

STANDARDISATION AND VARIATION IN SOUTH AFRICAN ENGLISH

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1. Terminology - dialect, accent, standard, non-standard.

An appraisal of dialectal diversity in South African English has to be set against linguists' approach to language variation in general and to the variation characteristic of English in other countries. This perspective is unfortunately rare in South African academic writing on the subject, which tends to adopt a hyper-normative or narrowly pedagogic view on the matter.

A language is the sum of its dialects; popular notions about a dialect not being 'language proper' are unscientific, as our discussion of the difference between standard and non-standard dialect will make clear. Dialects of a language are defined by their differences in terms of pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. Such differences may be associated with regional or social characteristics. In the former case, we speak of regional dialects, in the latter of social dialects or (sociolects). Social dialects may arise from differences according to social class, ethnicity, caste, etc. Whereas accent refers to features of pronunciation alone, 'dialect' includes at least grammar or lexical criteria. Thus, 'dialect' typically includes features of pronunciation, but not necessarily. Accent and dialect are separable, since it is possible to learn another dialect, while retaining one's original accent. It is also possible to speak standard English with any accent, though this is not always appreciated by lay and some academic writers.

The standard form of a language is that dialect which is most often used by educated people; it is the form usually used in writing, by the media, and in educational institutions. Linguists stress that the standard form of a language is but one dialect among many. Because of historical circumstances it may have been propelled to a position of power, and acquired the aura of being superior, logical, correct and aesthetically pleasing. These are *post-hoc* processes, as Edwards (1979:76) makes clear, in relation to standard English and French:

Linguistically, there is nothing which accords SE [Standard English] special status; nevertheless, because of its widespread social acceptance it is, in relation to other dialects, *primus inter pares* [first among equals]

The power of a standard variety derives from historical accident and convention. Parisian French, for example, is usually taken as the standard dialect of that language yet, if history had decreed that some other centre were to be the capital of France, then presumably its linguistic variety would now be the accepted standard...

The term *non-standard* ought not to carry negative overtones; non-standard dialects are simply those that were not privileged in the standardisation process. Although we may speak of 'standard' and 'non-standard' dialects, it must be borne in mind that dialects of a language tend to be similar in terms of the vast majority of linguistic features. As Labov (1972:64) puts it, 'the gears and axles of English grammatical machinery are

available to speakers of all dialects'. Differences which are linguistically quite small are often magnified as carriers of social meaning.

I now present thirteen 'touchstones' regarding the English language, dialect and the school, held by most sociolinguists today, which I have extracted and condensed from Trudgill (1975). These will form a baseline against which South African trends can be gauged.

(1) Variation in English along regional, social and stylistic lines is normal and to be expected.

(2) Within English-speaking countries, different regional and social dialects have developed because - or at least, partially because - different linguistic changes have taken place over a long period of time in different parts of the country and in different sections of the community. Even standard English is subject to the processes of change.

(3) All speakers of English are dialect speakers; that is standard English is also a dialect.

(4) Standard International English is subject to internal variation: for example, American standard English differs from British standard English.

(5) Dialects are not homogeneous, fixed entities with well-defined boundaries (or labels). Although people tend to perceive linguistic varieties as if they were discrete, reality involves social and linguistic continua.

(6) Where two groups of speakers develop closer social contacts than they had previously, their language is quite likely to converge.

(7) Style cuts across dialect; there are also formal and

informal standards. Thus *I'm bloody knackered* might be standard but colloquial; *I be very tired* might be non-standard but formal.

(8) Writing is a secondary phenomenon of language; speech is primary. If speech and writing are not in accord, it may be because the writing system is inadequate, not the speech.

(9) What appear to be linguistic judgements are usually social judgements, having their basis in status and social groupings. If we dislike an accent it is because of a complex of factors involving social, political and regional biases, rather than because of aesthetic factors. Groups of people who are prejudiced against others will probably always be able to find linguistic differences to support their prejudices.

(10) It is said that certain children must change their accents or they will run the risk of not being understood. Problems of this type are almost always over-estimated. What is difficult to one person may be easily understandable to another. Miscomprehension arising from accent differences is short-lived, comprehension becomes automatic given goodwill on both sides and prolonged contact. Teachers with a tolerant view of accents are more likely to establish good relations with pupils than those who display subtle or overt intolerance.

