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some language problems of students at a black university

L. PROCTOR and EDITH N. E. VERSCHOOR

Like many of his counterparts on the rest of this continent, the African student encounters on first entering University, acute language problems. He has to attend lectures given through the medium of a language other than his own (in the case of the South African student, English or Afrikaans); he has to read text books, most of which are written in English; he has to write assignments and participate in seminars and tutorials through a second or **contact** language; he will probably have been taught at primary and high school by teachers whose command of that second or **contact** language, was far from perfect; the conceptual level of the academic material that he has to master will be far removed from that to which he has been accustomed at school, and the general linguistic content of that material will be much more complex than any he has ever had to deal with before.

It is the aim of this article to examine in some detail some of the language problems experienced by African students in Bantu universities in South Africa, especially those that are English, as a medium of instruction.

English background in the Transkei

Through historical and geographical circumstances, Scottish missionaries played a great part in the educational development of Alice, where this University is situated, and English is the predominant language amongst whites in the region — English has come to be the predominant medium of instruction at Fort Hare, although there is nothing in the University Statutes that demands this. The ultimate ideal would, of course, be instruction through Xhosa, the language of the majority of students; but Xhosa has not yet reached the stage where it possesses a sufficient vocabulary to handle academic subjects, especially in the natural sciences. Text books are not available to enable students to pursue their academic studies through the medium of their mother tongue. Nor are there, at present, enough Xhosa-speaking academics to staff the University. The minimum requirement for entrance to university is a pass in the matriculation examination. However, most students have taken English as a second language in the matriculation examination, and many students enter university with low symbols in the English examination; which means that the majority of undergraduates arrive at university ill-equipped to follow academic courses given through the medium of English. Moreover, in the matriculation examination the emphasis is on written skills. Spoken and hearing skills are not assessed. Teachers in school tend to emphasise graphic skills rather than oral skills, with the result that proficiency in spoken English amongst first-year university students leaves much to be desired.

Few students (the possible exceptions will be those who come from South West Africa) will not have had any contact with spoken English outside their schools.

The problem of literary English for Africans

The majority of Fort Hare students come from the larger urban areas of the Republic, and as city-dwellers will have been in fairly constant contact with English, even as school children. But the opportunities they have had for extended contact with various **registers** of spoken English will not be as great as the opportunities enjoyed by a French student living in London. Most of the English language situations in which students have so far found themselves, will have been mainly on a master-servant basis and consequently the variety of structures, the extent of vocabulary, the range of semantic distinctions and the subtleties of everyday speech will not have been available to them. In a master-servant relationship, the tendency will be for the imperative to be used far more frequently than, say, conditionals;

simple sentences will be used rather than complex ones; the student will have been more frequently a receiver than a transmitter of a message. As a result, his experience of spoken English will be limited in range and complexity. When he arrives at university, on the other hand, he will be faced with spoken English of a greater range and complexity than that to which he has previously been accustomed, and his adjustment to this new range may be a painful one.

In 1960 legislation was passed which allowed only students who were Xhosa-speaking to attend the University of Fort Hare. Prior to that time the University had accepted students of various ethnic groups, many of whom could not speak the language of another group. Because of the large number of vernacular languages, students tended to use English as a **lingua franca.** Since 1960, however, Xhosa has tended to replace English as a communication medium amongst students to the detriment of English. Formerly it was an academic **status symbol** for a student to use English on the campus; at present, however, there seems to be some resistance on the part of students to use of English for everyday communication in the University and even those students who would prefer to use English seem to have succumbed to the pressure of the majority. It is no longer a status symbol to use English outside the lecture room or the tutor's study.

Mother-tongue interference

So-called "mother-tongue interference" — those ingrained habits which are carried over from the mother-tongue to the second language — is still very strong at undergraduate level. The commonest area of interference at the phonological level is in the quality of **vowel** sounds. The range of **tolerance,** the limits between which a sound is acceptable or not according to its phonemic quality of vowel sounds is much greater than that of consonants and therefore vowel sounds present greater difficulty to non-native speakers of English than do consonants.

