

Colour and language variation: the differentiation of morphosyntactic and code-switching patterns across ethnic divides in the Afrikaans speech community

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Sociolinguistic research conducted by Labov in the U.S. has shown that ethnic differences, as subsumed in colour, offers potential for linguistic divergence regardless of geographic location. One African speech community in which Labov's experiments can be replicated is the Afrikaans speech community, of which the White and Coloured members still form socially distinct components. A survey of linguistic convergence and divergence between these social components has become relevant against the background of South Africa's democratization and quest for a new colour-blind identity, of which English is commonly perceived as the obvious linguistic attribute. In the more specific case of Afrikaans, a linguistic survey of linguistic convergence and divergence between Whites and Coloureds has become relevant in the light of recent proposals to make the Standard Afrikaans norm reflective of the ethnic diversity of its users, and rumours of accelerated language change as a result of increasing contact with English among younger generations, especially among Coloured speakers.

A corpus involving White and Coloured Afrikaans speakers across South Africa and Namibia has yielded data which have been used to reconstruct morphosyntactic and Afrikaans-English code-switching trends across three generational cohorts. It appears that there are converging trends at both levels between the Coloured and White samples, which can be explained by dynamics of standardization of Afrikaans and increasingly equivalent levels of exposure to English in both samples. On the other hand, a dynamic of ethnic differentiation is clearly observable, with the cultivation of morphosyntactic 'identity markers' as well as distinct stylistic uses of code-switching.

In this contribution I will briefly present the state of social integration of the main ethnic components of the Afrikaans speech community, defining the concept of 'colour' from a South African perspective. I will then present variation in morphosyntactic and code-switching trends using concrete examples. I will finally attempt to correlate instances of variation at those two levels with the aim of supporting the notion of enduring processes of speech marking across colour divides.