English in Africa

Raymond Hickey, English Linguistics
Campus Essen

Website: www.uni-due.de/SVE
Introduction

- Africa has a long and complicated colonial history. The west coast was first visited by the Portuguese and as of the 17th century, above all with the development of the slave trade and the discovery of the trade route to India via the Cape of Good Hope, the continent came increasingly to feel colonial pressure from England, France and Holland as major European maritime powers. This development reached its peak in the 19th century with the Scramble for Africa when the interior of the continent was carved up by the Europeans, usually with no regard for the demographic distribution of the indigenous peoples.
Introduction

Thus the Belgians took a huge part of equatorial Africa and called it Belgian Congo (now Zaire). The Portuguese took Angola and the British lands on the east and west coasts such as Kenya, Uganda; Nigeria, Sierra Leone; what was later to become the Republic of South Africa shows an early Dutch, a later English and recently more Dutch influence; German presence was to be found above all in South-West Africa, present-day Namibia. Some countries such as Cameroon have had different periods under different colonial powers, in this case the British and the French.
The majority of African countries succeeded in gaining their independence from the European powers during the latter part of the 20th century. The roads to independence have been different for different countries and painful for many. The British relinquished their colonies fairly easily, e.g. Nigeria, less so Rhodesia (present-day Zimbabwe). Most other European powers were involved in some kind of struggle in the process: the French were tied up in a war of independence in Algeria. The Italians in Abyssinia and later the Belgians in the Congo were engaged in military conflict during their retreat from their colonies while the Portuguese loss of Angola was due largely to turbulences in the mother country.
West African countries
The term ‘West Africa’ is used to refer to the set of nations on the coast of western Africa from Gambia (in the north) and Cameroon (in the south). Nearly all of them are former colonies of England (hence the official language of many of them is English) and the base for the pidgins spoken in this region is English. Note that West Africa is used to refer to the maritime states of western Africa. It is here of course that trade contacts were most intensive from the beginning of colonial times onwards and thus pidgins developed to a greater degree here than in other parts of Africa. However one should mention that on the eastern coast of Africa in Kenya and Tanzania pidgins arose on the base of English.
Furthermore, the Republic of South Africa is interesting as it shows the interaction of English and Dutch in colonial times, producing the language Afrikaans which is in many respects a pidginised form of Dutch.

Because of the manner in which English was transmitted in West Africa, as a trade language during the colonial period from the 17th to the 19th centuries, pidginised forms of the language arose and have survived as vernacular varieties of English in several countries to this day. The map below shows the main locations where pidgins are spoken in West Africa.
East African countries
English in East Africa

This area is very large encompassing countries such as Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania. The position of English is somewhat different from that in south and west Africa as here there has been for centuries an indigenous lingua franca, Swahili. English was thus used as a supplementary language and not a primary pidginised one as was the case in West Africa for many speakers. e.g. in a country like Nigeria with many mutually unintelligible indigenous languages.
English in East Africa

Because the native languages of eastern Africa frequently belong to the Bantu group there is in many countries a common Bantu substrate as with Shona in Zimbabwe. Furthermore English interacts with Swahili in this region so that code-switching and mixed forms result. In general one can say that East African English is non-rhotic and has a simplified vowel system with frequent syllable-timing, an item of transfer from the Bantu substrate.
When discussing English in Africa it is important to distinguish between South Africa - a country, officially called the Republic of South Africa - and Southern Africa - a region which consists of various countries. First of all, South Africa and then the English-speaking countries Zimbabwe, Zambia, Malawi and Botswana. English is also used in Namibia, former South-West Africa.
The English language was first brought to South Africa at the end of the 18th century. It spread northwards during the 19th century with the colonial exploration of present-day Zimbabwe and Zambia (former Southern and Northern Rhodesia respectively), especially by David Livingstone. The area on the left of Lake Nyasa (in present-day Malawi) was affected by this and partly anglicised. This was also true of Bechuanaland (present-day Botswana) which resisted incorporation into South Africa. The area of present-day Namibia came under German control later in the 19th century but was also affected by the spread of the English language from South Africa. Mozambique remained a dependency of Portugal (until 1975) and did not come within the sphere of English.
Names of countries where pidgins are spoken are shown in red.

Countries in east and south where English is spoken are shown in black.
Shift of population from India to South Africa (Natal) due to shortage of labour after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834. Transportation took place between 1860 and 1911, mainly of speakers of Bhojpuri. Their descendants are speakers of South African Indian English.
Recommended literature


Divisions by region

West Africa
  1: English in Cameroon
  2: English in Nigeria
  3: English in Ghana
  4: English in Liberia
  5: English in Sierra Leone

East Africa
  English in Tanzania

Southern Africa
  (distinguish South Africa - a country - and Southern Africa - a region)
  1: Language in South Africa, 1: South African English
  2: Language in South Africa, 2: Afrikaans English
  3: Language in South Africa, 3: South African Indian English
  4: Language in South Africa, 4: Black South African English
Divisions by type

Supraregional / lingua franca
- New Englishes in Africa: Pan-African features
  (East Africa, the north of Southern Africa: Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia)
- Black South African English
- Swahili on east African coast

Pidgins and creoles
- West Africa: Sierra Leone, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon
Divisions by type

Transportation, re-settled English
  African American English: the African connection
  Liberia, partially Sierra Leone

Native forms of English (settler English)
  South African English, Zimbabwe (white population)

Contact forms of English
  Afrikaans English
  Cameroon English (contact with French)
  South African Indian English