The vowel sound that gives greatest difficulty to Xhosa-speakers is the neutral "schwa" /ə/. This phoneme is not part of the Xhosa phonological system — in other words it is not used in Xhosa at all — so students have difficulty in hearing when /ə/ occurs, and therefore they have difficulty in producing this commonest of English vowel sounds. This is especially true of the unstressed /ə/ in any position — initial medial or final (for example, **above, exercise** and **brother.** In Xhosa there is no phonemic difference according to **length** of vowel sounds, as there is in English, so this is another area of interference. The inability to produce /ə/ (as in "bird") results in something between /b d/ and /b :d/.

The difficulty in producing /ə/ in unstressed positions is symptomatic of a wider problem regarding **stress.** The phonemic difference between "óbject" and "objéct", so common to English, is not found in Xhosa. In fact, generally speaking, all Xhosa vowel sounds are of equal length and stress, (except in the penultimate position of any utterance) with the result that many Xhosa speakers of English produce English utterances with non-English or **un-English** tunes and rhythms. Stress is, of course, closely connected with intonation. In Xhosa, tone is of phonemic importance: one word spoken with a falling tone may mean the opposite of the same word with a rising tone. In English, intonation rarely, if ever, signifies a difference of meaning, merely a difference of intention, attitude or reaction. Consequently the ability to recognise the differences between surprise, annoyance, interest, disinterest, and so on, according to the stress and intonation of the question "Yes?" is difficult to cultivate in Xhosa-speakers.

One interesting aspect of mother-tongue interference in the matter of vowels is the influence of mispronunciations on spelling. The difficulty with /i/ and /i:/ (as in "live" and "leave", "ship" and "sheep") is well known. What is not so well known is the confusion of spelling occasioned by this phonetic problem. Students say ai li:v in aelis and therefore they write "I leave in Alice".

Confusion of homophones

It is not only the students' own faulty pronunciation of English which gives rise to problems. The pronunciation and enunciation of the lecturer must of necessity be clear and precise, otherwise serious errors and misconceptions occur during the dictation of

notes, which would not occur as easily amongst students whose mother-tongue was English. Whilst marking assignments recently, one of the (present) writers found that a high percentage of students had confused the word "incidents" with "incidence" during the course of taking down notes, and "patent" with "patient". Other words which have been found to cause confusion because they were not clearly heard and correctly registered are "instant" and "instance", "intend" and "intent". It would seem, then that more frequent recourse to writing words on the chalkboard has to be taken by a lecturer at an African university, and constant vigilance is required against the possibility of a word being confused with its homophone or near-homophone.

Problems of poor school-teaching of English

Almost all African students have been taught English at primary and high school level by teachers whose home language is not English. Many of these teachers are poorly qualified and inadequately trained, especially in linguistics, with the result that a "non-English" is taught, particularly at the **spoken** level. By the time students reach university or training college, it is almost too late to eradicate the errors perpetuated by poor teaching. It is not only at the spoken level, however, that one finds this "vicious spiral". The influence of the English spoken by many African teachers is often discernible in a fondness among the products of their teaching for using "non-English" **qualifying phrases** that are corruptions or phrases used inaccurately. One can only conclude that students have learnt these words and phrases from teachers. Some examples are:

(i) **moreso** instead of **moreover** or **furthermore**

(ii) **to the contrary** instead of **on the contrary**

(iii) **from the onset** instead of **from the outset**

(iv) **in fact** used liberally and inappropriately, usually instead of **as a matter of fact.** Students tend, particularly in spoken English to lard their sentences with **in fact.**

This inability to use qualifying words and phrases suitably, results in the speech and writing of students being stiff and stilted; their style lacks easy flow. In comprehension and interpretation exercises students often fail to see how such phrases affect the meaning or the tone of a passage under discussion. Some examples of linguistic ineptitude of this nature are:

(i) To indicate result, students use **thus** almost exclusively, rarely varying it with **therefore, consequently, as a result** or **it follows that.**

(ii) Little use is made of limiting words or phrases, such as **some, a few, rather, occasionally, perhaps, a tendency to, on the whole, to a certain extent.** Any statement or judgement, for example in the criticism of poetry, tends to be dogmatically made, giving a magisterial or categorical tone to their writing.