(11) While empowerment of people speaking non-standard dialects via teaching the use of the standard is a feasible goal, it must be tempered by questions of allegiance. That is, such empowerment is not a practical proposition unless the pupil wants to be associated with the group that typically speaks standard English, and s/he has a reasonable expectation of being able to do so. There may be a price to be paid for changing one's dialect, in terms of personal and cultural identity.

(12) Teaching all pupils to write standard English is uncontroversial. Since writing is a slower process than speaking, it enables the writer to make the necessary linguistic adjustments. There is less psychological involvement in ordinary (non-creative) writing; thus the use of the standard dialect for this purpose does not commit the writer to allegiance to any particular social group.

(13) Not all errors in writing are a result of non-standard dialect interference. Many are at the level of discourse and are also made by children writing in their home language. Most children are likely to benefit from help in matters of organisation, lay-out and argumentation.

I do not mean to suggest that the implications of all of these touchstones are easily implementable in the classroom. In particular, Trudgill does not acknowledge that the greatest opposition to the use of stigmatised dialects in the school system may come from adults within the stigmatised community itself. This may arise out of the fear of a possible ghettoization effect - and a suspicion that use of a localised, non-prestigious form of speech in the classroom (even for an interim period) might be a way of limiting opportunities for children in the community (see Fasold 1990:275n; and Wardhaugh 1992:340n). In turning to the South African case, it is first necessary to point out the differences regarding English and English education from the situation Trudgill takes as his base.

Trudgill is working within an overwhelmingly English society, in which L2-speakers of English are in a minority. In South Africa the presence of L2-varieties and the absence of a knowledge of English among children in many lower-grade English

classrooms must be given more attention than regional variation. The English situation treated by Trudgill involves relatively neat regional dialects with a social overlay. In South Africa the main divisions are currently on ethnic lines, less so on geographical ones. Trudgill deals with a well-defined standard dialect (the endo-normative southern British dialect) and prestigious accent (RP or 'Received Pronunciation').<sup>2</sup> In South Africa the situation is more problematical: RP and standard Southern British English form an important (and largely exonormative) educational ideal; but there is competition from other sources regarding informal standards: American English (thanks to its wide use on television), as well as an indigenous variety which Lanham (1982) calls 'Respectable' SAE.

On more practical lines, Trudgill takes for granted teachers who are native-speakers of English; in South Africa this is the exception. Even White schools of the past have occasionally had non-native English teachers (chiefly of Afrikaner descent).<sup>3</sup> Apartheid legislation denied pupils access to native-speaker models of English in the African schools even if such teachers were available. Furthermore, the inspectorate and administrative officials in charge of English have for some time been largely of Afrikaner background (Hartshorne 1987:100; Young 1990). Trudgill is working within a long-standing and stable education system, whereas we inherit a quagmire of problems. Research into English dialects in Britain is relatively advanced, laying the foundation for educationalists to build on - we are still at a fledgling stage. Finally, the antagonisms between different groups are much stronger in South Africa, the stereotypes, prejudices and competition for resources much greater (though

this is perhaps changing).

## 2. Sociolinguistic approaches to non-standard syntactic forms in South African English.

Linguists tend to categorize varieties of English along ethnic lines in South Africa, rather than by region or class. Although ethnic slicing for academic purposes along the lines of apartheid is to be distrusted, there is little doubt that segregation in housing and schooling has tended to polarise South African English into ethnolects. However, the ethnolects themselves are not homogeneous, showing secondary differentiation according to speakers' first (or ancestral) language, class and region. What I propose to do in the rest of this paper is to outline two constructions, one from South African Black English the other from Cape Flats English, to show the complexities of dialect syntax, which is done ill justice by the dismissive label "substandard".

Lanham (1976:290) expressed doubts whether African English (or South African Black English) had a well formed and coherent status. Magura (1984:5), on the other hand, argues that an indigenous norm has developed, and that 'Africans have accepted English as an inescapable colonial legacy. But they have also made it conform to their culture, language system, and way of thinking and expression'. There is some truth in each assertion. SABE as spoken by many educated people is a focussed nativised variety; but it co-exists with the interlanguage forms characteristic of many learners (which may fossilise at various stages - hence Lanham's impression of it being unfocussed). The SABE feature that I will discuss is the reversal of the polarity

that governs answers to *yes/no* questions couched in the negative. In positive *yes/no* questions South African Black English is no different from standard English. Thus:

1. Q: *Is he arriving tomorrow?*

A: *Yes (he is); or No (he isn't).*

That is, in both South African Black English and standard English *yes* implies 'yes he is', and *no* implies 'no, he isn't'.

