Mistakes in the Contact Zone

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I

All human communication is beset by hazards. In the transfer of messages encoded in the fragile medium of language, there may be 'misses' all along the line: mispronunciations, misprints, misstatements, mistranslations, misreadings, misun-derstandings—a never-ending proliferation of mistakes of one kind or another. In contact zones where people communicate across barriers of race, language and culture, not only do mistakes multiply, but they become at the same time more freighted with significance and more potentially dangerous.

To be sure, mistakes can have grievous consequences. A mistranslation in a court of law may be a matter of life and death and there are innumerable daily dealings where misunderstandings cause at the least inconvenience. In a large number of cases, however, errors do not impede the transmission of the desired message. After all, once you can talk about mistakes you are out of the woods: a mistake is only apparent as such when the message is understood. The most acute communication problems arise at a level prior to this, when all or part of a message is simply unintelligible; once we can identify mistakes, communication is taking place. Yet in the eyes of those who perceive themselves as beleaguered defenders of a threatened standard language, particularly in contexts where there are troubled relations between linguistic insiders and outsiders, what stands out is not the message itself, but the mistake—the verb that doesn't agree, the mispronounced word, the omitted article, the spelling error. Form supplants content; the error threatens to supersede the message.

My hope here is to offer a reconceptualisation of mistakes, a new way of looking at them that recognises their kinship with other modes of linguistic creativity and their potential for regenerating the language. Drawing on both literary sources and real-life examples of language in the world, I address both the generativity of mistakes and the harm that follows from an obsession with their wrongness; finally, I question the very definition of error in relation to standards that are necessarily local, timebound, profoundly implicated in structures of power, and mutable.

To start with, we should recognise that mistakes are inevitable and ubiquitous. We tend to focus on the linguistic errors of those we already perceive as alien or inferior, yet mistakes are to be found in the most elevated and sacrosanct linguistic preserves—in published texts as well as in speech, in the discourse of native speakers as well as that of second-language learners, in the language even of the most esteemed scholars. On the spine of a scholarly text in my own area of interest, for instance, two key terms have been transposed, so that the title reads not *Non-Standard Language in English Literature* (which is what appears on the flyleaf), but *Non-Standard Literature in English Language*. When I worked as a scholarly editor, I started the job with high ambitions, determined to eradicate error. The articles we published were edited, copyedited and proof-read at least twice, and yet errors crept in, persisted, evaded our most diligent scrutiny; it was embarrassing when on the spine of a journal dedicated to the teaching of English in higher education *January* was spelled 'Janaury'. In the end—though of course we continued to strive for error-free perfection—I was willing to admit our fallen state: typos and other errors, I concluded, are as inevitable and ineradicable as insects in the flour bin. This conclusion is readily confirmed by scrutiny of any number of published texts[1].

To err is indeed human, in language as in other domains. Yet linguistic mistakes can be sites of creativity and innovation, illuminating both the human mind and the nature of language. Such mistakes are products of the mind at work as it

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[1] Recently, for instance, I discovered in the US Owl edition of Salman Rushdie's *Shame* an alarming number of typographical errors, several of which seriously distort the meaning of the text: instead of 'a fat pigmeat tub' we read bizarrely of 'a fat *pigment* tub' (1997b:104); elsewhere readers may be bewildered by 'a tongue-*typing* formality' (1997b:105) or '*peeing*-tommery' (1997b:301). At one point, the novel switches its focus from the triumphant Raza Hyder to his vanquished rival Iskander Harappa languishing in a prison cell, the shift indicated in other editions of the novel by the blank line that marks a section break: the Owl edition, however, does not even include a paragraph break, so that readers are bewildered as they move from a sentence about Raza at a funeral to a sentence in which 'he' (a pronoun the reader can only read as referring to Raza) hallucinates about the walls of 'water-stained concrete' that enclose him (1997b:241).