One wonders whether it is because English **remains** foreign to these students, even when they speak fairly fluently and correctly, that they experience difficulty in speaking and writing with finesse and without the stiff, pompous tone which characterises their English. By the time students have reached English III stage, they have learned to handle the language competently, but seldom with delicate and subtle manipulation. Even at this stage they tend to steer away firmly from terms such as **rather, a tendency to, is inclined to, comparatively, relatively, hardly a day passes, nothing but.** One wonders whether this is due to lack of ease in using English, or to "forthrightness" and the tendency to make arbitrary statements that is a national cultural characteristic, which makes African students fail to recognise and appreciate nuances, and be slow to pick up and respond to parenthetic interpolations especially those interpolations which limit meaning.

Formal teaching of English in Transkei schools

One gains the impression from one's university teaching that teaching at primary and high school levels in the Transkei is of a formal, mechanistic nature. There seems to

be a lack of flexibility and freedom in the teaching of English. Written work appears to have been highly formalised with the teacher providing a mould into which the English-writing African child will be poured. The results of this can be seen in students' use or choice of synonyms. It would seem that little attention is paid at high school level to connotation, or to the difference in intensity of meaning of synonymous words. Students write: "The father **likes** his daughter" or they claim that "Maggie **hates** her aunt", when they mean that she **dislikes** her.

Recent developments in the training of language teachers suggest that attention should be paid to a contrastive analysis between the **home** and **target** language. The writers would like to suggest that such an analysis both of English and the vernacular is of prime importance in the training of African teachers of English. To mention but two examples: Xhosa does not differentiate between **he** and **she, his** and **her;** nor does it differentiate between countable and uncountable nouns, because there is no article in Xhosa. In consequence, students find difficulty in distinguishing between **hair, a hair, hairs, the hair** and **the hairs.** For the same reason the definite and indefinite articles present great difficulty.

Cultural contact and national policy

Because of existing social and cultural conditions in South Africa, African learners of English do not have easy access to the cultural content of English. This becomes apparent especially in the study of literature, where the lack of acquaintance with English history, culture and **mores** is a stumbling block to the understanding and enjoyment of literature.

The University study of literature places great emphasis on close analysis of passages, and it is here that the cultural **lacunae** become most apparent. The lecturer cannot take for granted that students will immediately recognise the significance (in discussion and study of character portrayal or relationships of matters such as gesture, stance, gait and apparel.

Gesture and its implications

Students experience difficulty in interpreting gestures, which to English-speaking persons are immediately meaningful and significant: for example, tossing the head, wringing hands, a vigorous shake of the head, shrugging shoulders, beckoning or running fingers through hair. The differences in appearance and physiognomy between Europeans and Africans make difficult the full understanding of terms describing hair — wispy, shaggy, dishevelled, rat's-tails, and so on. Where gestures portray character, mood, attitude, the significance of these is largely unrecognised. In consequence, far more time has to be devoted in the lecture or seminar to an explanation of these things than with European students.

An African looks at George Eliot

One of the prescribed works for English I is George Eliot's **The Mill On The Floss.** It is not the authors' aim at this point to discuss whether or why such a work should be prescribed for African students. They wish merely to point out some of the problems encountered in trying to "teach" such work, the background to which is far more remote to African students than it would ever be to their European counterparts in this country, including Afrikaans-speaking students.

In Chapter 2 of George Eliot's novel we read: "Exit Maggie, dragging her bonnet by the string . . ." It is not immediately perceived by the African student that this indicates Maggie's reluctance to "behave in . . ." character. It is not, for such students, a visually rich (and comic) picture of a refractory but rather lovable little girl. In Chapter 3 George Eliot writes: "Maggie was incessantly tossing her head to keep the dark heavy locks out of her gleaming black eyes — an action which gave her the air of a small Shetland pony." Later in the same chapter we read: "At the sound of this name, Maggie . . . shook her heavy hair back and looked up eagerly." The cumulative effect of the continual reference to Maggie's shock of hair is lost on African readers unless it is specifically pointed out, and they also fail to see that the gesture reinforces the picture of the little girl's sudden alertness as she turns her attention to Mr.

Riley's words. Even the phrase "which gave her the air of a small Shetland pony" has to be carefully explained so that the comic picture of a shaggy-haired, intractable little girl will not be missed. African students are unlikely to know much about Shetland ponies.

