

# Historical Sociolinguistics in a Colonial World, Methodological Considerations

Ana Deumert  
University of Cape Town  
[ana.deumert@gmail.com](mailto:ana.deumert@gmail.com)

# Outline

- Documenting a **dying language** – between the street and the archive
- Studying **language contact**
- Reconstructing **language use**
  - Case study: nie-2 in Afrikaans
  - Historical variation studies (first wave)
  - Style (third wave)
- Unpacking **ideologies** – reading and re-reading texts

# Non-native German during colonial Rule, historical reconstruction

- Taught as a second language in Namibian mission schools from 1895;
- Aim: to create ‘**a German-speaking upper class**’ (*eine Deutsch sprechende Oberschicht, Koloniale Rundschau 1913*)
- About 10% of the indigenous population attended mission schools.



# Acrolectal varieties

- **African elite**
  - Generally multilingual with a solid German mission education;
  - Kaptein ‘Franz’ spoke ‘pure high German’ (*reines Schriftdeutsch*; Clara Brockmann 1912)
- **Children of European/African parentage**
  - Cohabitation with indigenous was common among colonists;
  - In 1909 alone 1574 children were born of mixed parentage;
  - Some mission schools catered exclusively for mixed race children;
  - ‘eigentlich sin’ wir Duits aufgezogen’ (Hilda, granddaughter of a German father and a Khoekhoegowab-speaking mother);
  - Similar to the situation in Papua New Guinea (*Unserdeutsch*).

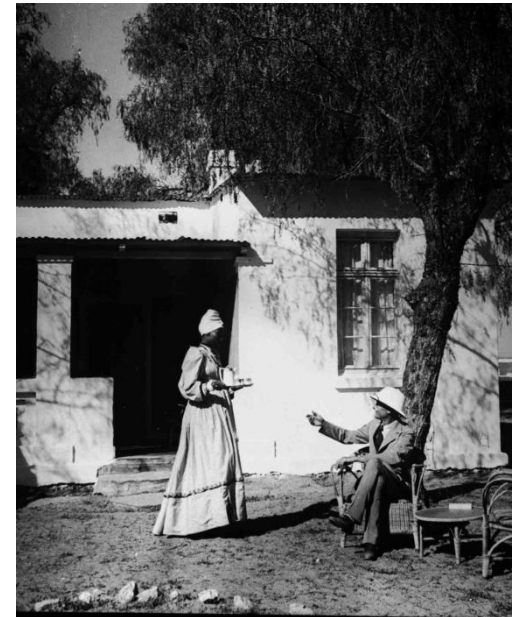
# Continued

- **Colonial employees**
  - ‘Keetmanshoop. The district has good interpreters among the policemen who have been working here for some years. Theirs is sufficient for simple translations. In addition, an indigenous teacher who speaks German well is used as an interpreter.’ (Windhoek National Archives, ZBU 249, 18 December 1911)



# Mesolectal & basilectal varieties

- A society divided into **colonial ‘owners’** and **African ‘non-owners’**;
- 1913, 95% of the African population in central/southern Namibia were classified as ***Lohnarbeiter***;
  - 55% domestic servants
  - 34% workers in small factories or workshops
  - 11% army or police
- Colonial memoirs provide meta-linguistic commentary and examples of different communicative responses to this inter-group contact.



# The variety space

- **Afrikaans-German admixture** (*ossenbanjaweithardloop*)

- **Otjiherero-German jargon**

*Mister ba-vera                      tjirura    sauf            ongombe                      seine            omuti*  
MISTER SUBJ.-BE SICK    GHOST    BOOZE    CATTLE                      POSS.    MEDICINE

‘The mister is sick. He looks like a ghost. He drank the cattle’s medicine’

- **Non-native varieties of German**

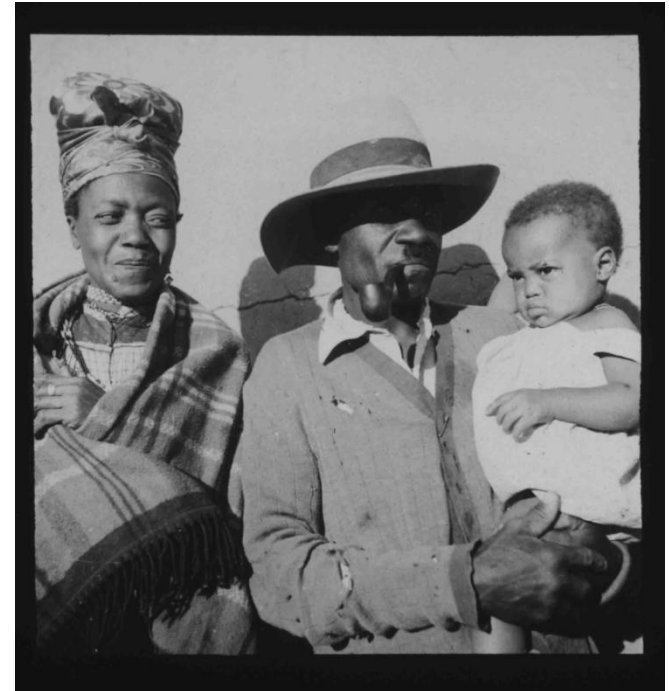
Ernst Cramer (*Die Kinderfarm*, 1942): ‘All Hottentots [Khoekhoe] and Herero in German South West Africa understand German and can speak some, and us Germans speak only German with them.’