I checked the text of the Owl edition against the British Picador edition. 'Tongue-typing' should of course read 'tongue-tying' and 'peeing-tommery' should be 'peeping-tommery'. Owl evidently used a spell-checker, which only makes the problem worse in that in place of a meaningless sequence of letters, which might alert the reader to a typographical error, a real word is substituted.

develops theories about how a language works. In perceiving mistakes, moreover, we see our language afresh; mistakes jolt us out of our unthinking and automatic processing habits and focus our attention on the substance of language itself. The creative theorising of the language learner has been amply demonstrated in the child's acquisition of a first language. The same creativity, the same seeking for rules and patterns, continues to characterise our lifelong language learning, including our learning of new languages. There are added complications, conflicts and tensions when languages are learned across significant barriers of culture and of power, but there is at the same time increased potential for generative forces that can enrich and revitalise the languages and cultures at issue. Two theorists in particular offer productive frameworks for thinking about such interactions and the 'mistakes' they engender.

The first of these is Mary Louise Pratt, a contemporary linguist and cultural critic at Stanford University. Traditionally, Pratt (1991:34) writes, linguists have imagined the typical speech community in idealised, utopian terms as a homogeneous, discrete, monolingual community whose members follow the same rules. She proposes instead that we think in terms of *contact zones*, which she defines as 'social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today'. If we foreground heterogeneity, linguistic multiplicity and conflict as the defining features of communities, we end up with a radically different vision of the world, of linguistic and cultural interactions, and even of what we call 'art'. In the contact zone, Pratt suggests, we can find a miscellany of new, mixed discourses and art forms that stretch the boundaries of our established critical paradigms.

In more narrowly linguistic terms, on the borderline between languages, new, hybrid, anomalous forms are generated. We see and hear these all the time in the classroom and in other interlingual contact zones, and as language teachers our impulse is to condemn these and work strenuously to eradicate them. We speak of 'interference', as if other languages were molesting English; we speak of the 'broken' or 'fractured' English that results. Mikhail Bakhtin, the second theorist whose thinking has influenced me, proposes a special term for such dialogic interactions between languages. Bakhtin was the great Russian proponent of dialogism, hybridity and heteroglossia in language; his term *vzaimnoosvescenie* is translated variously as *interillumination*, *interanimation*, or *mutual illumination*. This is defined as 'The major relativizing force in de-privileging languages'. 'When cultures are closed and deaf [*gluxoj*] to one another,' Bakhtin's translators Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist explain, 'each considers itself absolute; when one language sees itself in the light of another, "novelness" has arrived' (translators'

glossary, Bakhtin 1981:429f). I'd like to see us starting to think in terms of such interanimation of languages; that is, in the hybrid forms that purists and prescriptivists consider 'mistakes', I propose that we seek interillumination.

One example of a literary work that imaginatively engages the interanimation of languages in a multilingual contact zone is David Edgar's play *Pentecost*. A painting with an uncanny resemblance to the Giotto Lamentation in the Arena Chapel at Padua has been discovered under layers of brick in a disused church in an imaginary Eastern European country; this painting might have been painted before Giotto's, which would make it the earliest known instance of the use of perspective. As art experts and functionaries with various political agendas debate the future of the painting, a troop of refugees from all over the world invades the church, demanding sanctuary. Communication sometimes requires several layers of translation—for instance, the Palestinian Yasmin translates English into Arabic for the Afghan Abdul, who relays the message in Turkish to the Azeri Raif—and throughout the play there are allusions to the interrelations among languages, including the odd conjunctions across languages of similar word forms with different meanings ('the Finnish word for "fart" is the Swedish for "speed" and the like'; see Edgar 1995:28). In the end, the mystery of the painting is solved on the basis of linguistic clues. First, the fact that Old Nagolitic, the long-banned ancestral language of the country in question, used the same word for both *from* and *to* requires some radical readjustments of direction and locality. Second, it appears that Giotto understood a couple of Old Nagolitic words as their Italian equivalents; for instance, he took *gobbyo*, meaning 'rock', as the Italian *gobbo*, meaning 'hunchback', and so his painting features a huddled woman where the original has a rock. Giotto's masterpiece and the tradition of Western art it initiated—so the play argues—was not only derivative, based on this long-lost original, but was the product of a mistranslation[2].

