

## LEXICOGRAPHY FROM BELOW<sup>1</sup>

RAJ MESTHRIE

*University of Cape Town*

It is a pleasure to contribute to the festschrift of a colleague and scholar whose stature in historical linguistics, phonology and the general theoretical foundations of our subject is undisputed. As far as languages go, Roger Lass is active as a historian of English and the full range of Germanic languages, and as an analyst of the phonologies of a Dravidian language, Kannada and a Finno-Ugric, Finnish. More recently he has provided incisive analyses of the phonetics of Afrikaans and of South African English. Whilst his contributions to these streams of linguistics are well known, there are some lesser known interests of his with which this paper is meant to engage. One is as an etymologist, though I doubt whether his more recent pieces (e.g. Lass 1995, on the origins of certain four letter words in English) would make it into the pages of *The Transactions of the Philological Society* at Oxford. Another activity for which Roger Lass is known in South Africa is as a broadcaster on SAFM (formerly the SABC – South African Broadcasting Corporation) on the programme *Word of Mouth* (formerly *Strictly Speaking*), where discussions of etymology and points of “usage” predominate, amidst more general discussions of English and, to some extent, other languages of South Africa. On this programme Lass and others have provided the listening public with a sense of where linguistics stands on certain prescriptive disputes. Furthermore, past and present panellists have stimulated an interest in the history of words and in comparisons between British, American and other colonial varieties of English, especially South African. This paper is an exploration of the etymology of a word that has been queried in the programme, on more than one occasion.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to all the lexicographers whose work is cited in this paper. I am grateful to a number of people who give of their time to discuss certain points with me: Mohamed Adhikari, Gerald Stone, Roy Pfeiffer and most of all, Achmat Davids.

One of the more sought after words in South African lexicography is *laani* or *larney* (also spelt *lahnee*, *laney*, *lani* etc, phonetically [la:ni] or a close variant). The word came into prominence on being adopted in white South African English some time in the 1970s and 1980s, where its predominant sense was as an adjective 'uppercrust, posh, elegant, smart'. Before that the word was recorded in Tsotsitaal (an argot with an Afrikaans structural base and lexical items from a variety of sources, especially the African languages of the country) and in Indian English slang with the predominant meaning 'white man, overseer, boss, rich man'. Attestations from Tsotsitaal date from the 1950s (two such taken from the recently published *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* – henceforth DOSAEHP) are cited later. In Indian English the earliest citation seems to be in a play (*The Lahnee's Pleasure*), first performed in 1972 and published in 1980; but it was commonly used in informal registers at least from the 1960s. For example, it was in use in the primary school I went to from at least 1965. This dating is possible because of an incident involving a particular teacher and pupil-friend in a particular class (standard four). In a geography lesson of the day the pupil asked to recite ('by-hearting' was encouraged by some teachers) the class notes on the Fulani people of west Africa ended up by humorously calling them "the laani people". That the teacher was fully responsive to the joke might mean that the term was in use even earlier in South African Indian circles.

The social schism is worthy of note: *laani* denoting fashion and wealth to whites; but also white, male authority to speakers of colour. What have our lexicographers made of the term? Here I do not wish to criticise specific etymologies *per se*, since all lexicographers are limited by their sources, and must occasionally be tentative and conjectural. A sign of the recalcitrance of *laani* was when after years of thinking about it I had to return it in my *Lexicon of South African Indian English* (Mesthrie 1992: 112) as "etymology uncertain". My exploration in this paper is meant to focus on the scents, the clues, the trails, the dead ends and some fresh evidence leading to what I think is a solution to the mystery. At the same time a more general historico-geographical point about the diffusion of some elements of SAE slang will be made, as well as a brief excursus into the need for "lexicography from below".

In the 3rd edition of the *Dictionary of South African English* (1987), henceforth DOSAE, we find the following entry:<sup>2</sup>

**larney** adj. Posh, classy, dressed up, showy. [possibly from *lahnee*, *lanie*, possibly French *l'ornee*, the decorated one.

<sup>2</sup> Some editing and expansion of the highly compressed style of traditional dictionaries has been desirable for the purposes of this paper. For full bibliographical references to the works from which examples are taken the reader is referred to DOSAE and DOSAEHP. Only linguistic works or new texts cited in this article are furnished in the bibliography.