# Contexts of acquisition I

- *Where did you learn German?*  
Only from **my mother**. She lived in the time of the Germans. She also worked for German people, her mother had worked for German people. Then she always spoke this way, then she said, bring me something, a plate, bring me, then I said, what is a plate, then I don't know, then she said, this is a plate. She has always, this way, she had **always taught us, a little, taught us a little.** (Luzia)



# Contexts of acquisition II

- From school we have always looked for **help-work with German people**, and that's where we learned German. We worked in the store and garden work, worked in the garden, and house-help – we did everything. (Heinrich)



# Within-group use: crossing and performance

- **Inter-ethnic communication** (out-group contexts);
- **In-group uses** are instances of crossing and appropriation, linked to notions of performance/performativity:
  - Competition games;
  - Conversational banter (*quatsch-quatsch*);
  - Swearing and scolding;
  - Keeping secrets;
  - Conversational code-switching;
- Linked to issues of **identity** (*swarzeDuitse*)
  - *Ich bin duitse vrouw. Alte Duitse vrouw sein. Viele Duitse leute gearbeiten.* ('I am a German woman. An old German woman. I worked for many German people', Petrina)

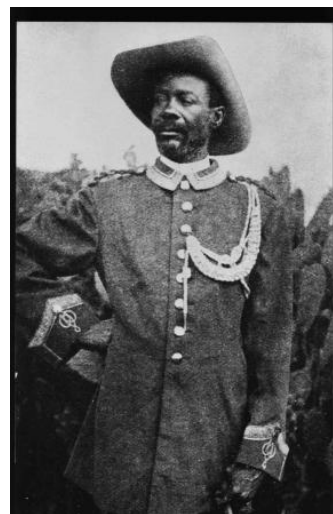
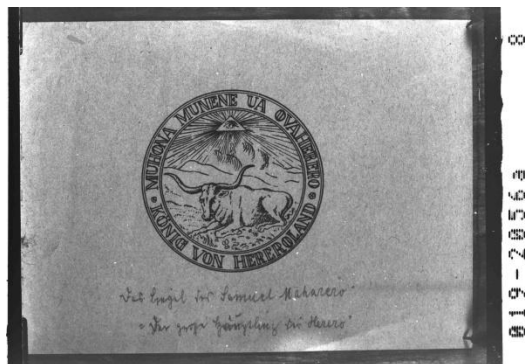
# Non-linguistic appropriation

- In Namibia, practices of crossing underpin the construction and expression not only of personal, but also of **collective identities** that have absorbed and appropriated aspects of the colonial 'other';
- Two further examples:
  - *Truppenspieler* movement
  - 'Traditional' dress



# Truppenspieler

- Marching groups of Namadama and Ovaherero were called *otruppa/oturupa* or *Truppenspieler* ('those who play soldiers' by imitating military practices including dress, marching drills, commandos);
- Attested already from **before 1900**, however, it was the funeral of Chief Samuel Maharero (1923) – who referred to himself as *König von Hereroland* – which contributed to the formalization and elevation of these practices;



# Continued

- Hierarchy of ranks and titles was directly based on the German system:
  - *Kaiser* ('emperor') of a regiment was supported by officers who carried German titles: *Oberst* ('colonel'), *Leutnant* ('lieutenant'), *Wachtmeister* ('constable'), *Unteroffizier* ('corporal'), *Gefreiter* ('private')
- **Function:** an ethnically-based welfare and support organization that brought people from dispersed settlements together, following the destruction of traditional African networks.



