

SOUTH AFRICA'S LANGUAGE POLICY : THE CHALLENGE FACING TERTIARY EDUCATION

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Abstract : South Africa's first democratic elections, held in 1994, introduced a process of profound change and a new developing identity based on eleven official languages. English, the first language of the minority, is the dominant language of the many first world structures in this fourth world country, creating the perception that the majority is imprisoned in a growing third world system. Tertiary institutions consequently need to promote all South African languages, not only because it is a constitutional imperative, but because promoting multilingualism is concomitant with the vision and goals of higher education.

Keywords : tertiary education, language policies, functional multilingualism

In April 1994 South Africa held the first democratic elections in its history and since then the country has been undergoing a process of profound change. The shift from a racist, authoritarian government to an anti-racist, democratic one has led to a new political dispensation and the evolution of a new social order. This transformation is in fact so complete that one can talk of the birth of the "new" South Africa, as it is popularly called, with a new flag and a developing identity based on 11 official languages made up of English and Afrikaans, the official languages of apartheid South Africa, and 9 African languages, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu. As in any bi- or pluri-lingual community, South Africa needs a language policy and one which conforms with the fundamental principles of its Constitution: democracy, equity and development.

Language is an emotive issue, made all the more so in a country like South Africa where, for at least 45 years, policy was devised to divide. But language is also very much a

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developmental issue: South Africa is what is termed a 4th world country and English, dominant in the 1st world structures, is the first language of the small minority of the population. The other 10 languages making up the first language of the majority, do not automatically grant access to this first world South Africa, and the perception is that the majority is imprisoned in an ever-growing 3rd world system. Language policy is one of the tools available to government to redress this situation, but it is a tool that can either empower by allowing access to development, or become an instrument of exclusion by being too deeply steeped in political ideology and rhetoric.

I believe that, in the words of Heugh (1995:330), it is "in the realm of education [that] lies the crucible of either domination or transformation of society". The language policy of tertiary education thus needs to be one which promotes all South African languages, not only because multilingualism is a constitutional principle and therefore a juridical imperative - South African universities have a long tradition of asserting their autonomy with regards to state policies - but principally because the promotion of multilingualism is concomitant with the vision, goals and objectives of higher education.

Where does the country stand to date with regards to language policy? South Africa's language policy is still in the making: various boards, commissions, departments and NGOs are currently formulating reports on the issue, but it is the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, government's executive arm on language matters, who established a Language Plan Task Group (LANGTAG) whose brief was to devise a National Language Plan and advise the Ministry. The final report of this group from which policy will now be made, recommends

> ... a democratic language policy based on the acceptance of the positive value of multilingualism. (LANGTAG 1996:v),

and identifies

> ... the needs and priorities that are to be addressed if the constitutional principles pertaining to the language question are to be realised. (1996:7)

Turning then to these principles in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, adopted by the Constitutional Assembly in May 1996, just a few months before the publication of the LANGTAG recommendations, we see that the 5 language clauses[1] recognise language as a

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[1] The five language clauses in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, read as follows:

6(1) The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.

6(2) Recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages of our people, the state must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of these languages.

6(3) National and provincial governments may use particular official languages for the purposes of government, taking into account usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances, and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in respective provinces; provided that no national or provincial government may use only one official language. Municipalities must take into consideration the language usage and preferences of their residents.

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right, express a commitment to redress the imbalances caused by the discrimination of the past, and commit the country to multilingualism.

Let us consider the extent of the constitutional commitment to an equitable language policy by looking at the manner in which the language clauses of the 1993 Interim Constitution were reworked in this final version. Clause 3(1) of the Interim Constitution (1993) established that there would be 11 official languages and that they were to be used, promoted and developed equally. Clause 3(2) however, stated that the

> Rights relating to language and the status of languages existing at the commencement of this Constitution shall not be diminished ...

The languages at issue here are Afrikaans and English which had enjoyed the superior status of official languages in apartheid South Africa to the developmental detriment of the newly official African languages. As Kathleen Heugh (1995:345)[2] has noted, clause 3(2), almost directly negated the equality afforded the newly officialised African languages in 3(1). The final Constitution however has dropped this non-diminution clause thereby effectively committing South Africa to linguistic parity.

South Africa's linguistic demography

Language	Number of speakers	% of the population
Zulu	8 541 137	21,93
Xhosa	6 891 358	17,69
Tswana	3 601 609	09,24
North Sotho	3 432 042	08,82
South Sotho	2 652 590	06,81
Tsonga	1 349 022	03,46
Swati	926 094	02,37
Ndebele	799 247	02,05
Venda	763 247	01,95
Afrikaans	6 188 981	15,89
English	3 432 042	08,82
Other	323 919	01,87

6(4) National and provincial governments, by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor the use by those governments of official languages. Without detracting from the provisions of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.