Similarly, many descriptive words and phrases which are crystal clear to European speakers of English probably do not have the same visual impact and clarity for African students. Some examples from **The Mill On The Floss** are: **turned pale with fear, white as a sheet, looked ashen gray, green with envy, mal-demer turned his face a sickly green, a jaundiced look, grew redder and redder in the face, Mr. Riley's waxen complexion.**

Other gestures which are unfamiliar (apparently because African students do not employ them) are: **shutting her mouth close, with pinched nostrils, winking** (a gesture not used by Africans), "That's nonsense!" said Maggie, **tossing her head** haughtily. A novelist's portrayal of character through physiognomy, facial features and gesture can not have for African students the same visual clarity and force as it has for their white counterparts, for example, George Eliot's description of the mischievous little boy, Bob Lakin, as a boy with "something agreeable in his **snub-nosed** face, with its **close curled** border of **red** hair". One wonders whether phrases such as "cheeks of cream and roses", "this pink and white bit of masculinity" and Lucy's "Neatest little rose-bud mouth" (all taken from **The Mill On The Floss)** can possibly be as meaningful to African readers as they are, because of traditionally held notions, to white readers. The "freckled face" of a small boy is hardly likely to conjure up immediately a picture of impish mischief; nor will "faded hair" or "a wispy bun" easily suggest, without the lecturer's explanation, an ageing appearance.

It is surprising to find how much confusion ejaculations, exclamations and interjections frequently cause, how much the motivating force behind the exclamatory words may be misunderstood. For example, students are unfamiliar with the variety of emotions which may be expressed by "Ah!"; nor do they always realise that "No" may be used to intimate attitudes such as incredulity, doubt, hesitation, amazement and a host of other feelings. The reason for this is obvious: in the formal register of the language which they have been taught at school, "No" has been used exclusively as the negative. One of the present authors was mystified to find, while marking assignments based on Chapter 2 of **The Mill On The Floss** that students commenting on Bessie Tulliver's devoted love for her husband and for Maggie, noted the gentle, affectionate way in which she addressed them and so on. During later discussion in a seminar, the explanation emerged: Mrs. Tulliver's favourite ejaculations, "dear heart!" and "oh, dear", were regarded as expressions of endearment rather than as signs of her feeble and peevish fretfulness. In the same way Tom Tulliver's ejaculation of dismay when he fails to halve the jam-puff fairly, "Oh, my buttons!", "Goodness me!" and "For pity's sake" tend to be interpreted in a rather literal way, as having something vaguely to do with "grief" or "pity".

The cultural gap

In the teaching of literature to African students, when specific prescribed novels are being studied, considerable difficulty is experienced wherever analysis of character and character-relationships are being discussed. The students' own national ethos, social codes and rules of conduct within the family group or clan tend to colour and influence their judgements of the **personae** in the novel. An example may be drawn from the Maggie/Tom relationship in **The Mill On The Floss:** Maggie **ought to have obeyed** Tom, they feel, because in Xhosa family relationships the authority of the "first-born" is unquestionable; in any case, being a girl, Maggie would be expected (in a Xhosa family) to be docile, obedient and self-effacing. The question of the moral choice confronting Maggie is not so easy to put across as it would be to White students where family relationships are more flexible. For the majority of African students, Maggie Tulliver's loyalty is undoubtedly to her father, because in African society parental authority is incontestable.

The intention behind behaviour, the motivation for conduct, the eccentricities, peculiarities and whims of the characters in a story are not readily grasped, nor is the comic ele-

ment in idiosyncracies immediately recognised. The ludicrous picture of Mrs. Glegg in the following passage from George Eliot's novel, for instance, does not have an instant laughter-provoking impact:

> Mrs. Glegg chose to wear her **bonnet in the house** today — untied and tilted silghtly, of course, — a frequent practice of hers when she was on a visit, and **happened to be** in a severe humour; she didn't know what **draughts** there might be in **strange** houses.

The comedy embodied in the **bold-type** words, the irony and mockery in the novelist's tone, the whole ridiculous picture of Mrs. Glegg's self-righteous disapproval is lost. Not that it is intended here to suggest that African students do not have a sense of humour; they do, but what immediately strikes the person raised in the English tradition as excruciatingly funny, is not necessarily regarded as very amusing by people reared in a completely different culture.