# Traditional dress



# Continued

- “Herero women’s reflections on their dress are a counter-example to a widely held notion that tradition (especially outside the West) is necessarily represented as timeless, ineffably local, and autogenetic ... Herero occasionally pass time by discussing the transnational aspects of their dress, even when not pestered by anthropologists ... In all of these reflections, **Herero actively chose and borrowed from other nationalities** ... Although historical documents talk about a Herero capitulation to European dress in the heavily oppressive conditions of the German-Herero War of 1904, the histories related by Herero women ... **tell of dynamic exchange and positive action, with choice and independent agency as central features.**” (Durham, *The predicament of dress*, 1999)



# Language structure

- **Noun phrase** – no gender and case marking; variable marking of plural; periphrastic possessive as well as simple juxtaposition (*swarze sule sulmeister*); definite articles replacing pronouns as well as frequent pronoun and article omission;
- **Verb phrase** – obligatory subject-verb agreement has been lost and variation between infinitive/plural forms and roots is common; past tense does not require marking, if it is marked AUX plus PP is most common (variation in past marking can be used to structure narrative organization);
- **Syntax** – SOV with V2 in declarative clauses; some changes in the structure of negation;
- **Lexicon** – polysemy (*gross* ‘big’ ‘fat’ ‘loud’ ‘a lot of something’); hypercolloquialisms; independent norm formation (*passione, kulas*)

# A 'pidgin'?

- **Current pidgin/creole studies**
  - The very notion of pidgins/creoles becomes blurred once we move beyond the 'best exemplar' approach
- The history of *Kiche Duits* is typical of language and culture contact in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century European colonisation, leading to the **restructuring of the lexifier** by a disenfranchised substrate community;

# Continued

- These varieties were employed for inter-ethnic communication (MIC, **medium for interethnic communication**, Baker, *Directionality in Pidginization and Creolization*, 1997);
- However, they did not develop into a lingua franca among Africans in Namibia (MCS, **medium for community solidarity**, Baker 1997);
- Yet, at the same time there existed **spaces/contexts** within the substrate community where *Kiche Duits* was used – not for ‘serious’, ‘content-based’ communication, but for play, social bonding, and to express socio-symbolic meanings (identity). These were **communicative moments** where *Kiche Duits* took on the meanings of a **medium of community solidarity, for socio-expressive rather than referential-informative purposes.**

# Language contact as a theme



# Demography matters

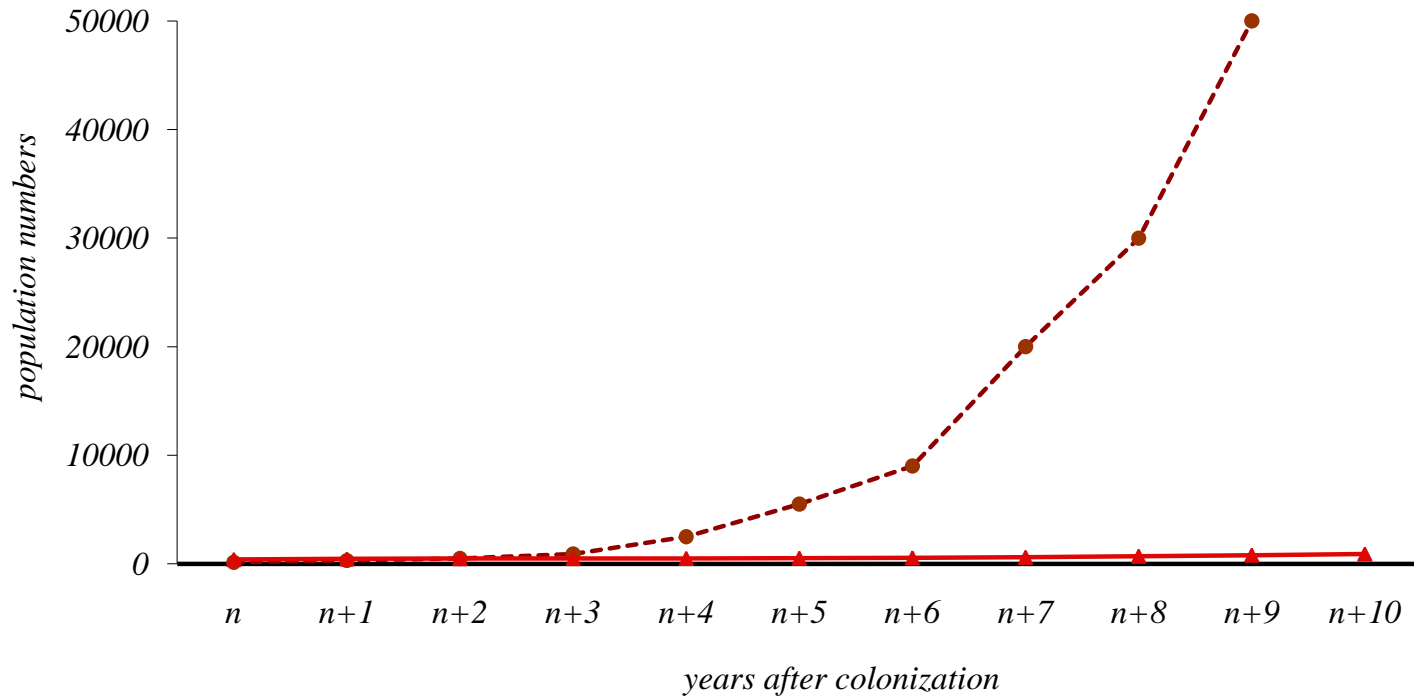
- Demography is very important in contact situations (see, for example, Jacques Arends' seminal work in creole studies; also Mufwene, *Ecology of Language Evolution*, 2001);
- South Africa: **is Afrikaans a creole?**
  - 'Afrikaans is a creole language' (Breyten Breytenbach, *True Confessions of an Albino Terrorist*, 1984)



