



## **Worlds of English**

### *Cape Town District Six*

#### **NARRATOR**

Today Cape Town's District Six is mostly wasteland but it used to be home to a vibrant community which was brutally displaced by South Africa's apartheid regime. The people of District Six spoke a distinctive language, a mix of Afrikaans, English and other words whose origins are obscure.

#### **BONITA**

There is a particular kind of way of speaking the terminology for example that people used that they would say only people in District Six know about this way of speaking and I can give you some examples but maybe they are words that won't mean anything because I don't even know where they have come from. I mean a common expression that I hear is, people would say if work is done very shoddily and it's not done to perfection they would say it's very "lappies kasaram", now no one else has ever heard of this word but District Six people they understand that.

#### **NARRATOR**

The residents were mainly mixed race but in the 1960's the area was designated as "whites only" and thousands of people were forcibly removed and their homes destroyed.

#### **NOOR**

Can you see all the empty land? Now people lived there before, there were houses there, everywhere you see empty land even over there right down from there, right down all empty see. You are looking at I mean 70,000 peoples lives were destroyed you know and again just because of the colour of their skin.

#### **NARRATOR**

A few of the original streets have survived but many have been replaced with new buildings.

#### **NOOR**

My house was right here, this spot, right here, a big double storey home, 4 bedroom home. On the corner of this was called Caledon Street and there was a street going down called Horsburg Lane. Many people died of broken hearts, I remember my father was about in his early 60's when he had to leave his home and I remember how my father cried because he didn't want to go because this was his home.

#### **NARRATOR**

Although much of District Six was destroyed its distinct language has survived.

#### **NOOR**

We didn't speak English, we didn't speak Afrikaans, our language was called kitchen English or the Afrikaans word that is Kombuis Engels [kitchen English]. What we do is we mix our languages you know, like let me give you an example now in English someone will say maybe "where are you going to?" or "where you going to?" now proper Afrikaans like that Kaaners used to speak they would say "Waar" w-a-a-r, "gaan" g-a-a-n, "waar gaan ye?" that is a proper Afrikaans now listen carefully what we said, we said "wa gatj" can you head the difference we didn't say vaar we just say w-a "wa" gat, g-a-t, j, we didn't even say ye and that was our, some of our language in District Six. We still speak it today and I am very proud of my language.

#### **KAY**

The vernacular that developed in District Six was a blend of two things, one was what you would call code switching where somebody would say two or three sentences in one

language and then two or three in another or a clause in one and a clause in another but where the grammars would be intact but in addition to that you had a mixed vernacular where the grammatical base is largely Afrikaans but an enormous amount of the vocabulary is English.

#### **NARRATOR**

Some of the original District Six residents still live here. When they speak you can hear a mix of English, Afrikaans and the local vernacular.

#### **RESIDENTS**

[LOCAL DIALECT]

Dan is dit 'n joke vir hom.

Tot nou die aand, hy het iets verkeerd gedone, man

toe se ek hom 'Ek klap jou so'

'Aaa' hy so

Ek agteruit, dink ek 'Jy's nog nie reg nie.

Some time moet ek jou na 'n doctor vat.'

#### **RESIDENT**

There are words we don't find in a dictionary that we use, you see, but it's a nonexistent word but we understand what it means.

#### **RESIDENTS**

Uh uh. Listen to me. Let me tell you something

[LOCAL DIALECT]

Hy praat al sy kak saam met my, you know?

'Waar gaat jy woon?'

'Ek wil nie weg van my pa nie.'

"As ek getrou het, wil ek nie weg van my pa nie."

#### **RESIDENT**

Because we were slaves you see so we came from the East whatever and then afterwards we adapted that to the South African language you know which was Afrikaans at that time, South Afrikaans mixed with the English and the eastern languages so and then we just mixed it up all the time.

#### **NARRATOR**

The former chapel in District Six has now been converted into a museum so that the history of the area and its language can be documented.

#### **NOOR**

These are all the streets and my house we saw here at the corner of Caledon Street and Hosburglen. This was St Marks church there and that was the fish market right opposite.

