfully' with other speakers (31). This perspective appears to gloss over the question of 'standardised' varieties altogether, on the basis that South Africans ought to be able access a number of varieties in terms of appropriacy to any given context. One of the major problems, however, arises from the fact that not only is it impossible to determine how many varieties any two people (unknown to each other) might have access to, but how many they have access to in common. The need for common access seems to me to be another way of defining the need for one standardised variety available to all; yet the question of 'whose standard?' has become, most unhelpfully, the focus of a now sterile debate. What happens to SSAE, as language and mode of inter-cultural communication, is open to question. Yet it seems to me that to emphasise local varieties to the exclusion of SSAE, when clearly each revitalises and extends the other, is not only foolish, but a failure of the critical imagination to widen the implications of this discussion for indigenous language development (its varieties, its standards, its pedagogy). That the debate concerning English in South Africa overshadows any debate about all our official languages, belies its inherent ideological posturing and intellectual aridity. In a 'debate' where native speakers of English are cautioned not to 'look to England', and speakers of local varieties encouraged not to 'look to native speakers'; the 'locals', the 'natives', and the

indigenous languages lose, since no constructive engagement with the challenge of language rejuvenation is offered. In this context, English in South Africa seems to be entering a phase described best as its post-colonial twilight; a period of political instability and ambivalence where its 'international allure' and 'local inaccessibility' is both the cause and consequence of an 'imperialism' of our own creation.

University of Natal

Notes

1. Citing J. Nhlapo (1944), Raboroko (1958), and A.C. Jordan (?) in 1989 Alexander affirms what he terms the 'unassailable position' for mother-tongue education with the provision that the *lingua franca* be used and taught only when it was clear that mother tongue education would limit engagement with the world (1989: 37). I am not disputing this position, nor is my concern with the arguments regarding the transition to English in primary school (MacDonald & van Rooyen 1990, and Luckett 1993).
2. For an example of this please refer to the discussion concerning the acceptance of varieties of English as endorsed by Ashworth and Prinsloo (1994) in *Critical Arts*, or my paper in *Changing English* (Balfour 1999).
3. Osisanwo (1989: 36) in Nigeria found that students who spoke one variety of performed poorly on listening assignments between native speakers. Factors which affected the slowing down of comprehension and loss of meaning included pace of speech, tone, pronunciation, and left to right ordering (Lanham 1995: 29). This finding has also been noted most recently by students who participated in the use of IELTS testing (NRF English Language Project: 2000-2002) at the University of Natal. Participants (all second language first year students of English, numbering eighty nine) found it extremely difficult to absorb and comprehend a pre-recorded conversation (used by IELTS in the Listening exam) between native (American) speakers of English. Students' listening and reading scores ranked weakest on the IELTS tests (Balfour 2002). Lanham (1995: 34) also claims that users of BSAFE, who were especially weak in English, when faced with problems of comprehensibility in texts, would often respond to questions by identifying related phrases or vocabulary and simply lifting this material from the text as an answer. This strategy has been described and explored in more detail in my study of non-native speakers of English in KwaZulu-Natal secondary schools (Balfour 2000). Strevens (1965: 119), in another study discussed by Lanham, finds that speakers of a non-native dialect of English in Southern Nigeria found it easier to comprehend Standard English (including received pronunciation) when compared to a non-native dialect of another group. Bobda (1991: 30), quoted also in Lanham (1995) attests to the fact that deviance in native English is not as much an impediment to comprehensibility as deviance in non-native Englishes.
4. Booth (1982) demonstrated (in London with Caribbean children) that with adequate instruction non-native speakers of English could make the transition to Standard English in writing. Sebakwane (1997) in the course of her research in the North Province explored the perceptions of teachers regarding varieties of English.
5. In an analysis entitled 'A rainbow nation of illiterates' Ludman (1995) describes the results of a study (Fuller *et al.*: 1995), conducted by Harvard and the University of Cape Town, of South African literacy levels in English and other languages. The study reveals that 80% of black South Africans and about 40% of whites are illiterate (in their home languages) and innumerate at Standard Five level (Ludman 1995: 13).

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