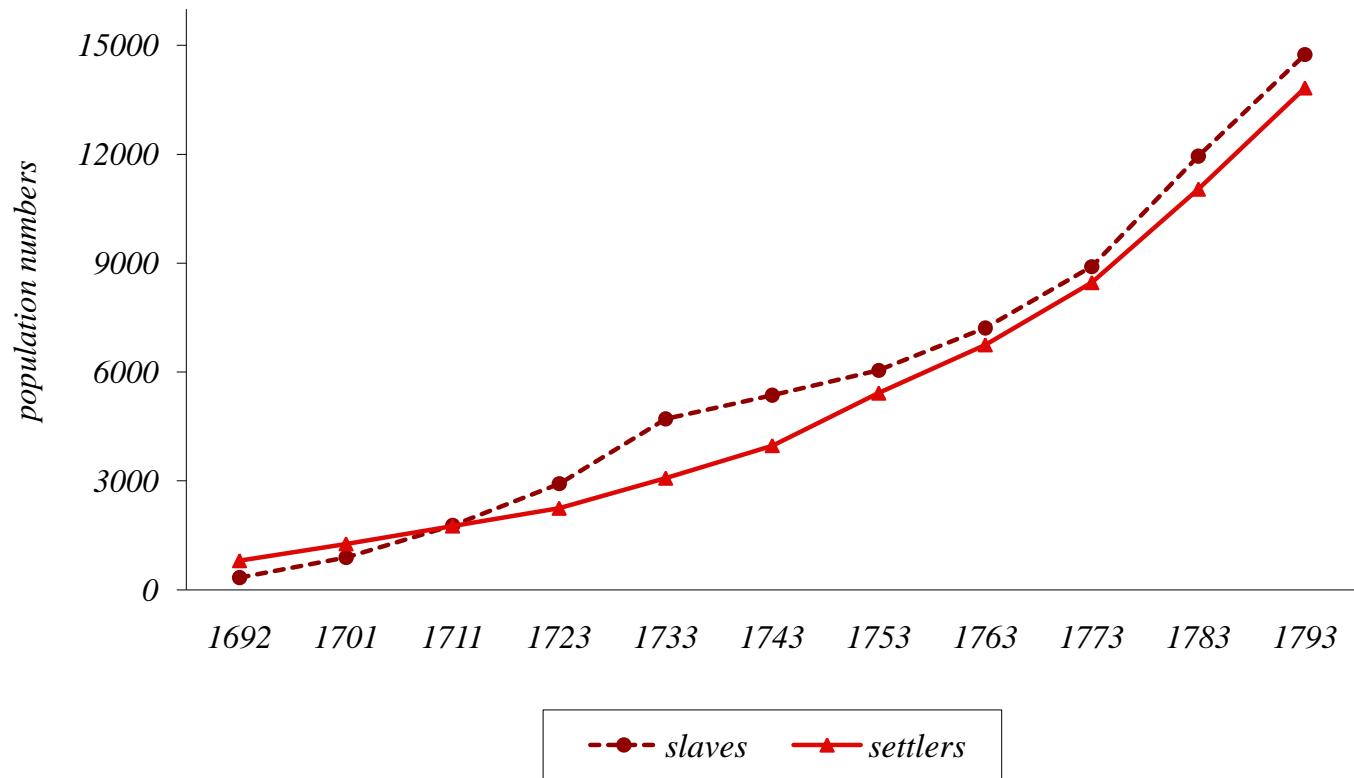
# The founder principle

- The **vernacular of the earliest populations** in a colonial settlement will shape the emerging contact languages significantly (Mufwene, *The Ecology of Language Evolution*, 2001).
  - Typically **lower class varieties** of the transplanted European language (the ‘proletarian background of the colonies’);
  - **Non-standard** and **dialect forms**;
- Cape Colony
  - Importance of an **urban Holland koiné** which developed in Dutch port cities;
  - 28% of early Dutch settlers came from Amsterdam, another 50% from North and South Holland.
  - Also, more than a third of the early settlers were of **German origin** (Low and Middle German dialect areas).

