

THE LINGUISTIC BEHAVIOUR of the various language and cultural groups which make up the South African community reflect the social attitudes of the groups towards each other. There are many language groups, by any definition of the word "language"—Afrikaans, English, Zulu, Southern Sotho, Venda, Tswana, Xhosa and many more—but perhaps it is most rewarding, in the context of the political and social set-up obtaining in South Africa, to examine attitudes between the two large groups defined in terms of colour, namely the Blacks and the Whites.

The Bantu languages have many new forms of expression either acquired from English or Afrikaans or coined from indigenous material, as a direct result of Black-White contact and its repercussions. Some of these expressions (using Southern Sotho as model) will be seen to reflect new patterns of social relationship, such as, for instance, the subjugation of one group by another.

The example of such words as 'ox' and 'beef', 'calf' and 'veal', has often been used to show that, after the Norman conquest of Britain, the English tended the animals while the French carved them up at table, and the relationship might thus be judged to have been an unequal one with the English subjugated by the French.

We find evidence of a similar nature in Black-White relationships in this country, in the widespread use of the the word for 'Whiteman' (Sotho *lekgowa*; Nguni *umlungu*; Shona *murungu*, etc.) with the additional meaning of 'master', so that a statement like 'Who is your master?' is very commonly rendered with the Bantu equivalent of 'Who is your Whiteman?' Conversely, we find that, in S. Sotho, the word for 'a Sotho person' (viz. Mosotho) is also ordinarily used for 'servant', 'Who is his servant?' thus being rendered with the S. Sotho equivalent of 'Who is his Sotho?' There is here, of course, no borrowing of new words; the position is that old words acquire new meanings reflecting new social relationships, or new words are coined from indigenous material as a response to changed circumstances. The new meanings attached to the two words referred to have become so thoroughly accepted, that a master-servant relationship between two Sotho people is sometimes described by means of those terms. The use, in English, of the words 'boy' and 'girl' to mean 'black manservant' (of any age) and 'black maidservant' (of any age), respectively, shows a similar lexical adjustment prompted by a new pattern of social relations. They refer, presumably, to people who are perpetual 'children', politically, socially, economically, and intellectually, and who therefore 'naturally' constitute the servant class. The use of these words in Afrikaans with the meanings given above is further proof that, in a given context, they are given entirely new (or slanted) meanings.

The word-complex *lekgowa/umlungu/murungu* etc. is often also used sarcastically to refer to Black people whose standard of living and general deportment are allegedly patterned on those of the Whites. Such state-

DR. KUNENE is a lecturer in Bantu Languages at the University of Cape Town.

D.P. KUNENE

"Who is your Whiteman?"

ments as *O ikêtsa lekgowa* (Sotho), *Uzenz' umlungu* (Nguni) meaning 'He pretends to be a White person,' are commonly used by those who like to think of themselves as behaving 'in a natural way', or 'as themselves', against those who are accused of 'aping.' And it is usually the intellectual who is in the line of fire. He belongs to the 'oo-excuse-me' group. The Sotho woman who goes daily to her White mistress's house to char, refers to this house as *hêisi* (from Afri. *huis*), as against her own *ntlo* (house). The homestead of a comparatively well-to-do African is thus often sarcastically referred to, by those of a lower social status, as *hêisi*.

These linguistic usages would seem to indicate a general acceptance of the *status quo*, by the popular mind, on both sides of the colour line. Menial work is 'kaffir work' or *kafferwerk* or *mosêbêtsi wa Basotho* (Sotho people's work), the normal thing being that the White man is always in charge of 'a gang of natives' who do the heavy and dirty work. A thorough flogging is, in Afrikaans, *kafferpak* (kaffir flogging), which speaks for itself. On the other hand, the African who strives to rise above the kaffir-something-or-other level, while admired by some, is generally scoffed at by most of those Africans who have not attained the same level as himself. Jealousy has a lot to do with this attitude, of course. Yet it would distort the picture not to take into consideration two other powerful motivating factors. One of these is the mental conditioning already referred to, making it seem 'natural' for things to be as they are. The other one, which is of comparatively recent origin, is a nationalistic feeling—the feeling of pride at being a member of a despised group which is now, however, visibly rising *as a group*, from the status of perpetual servitude; a group whose tenure of 'boyhood' and 'girlhood' is now quickly giving way to one of 'manhood' and 'womanhood'. Corresponding to this feeling of pride in belonging to this group is the tendency to view with scorn the way of doing things which has come to be generally associated with the Whites, who in turn are associated with oppression and a denial of rights. Indeed, the austere life of the African has come to symbolise his aspirations and hopes, and also his conviction that better times are just around the corner.

