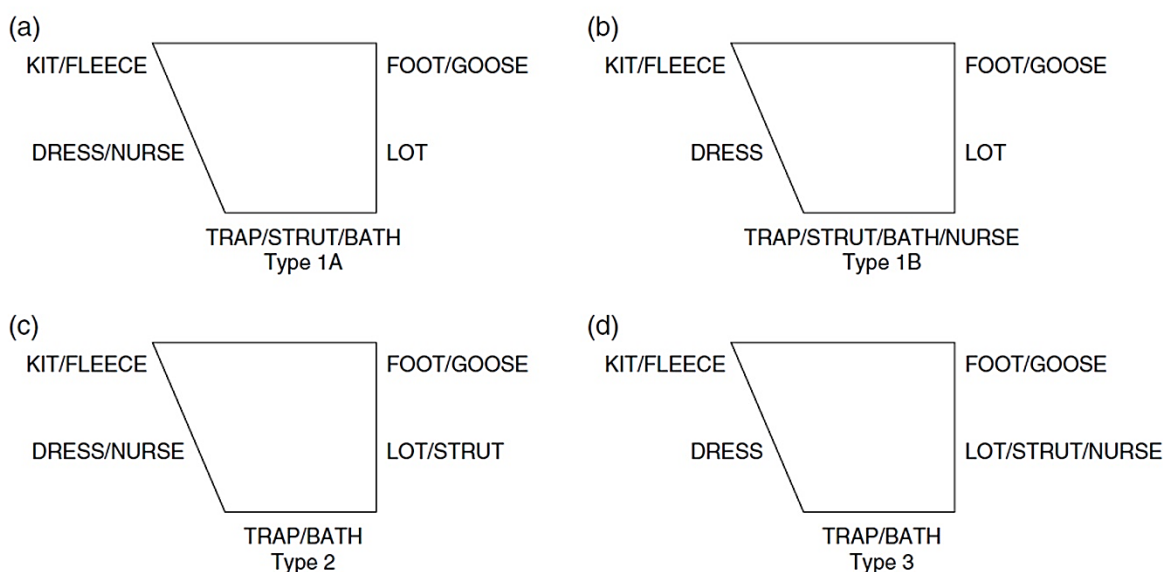


## Investigating possible changes to the TRAP vowel in Black South African English: A (post-)Bobdian analysis

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### Abstract

Simo Bobda's work (2000, 2001, 2003) provides an important framework for characterising the major L2 varieties of English in Africa. He was, to our knowledge, the first one to see how the largely five-vowel systems, which often eschewed phonological vowel length and schwa, differed systematically across Southern Africa (Type 1A), East Africa (Type 1B), West Africa (Type 2), and Cameroon (Type 3):



This paper examines possible changes to the TRAP vowel in Black South African English, which Mesthrie (2005) splits into TRAP1 and TRAP2. TRAP1 is the variant that Simo Bobda (2000) took as the main exemplar, with a characteristically Southern African realisation as [e] or [ɛ], not [a]. Salient pronunciations like [hev] and [hed] in *have* and *had* respectively perhaps reflect the historical influence of broader varieties of White South African English. However, Mesthrie (2005) makes a case for TRAP2 having [a] in mainly polysyllabic tokens, but being overall the more frequent variant. This exploratory study hypothesises that there have been changes to the TRAP vowel with [a] increasing at the expense of [e]. This is a noticeable trend of the last two decades, perhaps as a reflection of greater interactions between northerners and southerners in Africa, both at the political level and the level of mobility in terms of travel and migration. The paper analyses data acoustically from two data sets: (a) young Black South Africans at university who have English as an L2, and (b) speeches by political leaders – including President Ramaphosa – concerning the COVID-19 crisis. A quantitative analysis shows the following: (a) greater proportions of TRAP1 in the young peoples' data set, in line with earlier descriptions in the literature (Hundleby, 1963; Van Rooy & Van Huyssteen, 2000); and (b) greater proportions of TRAP2 in the special community of practice formed by political leaders, for whom the hypothesis of a declining TRAP1 proves tenable. The paper thus speaks strongly to the theme of a pan-African dialectology of L2 English.

**Keywords:** Black South African English; Community of practice; New Englishes; Pan-African dialectology; TRAP vowel

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