The rules in the two dialects are different if the question were initiated in the negative:

2. Q: *Isn't he arriving tomorrow?*

A: *Yes (he is).* Standard English

*Yes (he isn't).* South African Black English

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*No (he isn't)* Standard English

*No (he is)* South African Black English

That is, the answer *yes* implies 'he is' according to the conventions of the one dialect, and 'he isn't' in the other. The same holds for the answer *no* in isolation. As Gowlett (1977:14) and Bokamba (1982:84-5) point out, the logic underlying the examples from South African Black English (and African English generally) is consistent with those found in Bantu as well as West African languages.<sup>4</sup>

A strict syntactic analysis supports the notion of a systematic difference between the two dialects (rather than one being somehow 'naturally' superior). Firstly, in standard English agreement holds between *yes* and *is* and between *no* and *isn't* in the answer, irrespective of how the question is framed. Thus:

3. Q: *Is he arriving tomorrow?*

A:  $\overrightarrow{\text{Yes (he is)}}; \text{ or } \overrightarrow{\text{No (he isn't)}}.$

Q: *Isn't he arriving tomorrow?*

A:  $\overrightarrow{\text{Yes (he is)}}; \text{ or } \overrightarrow{\text{No (he isn't)}}.$

Agreement in this dialect operates laterally across the answer, as suggested by the arrows. In South African Black English this cannot be the case since *yes* in one set implies 'he is' and in the other, 'he isn't'. Is this faulty logic? In order to decide upon this we need to examine the answers *yes* and *no* in their full dialogic context. If the form of the verb *be* in the answer (whether overtly stated or not) matches that of the question the answer is always *yes*. If there is no match, the answer is *no*. Thus:

4. Q: *Is he arriving tomorrow?*

A: *Yes (he is)*

Q: *Isn't he arriving tomorrow?*

A: *Yes (he isn't)*

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Q: *Is he arriving tomorrow?*

A: *No (he isn't).*

Q: *Isn't he arriving tomorrow?*

A: *No (he is).*

In both dialects there is one underlying 'agreement' rule for both questions. Agreement in South African Black English holds not laterally, but vertically between question and answer. Incidentally, if this analysis is correct, it would show that dialects may be different in areas of grammar that on the surface appear to be the same. That is, the agreement rule for questions posed *positively* is actually different in the two dialects, even though the surface output is the same. On more practical

lines, it must be stressed that, though there is some potential for cross-dialect miscommunication in the case of questions couched in the negative, context and pragmatic cues often clarify the sense intended. Furthermore not all speakers of South African Black English use the pattern associated with it here; some educated speakers use only the standard English rule, others have both systems in their repertoire, and deploy them in different stylistic contexts. It would nevertheless be incorrect to associate the construction only with early interlanguage forms (or basilectal speakers) since it does occasionally surface as a variable rule in the speech of even university students in informal speech contexts.

One should be careful not to conclude from the above example that non-standard features in South African English are almost always instances of transfer (or "interference") from other local languages. One example of such a misanalysis will be discussed in some detail: the use of unstressed positive *do* in Cape Flats English. The Cape Flats refers to the vast sandy areas of Cape Town set aside in former times for occupation by 'non-white' people, often people forcibly removed from lush areas by apartheid laws in the nineteen fifties. This dialect of English is spoken largely, but not only, by people classified 'coloured'. I have resisted the ethnonym 'coloured English', since we are trying, with some difficulty, to move away from the facile and stereotypical labels of apartheid rule.<sup>5</sup> I use 'Cape Flats English' as a cover term for the English of people whether they have it as a dominant language, second language or an equal first language with Afrikaans. McCormick (1989) has argued that the vernacular of District Six is a mixed code: code switching is not

just an individual speaker's strategy.<sup>6</sup> There is also evidence of language shift from Afrikaans to English (in some homes), or at least a shift in dominance, with English becoming the main language of middle-class children.