As teachers and critics, we can deplore mistakes and lament the degeneration of our language—or we can celebrate the creativity of new forms and the regeneration of English they promise. Another possible response that neither Pratt nor Bakhtin addresses directly is laughter. There's always a strong impulse to find disruptions of our language funny; often mistakes rupture the fragile bond between signifier and signified, opening up new, incongruous, potentially hilarious

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[2] The play further disrupts our sense of the Western tradition by proposing that the painting in the church was painted by a Muslim traveller from the east; Oliver Davenport, the British art historian, explains: 'We have this mindset, still, about the mediaeval period. That everybody knows their places, no-one travels, no-one moves .... Whereas actually mediaeval Europe was a chaos of diaspora' (Edgar 1995:98).

possibilities of meaning. On the whole I believe such laughter is a good thing, though a great deal depends on the spirit behind it. It's possible to laugh mean-spiritedly, mocking the stupidity of those who make such crass mistakes—but it's also possible to laugh in genuine delight at the re-vision a mistake makes possible, recognising perhaps the way it subverts standard English and our notions of correctness. One test would be whether the joke can be shared with the person who made the mistake: if it's possible to explain what was funny and why and to laugh together, then the joke also becomes a learning opportunity.

The joke, the mistake, and the poetic are close kin. In all three, the rules are violated, opening up new possibilities of meaning, jolting us into a fresh awareness of the substance of language. The inverted 'hoppergrass' of the language learner startles and delights in much the same way as James Joyce's metamorphosis of the same insect into a 'gracehoper'. Salman Rushdie's (2000:59) illiterate Padma asks about 'hankying and pankying' and injects new life into a fixed expression. Nabokov's (1963:59) Pnin in his Russian accent demands 'viscous and sawdust'— which we ultimately decipher as 'whisky and soda'. A black man in the southern US speaks wonderfully, mysteriously, of a 'blue dollar hawk' and prompts Walker Percy (1975) to write an essay on 'Metaphor as Mistake'.

The particular subset of mistakes I have been working on consists of those errors in spelling or pronunciation that reconfigure words. Often the effect of such reconfigurations is irreverent and subversive: they cut their referents down to size. Huck Finn's 'sivilize', for instance, seems to be a different word from 'civilize', denuded of its etymological associations, diminishing and derisive. A speaker may deliberately malform a word in a debunking spirit of mockery, as when the Anglicised Sufyan girls in Rushdie's (1997a:267) *The Satanic Verses* call their parents' homeland 'Bungleditch' or when, in much the same spirit, Alan Helms (1996:25) calls his native town of Indianapolis 'Indian-no-place'. Such 'manglings' are more troubling when hostile outsiders mock the pronunciations of others by respelling them to make them look stupid, funny, or obscene—as we shall shortly see.

However, reconfigured words don't necessarily entail debunking and the decay of meaning, but may also engender new meanings. Consider, for instance, the song 'Sarvering Gallack Seas' that the people sing in the post-nuclear holocaust world of Russell Hoban's (1998:22) *Riddley Walker*:

Pas the sarvering gallack seas and flaming nebyul eye
Power us beyont the farthes reaches of the sky
Thine the han what shapit the black
Guyd us there and guyd us back.

Only faint traces are here preserved of what must once have been 'Sovereign Galaxies', and their former glory seems considerably diminished. Yet at the same time, those 'sarvering gallack seas' evoke a new set of associations. In the glossary included in the revised version of this novel, Hoban (1998:234) explains that:

> Gallack Seas would suggests to Riddley's people sky-seas that might be crossed by boats in the air. Readers might think of galleons, carracks. 'Sarvering' is the participle of 'sarver', which hints at severing, cutting off something for oneself, saving it for one's people, claiming a territory'.