# Plantation society



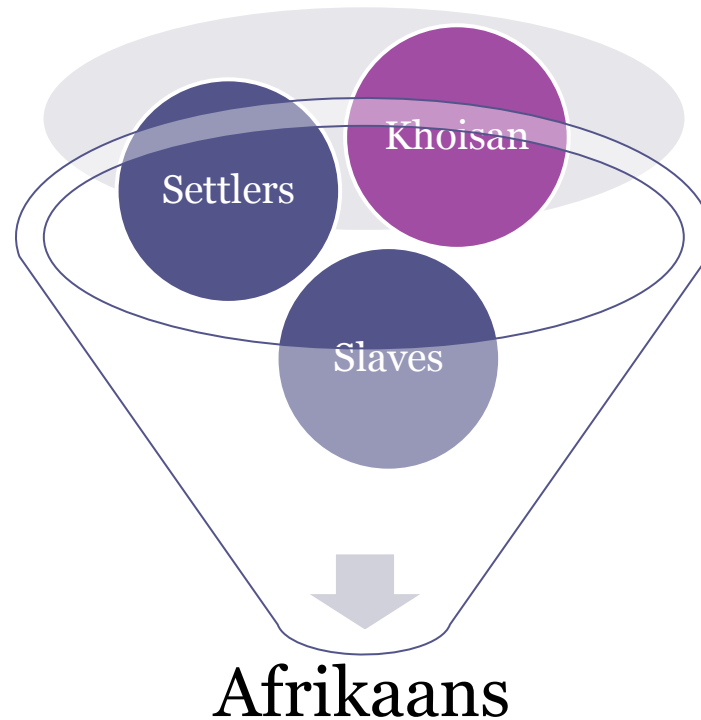
# Homestead society





# The double negative - reconstructing origins

- The structure:
  - *ek praat **nie** graag **nie***
  - *wie beseft **nie** goed dat die stelsel verander moet word **nie**?*



# Possible origins (Den Besten/Roberge)

- Double negation is attested for **dialectal Dutch** (*de man is nooit niet rijk*)
  - **Problem** – the negation is located in the middle field, negators adjacent to one another; southern dialects of Dutch (where this construction is attested) played a limited role in the development of Afrikaans
- **Early modern Dutch** had a bipartite negation (*en ... niet; dat 'n weet ik niet*).
  - **Problem** - this was used only very rarely in the 17<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup> century;
- **Nama** (Khoesan) has three negative operators: two of them occur clause finally (*tama*, indicative and *tite*, future).

# The social locus of nie-2

- The earliest attested uses of the double negative are in the reported **speech of Khoe**(eye dialect data)
  - *Wat hij niet weet nie* ('what he doesn't know')
  - *hij [Stoffel] zeg dat ik hem van avoon niet moet los maak niet* ('he says that I mustn't make him loose tonight'; 1810)
- Absent from **acrolectal Cape Dutch**:
  - 'The most plausible sociolinguistic evaluation of final nie-2 at the time of its entry in the philological record is as **a variable feature with a strong association with persons of color and with the lowest socioeconomic strata of Europeans**, whose communication networks brought them into contact with the labour force and its children.' (Roberge, *Etymological opacity*, 2000)

# The stylistic locus of nie-2

- Strategies of multiple negation are common in **spoken, vernacular usage** (also for other Germanic varieties);
- Multiple, emphatic negation is common in the **dialect literature** when representing characters of colour: *nee, niks geen drank, nie, niks* (Hendrik Kok dialogues, 1830, Boniface);
- Roberge (2000, *Etymological opacity*): *nie-2* originated as an **emphatic tag negation** in the substrate community and grammaticalized into a **scope marker**.

# Post-1875: a standardization feature

- Similar to **third person singular –s** in standard English (Ferguson, *Towards a Social Science of Language*, 1995);
- **1876, *Eerste Beginsels van die Afrikaanse Taal***
  - *‘Nes in Frans het ons een dubbele ontkenning in ons tweemaal nie’*



# Corpus of Cape Dutch Correspondence

- **Assumption:** closeness of informal speech to informal writing
  - Private, informal letters are the closest the language historian has to something which approaches ‘utterance tokens’ (Lass, *Texts as Linguistic Objects*, 2004)
- **Single genre corpus:** private letter only
  - Close personal bond between writer and recipient
  - Communication situation characterised by privacy
  - All texts handwritten, no typed material
- **Period:** 1880-1922 (roughly two generations)
- **Epistemological paradigm:** first wave sociolinguistics/ variation studies