My attention to unstressed *do* (non-stressed *do* is probably a more accurate term) was first drawn a few years ago when a neighbour came out in a mild fit of anger to enquire of her children the sentence reported in 5.

5. Who did throw that?

Sentence (6) is an example from children's discourse drawn from McCormick (1989:293):

6. He did eat his food. (no stress on *do*)

Sentence (7) from Malan's work amongst children from a similar community involves the past tense form of *do*:

7. Yesterday I did ride my bike in the road. A car come  
and he bump me on my back ...

More recently in trying to convince Cape Flats residents to vote in a new party in the forthcoming elections I was put on the spot about whether affirmative action would result in loss of jobs for 'coloured' people:

8. R.M.: Who told you that this was ANC policy?

Mrs X: My boss did tell me. (Louder) My boss did tell  
me.

The semantics of the construction will be treated in detail later: at this stage we simply note that the *do* or *did* form carries no phonological stress, and no presupposition of the type current in standard English 'I assert X, though you suppose not-X'. Such is the hegemony of standard English in South Africa that anything not espoused by schoolteachers and the public media

is assumed to be "substandard" and an example of "interference" from other languages, especially Afrikaans. A popular assumption is that unstressed *do* is calqued on Afrikaans past tenses.

The construction is sometimes stigmatised by members of the speech community. Some middle-class parents comment on the excessive use of *do* by children. And teachers have a field day correcting students' oral production of the form. Karen Malan (personal communication) who is currently researching the development of narrative competence in Kensington, Cape Town recently encountered a scene in a pre-school classroom at 'newstime', when the young teacher told her pupils 'You can now give me your news, but first remember there is one word we're not going to use. And we all know what that word is'. Karen assumed it was some socially tabooed lexical item that was being referred to. In fact the word being outlawed was *did*; and Karen stresses the great difficulty children had in refraining from using the construction that morning. The impression given by many speakers is that this is a typical form in children's speech, an innovation. Yet as it occurs in adult speech as well, I think the question of its origins is a particularly interesting one. Its origins take us back to the backroads of South African sociolinguistic history, not excluding second language acquisition. Perhaps far from being a case of "substandard interference" the construction goes back to the language of Shakespeare and his contemporaries when it was impeccably standard? In order to answer this provocative question we would have to examine the ways in which *do* has been used historically and in different regional dialects; and its occurrence or non-occurrence in early forms of South African English.

The main function of *do* appears to be a pragmatic one: it is a marker of salience or an introducer of salience, as the following child-language data shows:<sup>7</sup>

9. I (interviewer): And what were they doing there?

Child (W): They did bath and have they supper.

10. I: Ask her what's wrong with her lips - ask her.

Child (T): Um. Where's? Um?

To I: She did fall.

11. I: I thought he had it on for art, I wasn't sure.

Child (T): I did see Boomer.

Salience is admittedly a loose term. What the children seem to intend is to highlight the rest of VP, usually within a context of given NP subjects and/or an NP object that is given, known or obvious. (This makes the teacher's proscription on *do* in children's 'newstime' items particularly damaging: after all the exercise is essentially to report the most salient activity of the previous day.) Particularly salient in the child's world are verbs of activity and acquisition (*give, go, get, buy* etc.) Simple pasts as they occur in our data, on the other hand, are not generally salient. There is one further function of *do* amongst Cape Flats children - that of perfective marker, since children do not have the standard morphology involving *have plus past participle*. Thus, in context a sentence like *I did now cut my finger* corresponds to standard English 'I've just cut my finger'.

In answering the question of the origins of unstressed *do* there is an embarrassment of choices. I would discard the most popular one amongst commentators: the notion that Afrikaans usage is somehow to "blame". In Afrikaans the past is regularly

expressed by what is historically a perfect form, using the auxiliary *het*, the perfective prefix *ge* and the verb stem:

12. Ek het die bal geskop  
I 'have' the ball PERF-hit  
'I hit the ball'

The notion that this forms a template for the unstressed *do* construction is to my mind not very compelling for several reasons:

- (a) The word order in the English and Afrikaans is clearly different
- (b) Afrikaans *het* is functionally and etymologically equivalent to English *have* rather than *do*.
- (c) There is no equivalent to the obligatory prefix *ge* in the English pattern.
- (d) While sentence 12 is a regular pattern in Afrikaans, the putative parallel in Cape Flats English is not the normal past tense sequence.