As teachers know, not all student misprisions of words are simplifications; instead of reducing words to rudimentary forms, stripped of etymological associations, language-learners sometimes complicate them: a ten-year-old I once taught would write 'sordive' instead of 'sort of'—elevating the fuzzy filler of the inarticulate to a impressive Latinate-looking adjective. In some cases, reconfigured words may evoke new meanings that are richer or truer than their 'correct' versions. Consider the Chinese-accented 'so-so security' for *Social Security* in Amy Tan's (1989:275) *The Joy Luck Club*, or the Yorkshire dialect-speaking hedgehog in T.H. White's (1966:187) *The Sword in the Stone* who speaks of the badger's nose as its weak spot: 'A killee's heel they neame un on ter scriptures', he says; 'Hit one of they girt trollops on ter noase ... and the sharp life is fair outer him'. The Greek Achilles—a name that in itself demands knowledge of both Greek mythology and the special conventions for pronouncing Greek words—is displaced by a reimagining of the proverbial site of vulnerability entirely appropriate to the context: if a blow to the weak spot causes death, the victim may certainly be said to be a 'killee'.

My favourite example of a mistake that reconfigures a word and its meaning is from Rushdie's short story 'The Courter'[3]. Certainly-Mary is an elderly ayah from Goa who has come with her employers to London—and whose English is marked by the phonology of her native Konkani:

> English was hard for Certainly-Mary .... The letter p was a particular problem, often turning into an f or a c; when she proceeded through the lobby with a wheeled shopping basket, she would say, 'Going shocking,' and when, on her return, [the porter] offered to help lift the basket up the

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[3] I discuss the linguistic dimensions of this short story more fully in my article 'Jumble-Aya, Mixed-Up, and English: "*how newness enters the world*" in Salman Rushdie's "The Courter"'.

front ghats, she would answer, 'Yes, fleas.' As the elevator lifted her away, she called through the grille: 'Oé, counter! Thank you, counter. O, yes, certainly' (Rushdie 1994:176). (In Hindi and Konkani, however, her p's knew their place.)

The story in fact hinges on the transformation of the porter into a 'counter': the elderly Polish emigré porter seizes on the word—'thanks to her unexpected, somehow stomach-churning magic, he was no longer porter, but counter .... this name, this counter, this he would try to be' (Rushdie 1994:177)—and romance blossoms between the two elderly people.

There are clearly differences in the locus and conditions of these reconceptualizations. Sometimes the speaker knows the correct form and deliberately misshapes it (as in 'Bungleditch'); sometimes the speaker evidently does not know the standard form, or the concept it denotes, and has imaginatively constructed a new form and meaning, as we would guess to be the case for T.H. White's hedgehog. The same is probably true of Ying-ying St. Clair's 'so-so security', given that this appears not in her speech but in a portion of the text that she narrates. In other cases the speaker is evidently unaware of the reconceptualisation, and it is the listener who hears a word afresh and generates a new image in response. Again, the listener may or may not be aware of what the speaker intended to say (the 'correct' form); Saladin Chamcha in Rushdie's (1997a:76) *The Satanic Verses* hears the Reverend Eugene Dumsday say that he serves 'the Christian guard' and it takes a while for him to understand that Dumsday means not 'guard' but 'God' (Chamcha must figure out the correspondence between his own upper-class British speech, where post-vocalic r is realised as a lengthening of the vowel, and Dumsday's American English vowel system). And beyond this, for whatever constellation of factors, the listener may be disposed to hear, or impose, various shapes and meanings on what she or he hears, from the comical to the deeply serious. When Shekhar in V.S. Naipaul's (1984:549) *A House for Mr. Biswas* is said to refer to 'Somerset Morgue-Hum', the narrator who reports this understands the reference, knows moreover that the writer's last name is generally pronounced 'Mawm', and chooses to present Shekhar's disyllabic pronunciation in such a way as to make it seem as comical as possible. In 'The Counter', by contrast, the porter receives Certainly-Mary's mispronunciation with open-minded and thoughtful respect; he might have perceived it as a meaningless sequence, or perhaps as the word 'quarter', but instead he hears it as the non-existent but plausible word 'counter'—and re-imagines himself accordingly.