# Sample size

- What constitutes an **adequate sample size** for variationist work remains a moot point
  - Labov's NYC study = 88 speakers
  - Trudgill's Norwich study = 60 speakers
  - Milroy's Belfast study = 46 speakers
  - Santa Ana & Parodi's study of Mexican Spanish = 35 speakers
  - Sankoff (1980) suggests a sample of around 150 as adequate, even for complex and highly heterogeneous speech communities
- **Corpus of Cape Dutch Correspondence** = 136 individuals, 350 letters, roughly 130,000 words
  - Helsinki corpus (Early Modern English, 1500-1700) = 550,000 words

# Social variables

- Social background of each writer was reconstructed on the basis of the available historical sources;
- **Main source:** death notices, voter's list, South African Directories (which listed everyone with business interests/activities);
- Social variables considered:
  - **Age**
  - **Gender**
  - **Ethnicity** (White, Coloured, Black)
  - **Social class** (based on work in social history; four main classes)
    - Grand bourgeoisie (almost exclusively English-speaking)
    - New professional class (civil servants, doctors, teachers, etc.; geographical and social mobility; circa 40% of the CCDC),
    - Middle classes (independent farms, small scale production and ownership; circa 50% of the CCDC)
    - Working class (circa 10%)

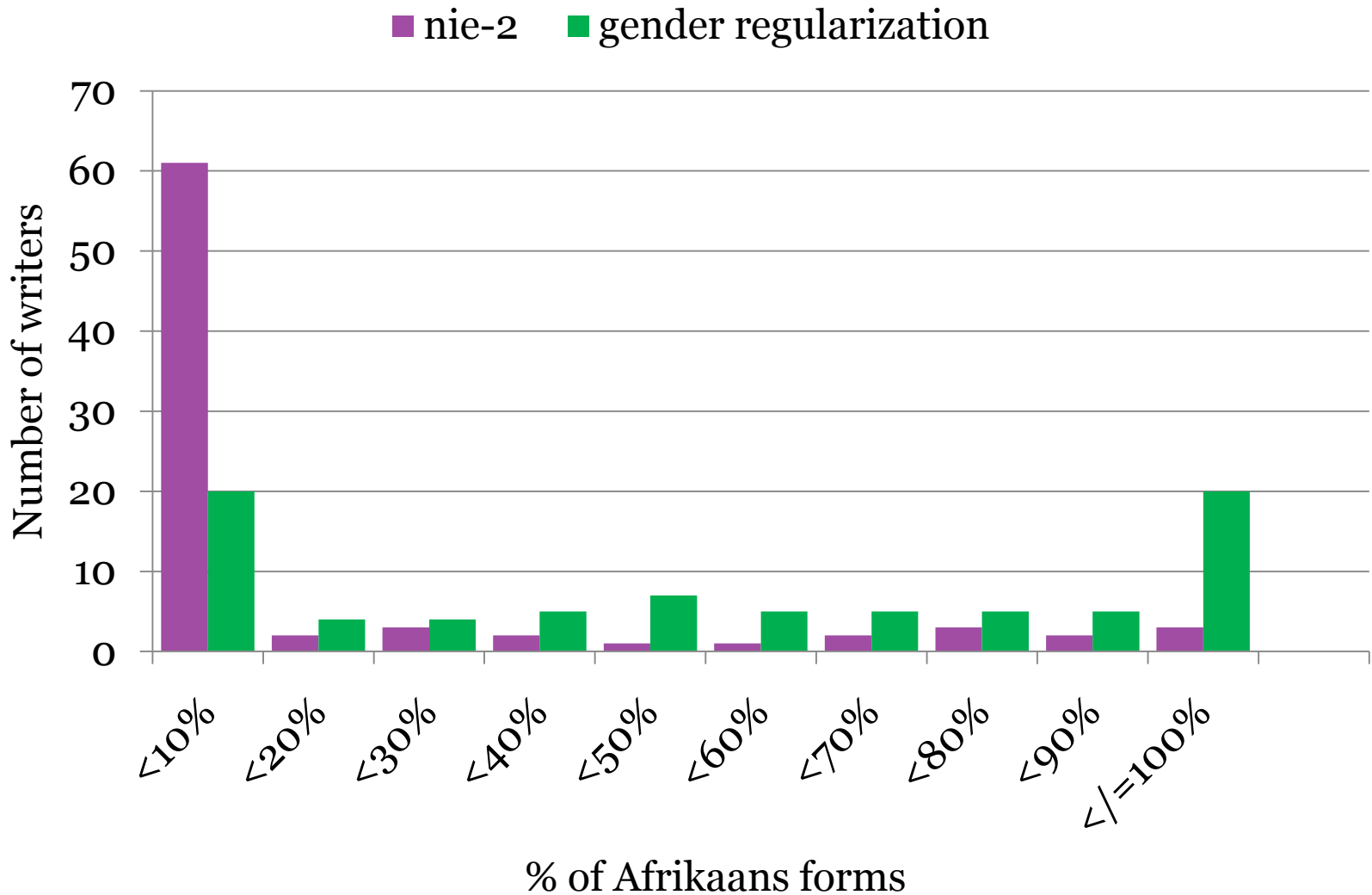


# An acrolectal and mesolectal corpus

- ‘The Corpus of Cape Dutch Correspondence is **well-defined but biased** ... The corpus includes mostly writers belonging to the **white petty bourgeoisie and the emerging professional class**. The ethnically more diverse working classes are clearly under-represented. The sample bias is a consequence of the very nature of the historical record which reflects the ethnically and socially skewed distribution of literacy at the Cape ... Absent from the corpus is the **‘true’ basilect**(or rather basilectal varieties). Focusing in the linguistic analysis on **acro- and mesolectal varieties** should not be interpreted as a ‘failure to reach the vernacular’ since basilects are not in any theoretical sense superior to other linguistic varieties.’ (Deumert, *The Dynamics of Cape Dutch*, 2004)

# Nie-2 in the Corpus

- Only **21% of negative clauses** in the Corpus have *nie-2* (363 out of 1746 clauses; Patriotstaal: 98%);
- The distribution among individual writers is **highly skewed** with only about a third of writers employing the feature at all;
- *Nie-2* was **not categorical** for any writer.



# ‘Nes in Frans het onseendubbeleontkenning in onstweemalnie’

- Why was *nie-2* selected into the early standard?