There are still other reasons for discarding the Afrikaans pattern as being the main impetus for unstressed *do*. Direct Afrikaans influence will not explain the parallel use of unstressed *do* in the present tense in CFE: there is no auxiliary in Afrikaans present usage.

I have not yet ascertained whether speakers themselves make a connection between the Afrikaans and the English forms. The data I have analysed does not give much support for this possibility. One child (J) describing the antics of a flying car in a popular television programme produced the same utterance in a code switched sequence (13 and 14):

13. Dan fly die kar net so, jong.

then the car just so hey

'Then the car flew thus, hey'

14. That man did fly over the truck.

In being asked to repeat himself and doing so in the other language J provides a valuable piece of psycholinguistic evidence against the Afrikaans origins of unstressed *do*. It is not the past tense of Afrikaans which is being 'translated' (albeit loosely) into the *do* form in the English: for sentence (13) is in the conversational historic present. Instead it is the salience of the activity of flying that is being translated. Did in (14) must therefore be a marker of salience rather than tense alone. Finally, if transfer from Afrikaans were a compelling factor we could reasonably expect it to turn up in the English of (white) people of Afrikaner descent today and in the past. This does not appear to be so. In my survey of code-switching between English and Afrikaans in the Cape in the nineteenth century (Mesthrie 1993), there were no such attestations. There were many stereotypes about Afrikaner interlanguage English in the nineteenth century, but unstressed *do* was not one of them.

More compellingly, while present-day Afrikaner English of the western Cape has a host of second-language features, including some which can be plausibly traced to transfer, the dialect is marked by the complete absence of unstressed *do* (Watermeyer 1993).

Amongst the many possibilities the one that I will propose here is that *do* is partially a survival of a construction that was once standard in British English.

A small measure of reflection will lead us to recollect that unstressed *do* was part of the language of Shakespeare, Spenser

and Johnson:

15. Shakespeare: I do dyne today at the fathers of a certain pupil of mine. (*Love's Labour Lost*, IV, ii, 161).

16. Spenser: Her hart gan melt in great compassion; and drizzling teares did shed. (*Faerie Queen*, 1, 3, 6).<sup>8</sup>

Brook (1976:113) argues that in sixteenth century English texts it is not possible to say conclusively whether unstressed *do* is used for excited narrative, for metrical purposes or simply as an empty verb. This use of *do* started to decline in written texts during the first half of the eighteenth century. There are a few isolated nineteenth-century survivals in the poetry of Wordsworth and Robert Browning. In addition, many nineteenth-century examples are unclear as to whether an emphatic or periphrastic usage is intended. Visser (1969:1508) cites a significant entry from as late as 1818 in William Corbett's *A Grammar of the English Language*, in which the semantics of periphrastic *do* are described without stigma or suggestion that it is becoming obsolete.<sup>9</sup> The possibility that relics of unstressed *do* were carried to South Africa by standard speakers who bequeathed it to one new dialect of South African English whilst losing it themselves is accordingly worthy of investigation. A scrutiny of the letters and journals of early Cape settlers suggest that the hypothesis is a tolerable one. Sentences like the following (drawn from letters written by settlers to the Governor of the Cape, lodged in the Colonial Office Papers Collection of the Cape Archives) show that unstressed *do* was part of the 1820 Settler repertoire, albeit as a recessive construction that was giving way to formal and counter-suppositional *do*.

17. My men have been very refractory and did refuse to work for a while. (No counter presupposition - intermediate between formal and informal *do* - T. Butler 31 July 1820.)<sup>10</sup>

18. ...that Petitioner remained at the Cowie for some considerable time without fee or reward, or any kind of payment for his trouble, that during this time Petitioner did actually cross the bar Ten different times... (No counter presupposition; seems intermediate between formal and informal salient *do* - R. Weeks 9 Jan 1822. Anglerville).