'How does newness enter the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?' Rushdie (1997a:8) asks elsewhere. One way,

evidently, is through the 'conjoining' of English with the phonemic system of Certainly-Mary's native tongue and the way in which this translates a porter into a courter. Newness, that is, may enter the world through the different forms spoken English may take in dialectal or foreign-inflected speech and the changes in meaning these may bring into being. A positive perspective on mispronunciations and other mistakes would look hopefully on such subversions and reconfigurations, on the 'newness' emerging from the interillumination of languages.

Let me hasten to add that I do not imagine classrooms where we welcome and celebrate all aberrations for their transformative newness. Most of us, I am sure, will continue to censure and correct mistakes as we always have. But if we respect the creative intelligence of our students and if we are alert to the innovative and transformative potential of their language, at the least our jobs will be much more bearable. I think of a colleague who responded with mingled horror and amusement to the student who wrote about taking something 'for granite'; in fact, this student had invented a metaphor far more vivid and compelling than the formulaic 'take for granted,' a metaphor that I think should delight teachers rather than horrify them[4]. Certainly there are differences between literature and real life. In literature writers can carefully preserve—or, indeed, construct—well-chosen specimens of interestingly anomalous language, presented in the cold fixity of print as in the glass case of a museum. In real life all is chaos and confusion as we struggle for intelligibility amidst noise and the strangeness of the language of others. Yet I urge those of us in the business of monitoring language as teachers, editors and critics to develop a double vision that allows us, while doing our jobs, to look at real-world mistakes with a literary eye, alert to their creative potential.

Consider two sharply opposed perspectives—one literary, one not—on misspellings and mispronunciations of the kind I have been discussing specifically within Black South African English. One perspective is presented in a one-page document that I picked up here in 1995; it is headed 'The "New South African" Dictionary: A Survivor's Guide to the New South African English'. Here are some sample entries from it:

| *Errors-* | Districts - e.g. ebbon errors[5] |
| *Get-* | A hinged device in a fence |

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[4] This inventive respelling reflects a US pronunciation of 'granted': the /t/ is lost and the first vowel is the same as that in 'granite'. (Similarly, the spelling 'sordive' for 'sort of' reflects the US voicing of /t/ between vowels.)

[5] In ludic mood, one might be tempted to play further with the equivalences posited here: 'ebbon errors' might itself be a title for the listing, 'ebbon' evoking the 'Ebonics' controversy in the United States.

Gaddin-	Where you grow Kebbi-jess
Hair-	as opposed to him
Hiss-	Masculine form of hairs
Itch-	As in 'itch and aviary'
Phlegm-	The banning tip of a Kendal
Piss-	Symbolised by white doves
Sheep-	Big boat
Ship-	Provider of wool
So Then-	Pertains to the South—e.g. So Then Africa
Spitch-	What politicians make at a rally
Suffa Ring-	As in 'the peep pull ah suffa ring'
Teksi-	Kah for hire—sometimes Parrot Teksi (i.e. not a mamba of the teksi association)
Tocks-	Negotiations
Tipic ally-	Characteristic (Gordon 1995).

This is an attempt to ridicule the speech of black South Africans by making it look as alien and as unintelligent as possible. The respellings are chosen to arouse ludicrous associations—e.g. 'phlegm'—besides being crude and inconsistent. Some cases are pure eye dialect (that is, changes in the visual representations of words that do not in fact reflect any actual sound change but are simply respellings of their standard pronunciation): 'kah' is exactly how white South Africans pronounce the word 'car', for instance, and it is hard to imagine what 'tipic ally' might represent other than the standard pronunciation of 'typically'. The main purpose of the quotation 'the peep pull ah suffa ring' is evidently to mock the rhetoric of the freedom movement: there is no 'mispronunciation' at issue here, just a respelling and resegmentation that fractures and reshapes words to make them look silly. One might note, moreover, that the pronunciations identified here as deviant are defined as such in relation to a particular dialect, the speech of white South Africans. (There is after all no vantage point outside particular dialects from which to judge a language.) This emerges clearly in the choice of the word 'hair' as an equivalent of black South African 'her', implying a pronunciation of 'hair' with a long monopthong—a pronunciation which is 'substandard' not only in relation to both British and American English, but even in relation to South African Received Pronunciation.