- An attempt at **explanation**:
  - The **semantics of Afrikaans *boer*** include highly positive connotations such as strength, resilience (*duursaamheid*) and community cohesion.
  - The Afrikaner *boer* was not only a prominent figure in the post 1860s dialect literature, but also a point of reference in language policy debates;
  - The focus of the GRA was on what they called *Boere-Afrikaans* (distinguished from *Heere-Afrikaans* and *Hottentots-Afrikaans*)
  - Afrikaans itself was described as being ‘*n armeboerenôi, by vele min geag*’.



# Iconization (Irvine & Gal 2000)

- The Afrikaans *boer* was described as straightforward, down-to-earth, honest and common sense, and **the language was codified in his image**
  - Absence of what was called *hinderlijke buigingsvorme*;
  - The language (and style of expression) is repeatedly described as simple and clear;
  - Motto: *Nou skryf ons net soos ons praat, en seg wat ons wil*
  - Nie-2 with its historical origin as an emphatic emphasis marker became **part of this iconically-motivated repertoire**, representing the decided and resolute voice of the colonist farmer (as opposed to the educated English/Dutch-speaking townsman);
  - Example of a **'hyperdemotic' selection** decision which reinforced not only the structural distinctiveness of Afrikaans (vis à vis Dutch), but also its social symbolism and political/ideological identity.

# The limits of ideology

- **Extremely slow diffusion** of this particular feature;
- **Non-obligatory character** was still acknowledged in 1949 (Nienaber, *Oor Afrikaans*)
  - Omission is not a ‘taalfout’;
  - ‘Die eerste nie is die eintlike draer van die ontkenning, die tweede is niet die psigologiese afronding wat die betekenis nie sal skaad as dit weg gelaat word nie’



# Historical third wave sociolinguistics



# Style - speaking like an Afrikaner

- **Communities of practice** – groups or associations in which people create and maintain social meaning, practices and identities through their joint participation in purposeful, strategic activities and endeavours;
- Ties between individuals can be both weak and strong, most importantly they are targeted (i.e. they **are ‘about’ something**);
- Eckert (*Language variation as social practice*, 2000) gives the example of a **garage-band**
  - ‘The practices that emerge as a rock ‘n roll band works together include such things as choice of songs the band plays, the kind of music ... ways of dressing, ways of getting and choosing gigs, ways of developing new songs and rehearsing, ways of behaving and talking in encounters with band members and when representing the band’