19. (New paragraph): Mr. Austin did present a Memorial date 2nd June 1821 for a further grant and Mr G. Dyason also presented one without date... (no counter pre-supposition)

A more important source for unstressed *do* must have been the King James Bible. Missionaries preached in archaic religious registers in which the use of unstressed, positive *do* was commonplace. What was a formal and perhaps archaic (and therefore resonant) form of expression for the missionary might have sounded like ordinary usage to new learners of English. Furthermore many missionaries, especially those of Continental origins, used periphrastic *do* in the course of ordinary writing - in their journals and letters to their Directors in London. Here are some examples from three continental missionaries:

20. F.G. Kayser: The man got angry and did beat her with his stick, but she remained fast in her resolution. (Kayser to LMS directors, Knapp's Hope, 16 Jan 1839).

21. J.R. Faure: Being informed of this I did no longer doubt to mention it to you. (Faure to LMS Directors, Cape Town, 13/7/1830).

22. J.H. Schmelen: Most of them did set against me (Schmelen to LMS directors, Kornagggar, 29 Dec 1828).

Although there are still gaps in my arguments that need to be filled I suggest that unstressed *do* is most likely to be a retention of patterns of English brought to South Africa in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Although the pattern was becoming obsolete amongst English settlers, it was reinforced by the archaic styles of the missionaries, especially second-language speakers from the continent. Second-language strategies among new learners of English in the Cape must have played a conserving and transforming role (from formal and colloquial style to colloquial style alone) in keeping the construction alive in one speech community, whilst its erstwhile carriers adopted middle-class values that favoured new syntactic norms that excluded unstressed *do*. Far from being a haphazard form of speech as some people believe, we may well have a survival from the very best English of the Bible, Shakespeare and so on. (The only non-standard innovation would therefore be the use of *did* to signify perfective aspect.)

3. Conclusion. The arguments in this paper support the notion that there is urgent need for a shift of emphasis away from the popular perception that there is (or ought to be) one legitimate form of spoken English. Furthermore, we should not allow differences from standard English (in spoken or written medium) to prevent one from being receptive to the ideas expressed. I conclude by quoting Jenkins (1991):

It is inevitable that teachers are going to have to confront the existence of varieties of language among their

pupils in their everyday teaching.....Teachers will bear a great responsibility in educating all their pupils in understanding this phenomenon of varieties of language and handling it in such a way as to promote reconciliation between people.

#### Notes

1. This paper is partly based on Mesthrie and McCormick (1993). I am grateful to Kay McCormick for her input to that paper and for her generosity in making available her child-language data to me.

2. *Exonormative* means 'following norms developed in outside territories'; *endonormative* means 'following norms developed within the territory under consideration'.

3. For example, Elwyn Jenkyns, the current president of the English Academy, once mentioned in a talk that all his teachers at school, including teachers of English, had been L2 speakers (of Afrikaans descent).

4. In semantic terms the similarities in the answers to the positive questions and the differences in the answers to the negative questions can be attributed to the phenomenon of presupposition. *Is he arriving tomorrow?* in both dialects is neutral, the question favouring neither a negative nor positive answer. In *Isn't he arriving tomorrow?* there appears to be a difference in presupposition (or expected answer) in the two dialects. Standard English favours the expectation that he is, and the answer *yes* or *no* pick up on this expectation. In African (and South Asian) varieties of English the expectation is that he isn't, and the answer *yes* or *no* relates to this. See also Bokamba (1982:84) for a related argument.

5. Cape Flats English is also spoken by many people classified 'Indian' or 'Malay' as well as by some people of Xhosa descent.

6. District Six is not technically part of the Cape Flats, but is an important historical input into the English of the Cape Flats.

7. The examples are drawn from K. McCormick's interviews with (inter alia) children in District Six in the 1980s.

8. Examples are taken from Visser (1969: 1502-5).

9. Elsewhere Visser (1969:1512) says "it is not until well on in the 19th century, when stressless, periphrastic *do* is obsolete, that instances occur of which one can be absolutely sure that they contain an emphatic *do*". This would support my conjecture that *do* may have lasted longer than believed by many scholars. However, it must be acknowledged that Visser's remark is unclear as to whether "well on in the nineteenth century" is a *terminus ad quem* for unstressed *do* or a *terminus post quem* for stressed *do*.

10. The absence of a counter presupposition can be seen from the previous sentence of the letter, *I have laboured myself not like a slave but like a horse as everyone here can testifie and if I get good land I will set an example of industry.*

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