The citations are mostly from female writers in up-market women's magazines:<sup>3</sup>

Blue eye shadow, orange blusher, pink lipstick, her purple shade wedgies... and her best diamante drop ear-rings. Talk about larny! Auntie Vilma would put a rainbow to shame any day. *Darling*. 31.8.77

He selected an English school for the first two and... Manoto acquired a larney British accent before he came home. *Fair Lady* 7.4.82

And the Bee-ems and other larney cars filled with business men and their birds. Jani Allan in *Sunday Times*. 6.6.82

Very *laanie* and so it should be at the prices of the drinks. R. Rumney in *Weekly Mail* 1-7.11.85

White middle-class usage uses the word in an adjectival form. For this sense the suggested etymology from French is not as implausible as might seem at first sight, if we take into account the prestige of Paris in the world of fashion and beauty. However, for the French etymology to stick one would like to see analogous cases of recent French influences on SAE. Moreover, one would have to account for the influence of the French source-word in South Africa, but not elsewhere in the world. Other senses of *laani* are recorded for the first time in the 4th edition of DOSAE (1991):

2. n. Boss, employer.

... 'You might get yourself a gold watch'... My lahnee will give it to me man'. 'Your?'... 'My boss, man'. R. Govender *The Lahnee's Pleasure*. 1978.

I soon discovered that it's convention to down tools at the approach of any larney or foreman and have a bit of a chat. *Frontline*. March 1989.

3. n. and modifier. White person, rich person.

'Situations', can go to their larnies (White Superiors) and complain about corruption. G. Mvubelo in *Natal Mercury*. 8.6.83.

Albert ...had such 'white' features – blue-green eyes and blond hair – that most African and coloured kids called him 'Laanie' – a colloquial term meaning both European and wealthy. D. Mattera *Memory is the Weapon* 1987.

DOSAE stresses that "the etymologies remain unknown". In this connection J. Branford (1991: 174) cites my observation (personal communication) that the word does not originate in an Indian language, despite its connection with Indian

<sup>3</sup> The exception is Reg Rumney in the *Weekly Mail*.

slang. DOSAE makes a tentative suggestion, citing Mfusi's (1990) thesis on Soweto Zulu slang, which records *ilani* as a class 5 noun (with prefix *i-*).

The link with Soweto Zulu probably puts the cart before the horse. The question must still be raised where Soweto Zulu got the item from, since it is not found in the earlier forms of Nguni or Sotho languages. Given this picture, it is more likely that Soweto Zulu, Tsotsi Taal and related varieties have adopted this word from general slang usage than the other way round. They would then add a noun class prefix (the most usual for borrowings is *i-* (class 5) with plural *ama-* (class 6).

To return to the 'posh' signification, it is unlikely that this is independent of the 'white boss, rich man, big shot' meaning. More likely we are dealing with one item that shows semantic shift and split. In Indian circles it is now possible to have female referents for the term, with the meaning 'rich person' (*She's a laani*). However, with the meaning 'boss' the word still has a unigendered meaning: *She's my larney* (meaning 'boss') does not sound authentic, though I would not be surprised if this were to change in keeping with the times.

*Laani* also occurs in the working-class speech of Coloured people in the Cape Peninsula, as studied in detail by Stone (1991). The entry of relevance (1991: 431) is as follows:

- laanie:** (1) male employer, owner of business, man in authority at a firm (e.g. manager).  
 (2) man of wealth, leisure and prestige. Hence *vrou(mens) laanie*: female employer. *milaanie*: my boss (servile address).

Stone's etymology is "abbreviation of *kappielaan*". The term *kappielaan* is glossed as follows (Stone 1991: 424):

**Kappielaan:** leader of work crew. Standard Afrikaans *kapelaan*: 'chaplain'. Variant of Standard Afrikaans: chaplain, shop steward.<sup>4</sup>

He notes further the use of *laanie* in Flytaal (a variety that originated in male slang used in townships) and in white, adolescent middle-class use which he derives from the noun sense in the "respectable" sub-code of Cape peninsula working class Afrikaans. The reservation I have about this etymology is that there is little evidence for clipping (or shortening) in the dialect that Stone described so well. Furthermore, why was it the *-laan* suffix that was retained and not the more salient root *kappie*?<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Note that Afrikaans *kapel* is cognate with English *chapel*.

<sup>5</sup> Certainly *kappie* would then be homophonous with *kappie* the diminutive form of *kap* 'cap'. But avoidance of homophony as a general principle in the dialect has to be demonstrated.