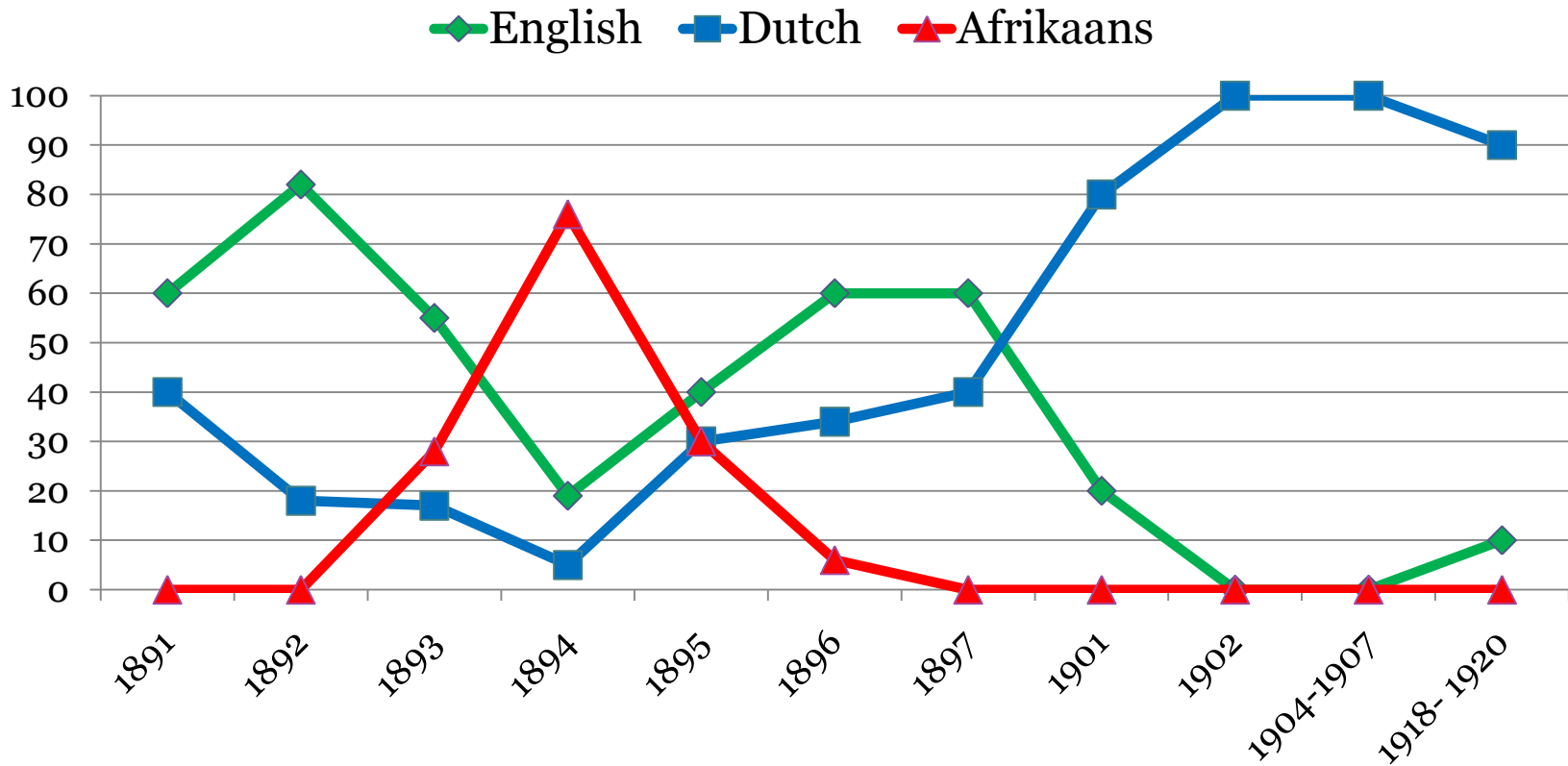


# Community of practice: nationalist networks

- Purposeful use of 'Afrikaans' for **in-group correspondence** among members of the *Afrikaner Bond*;
- Also established as a **spoken norm** in nationalist debating circles;
- Used as an **in-group code** and **marker of identity** among young, nationalist Afrikaners studying abroad (especially Edinburgh).



# FS Malan (1871-1941), in %



# More than language

- Mr. Malan lijk meer boerachtiger. Stoffel se die wijnboere het hom goet gegee dianner dag, en hom gese dat hij te veel ophou moet Dr. Jamieson en die aner Engelse. Nau het hij weer sij das verkeert vas gemaak en een weie broek angetrek, **so dat hij weer soes e boer kan lijk.** (*Straatpraatjies*, June 1909)



# Colonial linguistics again - Unpacking ideologies

- Close reading of the ‘**colonial archive**’;
- Errington (Linguistics in a Colonial World, 2008)
  - ‘The colonial era ended two generations ago, but colonialism has not really gone away ... **Some scholars have colonialism on their minds because they recognize that it might be in our minds, in the guise of durable categories and ideas which emerged** then but still serve now as common sense for thinking about human diversity and inequality. These concerns have led many into closer, more critical engagement with textual remains of the colonial past ,which they read with one eye on the present. History, biography, literature, and other kinds of writing take on new importance from this point of view, as do maps, censuses, photographs, monuments, and a wide range of other materials. All these can be thought of as parts of a **colonial archive**’.