The African has, needless to say, found himself in a

umlungu
 e
 k
 murungu
 o
 whiteman
 a

position where, in order to ensure that he obtains employment, he must be able to make himself understood by his potential employer. Thus the acquisition of English and/or Afrikaans has, for him, been largely a matter of necessity. On the other hand, Whites who have a knowledge of one or other Bantu language are relatively few. It is a revealing commentary on the relations between Black and White generally that the Blacks are genuinely surprised and impressed to hear a White speak a Bantu language, especially if he speaks it well. Indeed, his mere attempt, such as it may be, to do so, is usually applauded by the Blacks. A possible inference to be drawn from this attitude, is that the Black interprets the Whiteman's attempt as a gesture of goodwill since, on the face of it at any rate, there could be no compelling reason for him to acquire the Blackman's language. Conversely, many Whites are astounded to meet a Black who does not know even the rudiments of a European language. At the bottom of their surprise, one may surmise, lies the question, 'Has he never worked for a Whiteman?'. This patronising attitude towards another's language is not confined to different colour groups. Up till very recently, the Englishman spoke Afrikaans (or attempted to do so) as a gesture of goodwill towards the Afrikaner. It is no exaggeration to say that, broadly speaking, he had a condescending attitude towards the Afrikaner and consequently to his language as well. He did not need Afrikaans to carry on his business, or to be acceptable in the highest social circles, or to use as a medium of instruction in school, etc. He could always choose to carry on his official transactions in English, and he invariably did so. In short, he did not need Afrikaans which has been, and still largely is, the language of the farm and the dorp. He could make blunders in his attempt to speak this language, laugh them away, and not blush. The Afrikaner, attempting English and making the same blunders, became self-conscious—and blushed.

There is today, however, a conscious effort on the part of the Whites to learn one or other of the Bantu languages of South Africa. White schools may voluntarily include a Bantu language in their curricula, but to what extent this is being taken advantage of, it is difficult to say. The Minister of Bantu Administration

and Development (Mr. De Wet Nel) is reported (*Cape Argus*, March 7, 1962—Review of Parliament) as having "restated what he had said before—that Bantu languages should be made a compulsory subject in White schools."

More and more, university students studying Bantu languages give, as their main reason for doing so, a desire to know something of the languages spoken by the Blacks around them.

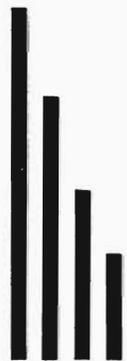
When peoples of different cultural levels come into contact, resulting cultural modifications are reflected, to varying degrees, in their vocabularies, and sometimes even in their modes of expression. The extent of the 'borrowing' of ideas, institutions, implements, etc., can often be gauged by the extent to which the borrowing of foreign words, which are '-ised' in order to fit them into the new structural pattern, has taken place.

Linguistic borrowing from the two European languages come into Sotho either from only one of the two possible sources per idea acquired, or from both sources at the same time, resulting in the enrichment of the language by two synonymous expressions where none existed before. Where words have come from one language only, Afrikaans has been tapped to a much greater extent than English. This is hardly surprising since contact between Afrikaner and African has, in most cases, not only preceded that between Englishmen and African by a long period of time, but has also been more extensive and intensive.

The social significance of certain linguistic expressions drawn from both Afrikaans and English will be examined in a future issue of *The New African*. ●

6 month subscribers

If you were a foundation subscriber your subscription runs out with this issue.



1 World surface mail	One year R2.00/£1/\$2.80
	6 months R1.00/10s./\$1.40
2 Renewal subscription	One year R1.80/18s./\$2.50
	6 months R1.00/10s./\$1.40
3 Students in Southern Africa	One year R1.50/15s.
4 Airmail	One year to U.S.A. \$6
	One year to U.K. 30s.
Other rates on application	

re-subscribe now

to THE SUBSCRIPTION MANAGER
 THE NEW AFRICAN
 P.O. BOX 2068
 CAPE TOWN

Name

Address