A very different perspective is presented in Peter Anderson's 1993 'The Flame Tree of Freedom: Poetry and Apartheid', part of a special section of the *Boston Review* on 'The New South African Poetry'. Included in the article is a poem, reproduced exactly as it came into the author's hands, we are told, except that the original was hand-written; here is its first stanza:

Virsil for an Urchin

laugter
achoing from farmished
lips stumbles from its
pedestal
Where flies discreately
consumate their sodomy

<div align="right">(Zachariah Rapola quoted in Anderson 1993).</div>

Anderson wonders whether the spelling of this poem should be standardised—but then considers the losses this would entail; he points to 'the ache in the echo' that can be detected in 'achoing' and asks of 'discreately', 'is the undoing of what is created, discreated?'' .... '[W]riters as diverse as the Nigerian Amos Tutuola and the Irish James Joyce', Anderson reminds us, 'have prepared us to recognise [such misspellings] as resonant distortions'; editors who 'corrected' these spellings, he charges, would function as 'agents of the dominant culture'. 'It is one thing to tinker with your own culture', he asserts; 'To tinker with another, to "correct" it, may amount to imperialism'.

I have reservations about Anderson's argument. High-handed editing may indeed be imperialist, but a refusal to edit could be a form of condescension, reminiscent of what has in another context been called 'the zoo theory', a hands-off policy where those in power justify neglect on the grounds of wishing to preserve unchanged the 'quaint and primitive' innocence of the powerless (Kluge 1991:108). In my own experience as assistant editor of a scholarly journal I came to question a double standard I observed in editing practices. We copyedited the articles we published for accuracy and correctness, fixing errors in grammar or mechanics to conform with the standard scholarly language, making sure that our scholarly authors looked good. There was a select subset of texts, however, where the criterion was authenticity rather than correctness. In this second set were two kinds of texts, typically quoted within the scholarly articles we published: on the one hand, published texts of established stature (we did not correct the spelling of Milton or Chaucer), and, on the other hand—most interestingly—specimens of student writing, where the practice was to lovingly preserve all errors, whether they were relevant to the purpose of the article or not. The scholarly articles we published benefited from our editing (so we hoped), and their authors learned from the editing process to be even better writers than they had been to start with; student writing, by contrast, was fixed forever in its original, authentic, unimproved condition. Peter Anderson wants to treat Zachariah Rapola as we treated student writers and presumably would expect

him to continue writing as in the specimen we have here. Of course Anderson has valid points about the difficulty of editing across cultures, but surely the solution is not to renounce the very possibility of editing in such cases. Ideally editing should always be a collaborative venture where the editor consults the author about her or his intentions; where any significant gap divides author and editor there is all the more potential for both to learn from the collaboration.

Anderson's reverence is infinitely preferable to the dictionary-maker's malevolence, but it strikes me as patronising, and I can't see that his tolerance for anomalous spellings furthers the project of defining the English of the New South Africa. There has to be a middle ground between these two extremes.

II

Outside the South African context, mistakes, or what have been perceived as mistakes, have sometimes had dire consequences. In the Old Testament Book of Judges, we learn of the battle between the Gileadites and the Ephraimites and how the Gileadites identified their enemies:

> 6 Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand[6].

More recently, in 1937, between 15,000 and 35,000 Haitians were murdered in the Dominican Republic on the orders of dictator Rafael Trujillo—and again a test word was used to identify those who would be slaughtered. The episode has recently figured in a poem by Rita Dove and a novel by Edwige Danticat, but this account is a historical one, written by a journalist called Michele Wucker.