Literature and University teaching

This brings one to a related question: Is it possible to teach a second or contact language satisfactorily at university level, where the bias is strongly towards literature in the syllabus, when those being taught have scarcely even a nodding acquaintance with the social and political history of the country of origin of the language? In their primary and secondary schools African pupils learn little, if anything at all, about the history of England or of English literature, so that terms such as "the Augustan age", "the Victorian era", "Victorian prudishness", "a Puritan outlook", "Queen Anne's reign", "with Edwardian elegance", and "mediaeval chivalry" mean nothing at all to students, except perhaps to those who studied history as a matriculation subject. Their sense of chronology is so poor that the present writers found a large number of students in English I labelling the historical setting of **The Mill On The Floss** as being "mediaeval", or "a story of ancient times". It must be obvious, then that terms such as "bailiffs", "beadles", "Chimney-sweepers", "gypsies", "water-rights", "gig" and "cupping" have to be explained. Readers of this article may ask: Why do students not consult a dictionary? They do make extensive use of their dictionaries, but these do not explain **why** Mrs. Tulliver was so horrified to "have the bailies in", or why Mrs. Glegg should "have a strong opinion" on the matter of Sister Pullett owning a "four-wheel". It may be possible now for our readers to imagine some of the problems encountered in reading the poetry of Alexander Pope in English II, in attempting the study of **The Rape of the Lock** with its references to "lap-dogs", "fans", "snuff-boxes", "patches" and all the other social paraphernalia which made up Belinda's world. The difficulty is, of course, not unsurmountable; but it is time-consuming and makes great demands on the tutor's lecturing time, and on the student's study time.

African students and English register

Because of the fact that African students have had very little contact with various registers of spoken English in their pre-university years, they find considerable difficulty in recognizing differences of tone and attitude on the part of a writer and varieties in the style of written English. They do not easily detect inferences in a statement or recognise nuances; nor do the associations surrounding a word always have significance for them. They may be acquainted with the denotation, but not with the connotation, of a word. They do not easily recognise the difference between factual and emotive writing. They find the concept, irony, extremely difficult to grasp. They miss the ironical tone in an author's voice or fail to see that a character in a novel is being presented in an ironical manner. By way of illustration one might quote again from **The Mill On The Floss.** Because they are unfamiliar with the typically English dislike of ostentation, they fail to see the full import of George Eliot's reference to Mr. Riley's "ample cravat" or to Mrs. Glegg's "large gold watch" with its "many-doubled chain". It is difficult, too, to explain the subtle Eliotian irony and the implication that Mr. Riley is being patronizing when he speaks of his "good friend Tulliver" and when the novelist claims that he "spoke of such acquaintances (as Mr. Tulliver) kindly as 'people of the old school'." The more subtle forms of hyperbole, the mock-heroic and, particularly, understatement (so typical of the English sense of humour) all require a considerable amount of explanation before they are fully appreciated.

A lack of general knowledge, which is a weakness prevalent today even amongst white students, whose chief interests are sport and pop music, is naturally greater amongst African youth. As a result, the lecturer at a Black university often has to **explain** similes and metaphors which would, to an English-speaking student-group, be self-evident. Examples, taken again from George Eliot's novel, are: "He could climb trees **like a squirrel"** and "Lucy sat . . . watching with her eyes . . . like a pretty **spaniel".** To the average African student (excluding perhaps the more sophisticated urbanite types) a dog is a dog, so that references to "bulldog tenacity", "pug-like features," "spaniel-like devotion" or "the mournful look of a Basset hound" are not always fully appreciated.

Closing the gap

These, then, are some of the language problems of students at a black university. Much of what has been written in this article applies particularly to those students following courses in English as a subject discipline, but can also be applied to students following courses through the medium of English in other disciplines. Many generalisations have, inevitably, been made, but what is incontestable is that a mastery of written and spoken English will influence thinking and learning, and therefore general academic success, far more in a black university that at an English-medium university. Furthermore, one's teaching and lecturing techniques will be strongly influenced by the level of language proficiency of one's students. But questions of far greater significance come to mind: is the traditional three-year course long enough? Should there not be an introductory or **crash course** in communication skills at the beginning of the academic year? Should auxiliary course material (in English and in other subjects) not be made available to students, possibly on a self-instruction basis? Could educational technology help, especially in the field of reading and spoken skills? The answers to these questions can be provided only by careful and intensive inquiry and research. As far as communication skills are concerned, closing the gap between school and university requires urgent and immediate attention.

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