DOSAEHP, the most recent publication to suggest an etymology, returns to the Asian element in South Africa for the roots of *laani*. This is not implausible, as the word seems to have an Indian feel to a number of commentators. Earlier, L. Barnes (1978) in his list of words in South African Indian English assumed *lahnee* to be a word derived from an Indian language, though he did not provide a specific source. L. Green, an informant cited in DOSAEHP (1996: 415) says "I have a feeling that this word (used by white youngsters to mean 'posh', smart, in a vaguely derogatory sense) is more generally used now than it was in the past. I gather it is of Indian origin and was originally used by the Indian community in Natal to refer to white people, especially upper class people." However, I know of no closely related usage in Indic languages. One form that does come to mind is the proper name *Kripalani* which might work in India, since it is the name of a well-known, affluent business family. But India which has the Kripalanis does not have the term *laani*; and South Africa which has *laanis* does not have any Kripalanis. Further, we should still have to explain the loss of the first two syllables in the proper name, rather than the last two. As for Dravidian languages, Tamil is a non-starter since it disallows [l] in word initial position. And there is no close equivalent in Telugu, the other Dravidian language of consequence in South Africa.

DOSAEHP's solution betrays the desperation brought upon all lexicographers by the elusive *laani*. The entry is as follows:

**larney** n. and adj. Colloquial... ultimate origin unknown, perhaps related to Malay *rani* 'rich, a queen' or Hindi *rani* 'queen'.

It is not clear why *rani* should turn to *laani* in an Indian language (or actually split into two). There are survivals of an old Indic *r/l* alternation (e.g. *nikral* versus *niklal* 'he emerged') in South African Bhojpuri, but no such alternation with *rani*. Furthermore, there are no examples, to my knowledge, of [r] from an Indian language turning to [l] in South African Indian English. If we appeal to an African language transformation of *rani* (as DOSAEHP does explicitly) there is indeed evidence for the change of [r] to [l] in borrowings. Zulu, for instance, used to regularly turn an [r] from English loan words to [l]. Hence *laundry* in Zulu is *ilondolo*; the word for rice is either *ilayisi* or *irayisi* (Doke - Malcolm - Sikakana 1982: 405). But the semantics of a transformation of *rani* to *laani* via borrowing does not work: *rani* is decidedly female; *laani* is prototypically male (as a noun).

I believe that the etymology of *laani* is from Cape Town Afrikaans, going back over a century. This usage occurs in a recently discovered corpus of materials pertaining to Afrikaans before it was standardised and made an official language. Mohammed Adhikari, a historian at the University of Cape Town has recently edited a collection of satirical columns called *Straatpraatjes* ('Street

Speeches'), which appeared in the APO newspaper between 1909 and 1922. This newspaper was the official organ of the African Political Organisation (APO), the first substantive coloured political association, which dominated coloured politics for nearly four decades. Probably written by Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman, the president of the APO (Adhikari 1996: 3), the columns provide a satirical view of Cape Town parliamentary politics and of the Cape Town social scene. The pseudonym adopted by the writer is Piet Uithalder, a simpleton who is frequently accompanied by the (apparently) smarter Stoffel. In *Straatpraatjes* the word *oolana* occurs only once, in the entry for 19 January 1910 (Adhikari 1996: 69):<sup>6</sup>

Raai gister het ik in Stoffel na Muisenberg gegaan. Of kors, ons rij altoes in die First Class Smoking Compartment. Bij Ronebosie klim da twee kerels in. Da is hulle se Stoffel. Wie, se ik. Kan jij dan nie sien nie, se hij, Botha en Graaf. Die woore was knap uit sij mond toe haal ik mij cigar case uit. En ik neem ons roek net soes twee oolanas. Een van die twee outjes kijk mij soma kwaat an.

[You know, yesterday Stoffel and I went to Muizenburg. Of course, we rode all along in the First Class Smoking Compartment. At Rondebosch two men climbed in. "There they are", said Stoffel. "Who?", said I. "Can't you see them, then?", he said, "Botha and Graaf". The words were barely out of his mouth when I had taken out my cigar case. And we had a smoke like two *oolanas*. One of the two chaps just scowled at me.]

In *Straatpraatjes* parlance an *oolana* was a white person who had considerable social and economic standing. The term was used until recently by the oldest speakers of coloured Afrikaans and pronounced [ulənə] (Achmat Davids: personal communication). Achmat Davids is of the opinion that *oolana* is based on the vernacular Cape Afrikaans term *oorlander* 'one who comes from abroad' (literally 'across land-er'). He believes, further, that the term referred to the upper-class English immigrants of the nineteenth century, who would have impressed the likes of Piet Uithalder more than the Afrikaner who was of longer standing in the Cape. (In standard Afrikaans there appears to be no term *oorlander*, or – at a pinch – it might be interpreted to refer to one who made a journey across land, rather than one from abroad.)