#### **NARRATOR**

Under Apartheid Afrikaans was imposed as the official language of South Africa and there was a strong purist ideology to keep languages separate.

#### **KAY**

During the Apartheid era when there was a strong concern for racial purity and that went along with the strong concern for what people called linguistic purity and its very very common it's not particular to South Africa that where there are heavily weighted ethnic

divisions that very often that the weighting carries over into the language and if people want to keep separate they will not want their languages influenced by the other and they sometimes use words like contamination, we don't want it contaminated with that other language and so on.

### **NOOR**

I used to travel a lot you know, every year we used to go to South End Port Elizabeth now there and also other areas people speak proper Afrikaans like the people speak here you know and I remember when we go there every year when we speak they used to laugh at us you know and when they speak we used to laugh at them so it was really fun you know but of course after that it didn't bother them because then they realise now that it's our language why must you laugh at somebody's other language you know, so I am very proud, very proud, we still speak it, my brothers, my sisters, well of course my children speak English you know, but we as a family and cousins and friends, we still speak the same language.

### **NARRATOR**

During Apartheid language and politics were closely entwined. Afrikaans was spoken at school but for many families who lived in District Six like this one it was seen as the language of the Apartheid regime and English was viewed more positively.

### **SHEILA**

We normally speak English but we grew up, my mother spoke Afrikaans, my father spoke English and that's how we were quite fluent in both languages you know and at school too.

### **LINDA**

My father would not allow us to speak Afrikaans in the home because of his, because of the policies of the government he suffered so much, he was a soldier he fought for this country and you know, even though he went through all that he was treated like a second class citizen and so he totally rejected the culture of Afrikaner nationalist government and so we were forbidden to speak Afrikaans in our house so we spoke to my mother when he wasn't there and then she would, and he would always tell her don't speak Afrikaans but you know when you lived in District Six you had to speak Afrikaans and for me it was all about mixing my languages. The interesting thing about District Six was you spoke a certain way in your home, in the streets you would speak Afrikaans and then you would mix your English and Afrikaans and you would speak a different Afrikaans to what you spoke in school. In school you were taught the proper Afrikaans of Taal you know and then your friends on the street you spoke just like them if you didn't speak like them you would be ostracised you would sometimes be bullied.

### **NARRATOR**

The vernacular which is spoken by the District Six residents is viewed much more positively now than it was under Apartheid.

### **KAY**

People are now quite confident about speaking this vernacular outside the community and also sometimes recognising that it has enormous value so for example two people that I interviewed again when they were in their early twenties, one had become a doctor and one was just finishing her degree in nursing. I had interviewed them when they were 3,4,5 years old and tape recorded them when they were at preschool and I knew that they were fluent in both languages and could speak the vernacular and I asked them as adults now and in your professional lives which languages do you use most and so on and you know do you use the vernacular because they were not working, there aren't any hospitals left in District Six, there was one. So they are not working in District Six anymore but the vernacular is quite or a form of it, is widely spoken and they said it is absolutely crucial in our work because people are frightened when they are ill, come to see the doctor, they know if they are working class and they are quite often they are I can't speak proper English but I don't know the Afrikaans words for my ailments so I can't really speak Afrikaans cos I might mix and they just say it's a huge relief if the doctor can actually speak to them in their own vernacular and because of course you can't learn a vernacular like that, nobody teaches it, you can only pick it up by association

the second message that the patients were getting is, we grew up in circumstances like yours so it was a great bonding thing and they both said that it is crucial.

### **BONITA**

There is strangely enough a lot of the old dialect that still exists that people still use as a kind of, I suppose an informal dialect and I see and some of it is class based because I have still heard, I still hear lots of people talking the dialect in the townships. So sometimes it is also a dialect for the working classes I think and people that have hung onto that very comfortable in talking in that register. So I don't see it really dying out in that sense. The current District Six community has a number of new languages that have come in through people coming from other parts of Africa like in the rest of South Africa, the rest of Cape Town, people coming from Congo, people coming from Rwanda a lot of Zimbabweans so we have got Shauna we've got French, we've got a bit of Portuguese as well and so I think it is going to be interesting to see the kind of language mix that emerges from that.