> Since Haitians are considerably darker than most Dominicans, soldiers would accost a man or woman with dark skin. Holding up sprigs of parsley, Trujillo's men queried their prospective victims: 'Como se llama ésto?' 'What is this thing called?' The terrified victim's fate lay in his pronunciation of the answer. For Haitians, whose Kreyol language uses a wide, flat 'R', it is difficult to pronounce the trilled 'R' in the Spanish word for parsley, 'perejil.' If the word came out as the Haitian 'pe'sil,' or a

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[6] Who now knows the original meaning of the word 'shibboleth'? This is a classic case of the error displacing the message.

> bastardized Spanish 'pewehí' the victim was condemned to die (Wucker 1999).

These stories show the imbrication of language and identity—specifically ethnic or racial identity. The mispronunciation in each case serves as a sign of racial otherness, identifying the speaker as member of the despised enemy tribe and thus as the target of genocide or 'ethnic cleansing'.

South Africa has surely moved beyond the stage of genocidal race hatred. I do note, however, that there are a lot of complaints about the supposed degeneration of the English language in South Africa—almost as if language has come to be a token standing in for race.

If we were teaching Hebrew to the Ephraimites or Spanish to Haitians in the Dominican Republic, would our job be to teach the pronunciation of 'shibboleth' or 'perejil' preferred by their enemies? We might well see that as part of our job; isn't that what language teachers do—teach the 'correct' standard form of the language, the form favoured by the educated and powerful? But there are troubling consequences to seeing our jobs only in those terms. The problem in these two stories of lethal mistakes is hardly in the trivial mispronunciations of the victims; it's in the mindset and the actions of the genocidal Gileadites and Dominicans. Is our purpose as teachers to enable a privileged few to join the ranks of the linguistic elite and thereby to reinforce a rigid standard that has been used in oppressive and discriminatory ways? Or should we consider the social context within which language operates, accept the fact that languages and standards change, and work towards greater tolerance of linguistic diversity? More important than insisting on the pronunciation favoured by the powerful, we might want to suggest that it's not such a terrible thing to say 'sibboleth' and to work against the hatred and contempt of the dominant groups. We might even argue that 'sibboleth' should not be considered a mistake but part of an emerging new standard.

It is in the nature of language to change and grow. Standards too are mutable. Since I moved to the US, my own definitions of standards and mistakes have shifted; there are still some US forms that I find jarring—for instance, when I hear about someone's hair being 'plated' or worn in two 'plates', it still seems to me ridiculous, outrageous, just plain wrong. But US dictionaries accept this spelling pronunciation of the word 'plait', and rationally I have to concede that my own preference for the pronunciation 'plat' casts me as an outsider and the proponent of an irrational Anglophile antiquarianism.

In South Africa, as in the world at large, native speakers of English are now outnumbered by those for whom English is a second language (or a third, or fourth, or fifth ...). Linguists have for some time been talking about the New Englishes or

World Englishes on the global scene—distinctive regional and national varieties of English heard increasingly on the airwaves and in the media, figuring too in written form in the literatures emerging from many parts of the world. Rodrik Wade at the University of Natal has written interestingly on Black South African English as a 'New English' and about the prospects of 'restandardisation' in South Africa. The fact of the matter is that the English language no longer belongs to those who consider themselves English by blood; it is a world language, and it will inevitably be spoken and written in many different ways in different parts of the world. There can be no doubt that some of the mistakes we stigmatise today will constitute the standard of tomorrow.

A final note on the role of literature. One of the joys, and one of the defining qualities, of certain Indian, West African, and Caribbean novels is the distinctiveness of the dialogue—represented not as flat, 'correct' English by metropolitan standards, but as a lively local vernacular. I would hope that South African writers too will find imaginative ways of capturing the way South Africans really talk and that literature will work toward defining and validating a new standard for South African English.

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