An alternative that I think deserves to be considered is a derivation based on *Hollander* (which is still the standard term). The changes from *Hollander* to [ulənə] in vernacular Cape Afrikaans are fairly natural (glottalisation of initial [h]; the raising of [o] to [u]; the change of [nd] clusters to [nn] and then [n]).

<sup>6</sup>I am indebted to Mohamed Adhikari for a computer-assisted search for *oolana* in the entire *Straatpraatjes* collection. Note that 50 of the 102 columns are reproduced in Adhikari (1996).

More than that, the semantics fit very well. The Hollander was distinguished from the more local Afrikaner in terms of wealth and status. For some white South Africans in times past the term *Hollander* had more positive connotations than the term (English) *settler*, as is suggested by the following account by Lanham and Macdonald (1979: 74):

One member of a well known Settler family specifically rejected her Settler origin claiming that her ancestor was a young lawyer who made his own way to SA [South Africa]. At least three others from families with a history of intermarriage with Afrikaners in the last century, insisted in their reference to their forebear as 'our Hollander ancestor'.

Whatever the ultimate origin (*oorlander* or *Hollander*) the word has travelled far within South Africa. From being a word used by Cape Town's underclasses, it has travelled across South Africa and undergone further phonetic change. My assumption is that it went from the Cape to the Transvaal, possibly as early as the heydays of the gold and diamond mines from the 1860s and 1870s. This has still to be proved, especially since the first citation in DOSAE for Tsotsitaal is only in the nineteen-fifties:

As I sat down... I heard a murmur 'Laanis', the tsotsi word for white man.  
A. Sampson *Drum* 1956.

The next citation given in DOSAEHP (1996: 415) comes from 1963, in L.F. Freed's account of *Crime in South Africa*: "The tsotsis have a variety of words for money... Their word for an old man is 'toppie', for a young girl 'tjerrie', for a European 'lani'".

The lengthening of [ʌ] to [ɑ:] probably shows the effects of African language systems in which length is not phonemic, but penultimate syllables are lengthened. Tsotsitaal words do not seem to favour prefixes; and the initial [u] which might have the appearance of an African language prefix must have dropped for this reason. (In later becoming absorbed into Soweto Zulu, *laani* would have acquired the unmarked class 5 prefix *-i*, with class 6 plural, *-ama*). The change of the final schwa of *oolana* to [i] seems to reflect a preference for this final syllable in many Tsotsitaal items (*toppie*, *tjerrie*, *laani*).

The history of *laani* shows an important and – I think – well-used, underground trail for a significant number of South African neologisms, in English and other languages. The trail starts with class relations of the old Cape and the Afrikaans working-class codes of people of colour; it then proceeds north to the Witwatersrand and is absorbed into the predominantly black forms of township slang and antilanguage (Flytaal, Tsotsitaal, Isicamtho); it then takes a turn to the coast of Natal and is assimilated into the slang of male adolescents,

and working class slang, notably (but not exclusively) into Indian English slang. Bleached versions then appear in middle-class white English in Natal and elsewhere. It is the geographical and sociological trail that involves "crossing" (of linguistic, racial and class boundaries) that is of as much interest as the exercise in finding the right etymology.

Other words that have probably followed the trail of *laani* include terms like *lank* 'lots of' and *vai* 'to go' (Standard Afrikaans *lank* 'long' and *waai* 'to blow'). The citations that DOSAEHP give for each of these date to white teen slang of 1970. Again, they were definitely in use in the early 1960s amongst Indian youth in Natal, at a time when direct contact with Afrikaans was minimal. I suggest that the trail is the same as for *laani*.

The title of my paper is meant to suggest that greater attention will have to be paid by our lexicographers of English and Afrikaans to the linguistic practices of the formerly marginalised people of colour who speak these languages. DOSAE, DOSAEHP are certainly excellent works of scholarship and have tried to make "all the voices of the land speak" (see especially Branford 1987: vi) with some success. But there are still signs of uncertainties when dealing with spoken non-standard varieties of English and Afrikaans. This challenge from below, so to speak, is the principal one that an adequate South African lexicography of the twenty-first century will have to meet.

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