6(5) The Pan South African Language Board must -

(a) promote and create conditions for the development and use of

(I) all official languages;

(ii) the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and

(iii) sign language.

(b) promote and ensure respect for languages, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, and others commonly used by communities in South Africa, and Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and others used for religious purposes.

[2] "This non-diminution clause ... effectively prevents the reduction of the privileged status of either Afrikaans or English. Clause 3(1) tacitly extends equal status to all 11 languages, but this is effectively undermined by clause 3(2)."

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South Africa's linguistic demography is a complex one. The above statistics (Schuring and Prinsloo, 1990) show that approximately 86% of all South Africans have an indigenous South African language as their first language, whereas English is the first language of only just under 9% of the population. This statistical representation fails to reflect that English has a *de facto* privileged status in the higher echelons of power as well as in high status positions in commerce and education. The Government, the public service and the political leadership use English as the most important medium of communication. Since the installation of the Government of National Unity the Annual Reports of government departments are published only in English, or in English and Afrikaans, (a throw back to the apartheid era), with a few notable exceptions; for example our Communication Services use all 11 official languages, as is to be expected, but the Department of Justice only use 4 (LANGTAG 1996:195) Further, English is the language used on political platforms.

In the printed and electronic media, the emphasis is almost entirely on English (LANGTAG 1996:160). The South Africa Broadcasting Corporation reserves one TV channel solely for English, all other languages share the other two; the reporting of important events, on both television and radio, is done mostly in English; public figures speaking languages other than English rarely benefit from air time and voice overs are mostly in English (LANGTAG 1996:160). The South African National Defence Force has recently proclaimed a unilingual language policy in favour of English (de Kadt 1996:12) as has Eskom, the parastatal national supplier of electricity. And of course, in the business sector English is used as the national and international language of commerce and trade.

With regards to tertiary education, a recent survey (National Commission on Higher Education [NCHE] 1996:378) shows that all tertiary institutions - universities, technikons, single vocation training colleges - use English as a medium of instruction. In some, dual medium or parallel tuition takes place, but only in Afrikaans and English (and this in institutions which were originally Afrikaans-medium universities and have only just recently become bilingual). None encourages the use of African languages in formal classes in disciplines other than the African languages themselves. All universities and technikons offer Afrikaans and English as subjects, but other official South African languages are offered at different levels at only a few of the institutions (NCHE 1996:378).

The origins of this hegemony of English in higher education are to be found, first and foremost, in the separatist, apartheid policies of the Nationalist government which made language an instrument of division, ethnic differentiation and subjection. At the time of Union in 1910, English and Dutch were proclaimed official languages and English was the language of education (white education, that is, as there was no provision for what, at that time, was called Bantu education). In 1925 Afrikaans replaced Dutch as one of the official languages and the Afrikaner nationalist movement demanded, and obtained, that there be Afrikaans-medium primary and secondary schools alongside the English-medium schools. After the Nationalists came to power in 1948, policy was formulated which divided all education along racial lines. As far as school education for blacks was concerned, the 1953 Bantu Education Act established that after 8 years of primary school instruction in the mother tongue, Afrikaans and English were to be used equally as mediums of instruction. This language policy for black education was one of the main causes of the 1976 Soweto riots which finally, after much social and political upheaval, led to the Ministry agreeing that one

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medium, either English or Afrikaans, to be decided upon by the school, could be used at secondary level, as was the case in white education. By 1978, 96% of African pupils in secondary school were being taught through the medium of English (Hartshorne 1995:312-313)

Parallel to what was happening at schools, the Extension of the University Education Act of 1959 applied the ideology of apartheid at tertiary level by establishing separate universities for different ethnic groups (NCHE 1996:29). Black students, that is African, Indian and Coloured, were only admitted to the so-called white universities in cases where equivalent programmes were not offered at the black universities and only after ministerial approval had been obtained. The language policy, at both historically white and historically black universities restricted the use of African languages as languages of tuition to the teaching of these languages themselves (NCHE 1996:377), and the medium of instruction was either English or Afrikaans. This separation at the higher education level was to reinforce the dominance of white rule by excluding blacks from quality academic education and technical training and, in the infamous words of H.F. Verwoed, to prevent the black population from rising above "a certain level of labour" (as quoted in NCHE 1996:385)

The legacy of apartheid educational policy therefore, is that many black students are not adequately prepared for higher education, neither with regard to basic academic skills nor with regard to language awareness and communicative competence in the language of tuition and learning. Although entrance requirements at most tertiary institutions have been modified[3] so that students who have the potential ability to cope with higher education are not restricted by their high school results, the anomaly remains: the majority of students now studying at tertiary institutions have an African language as a home language, while English remains the medium of tuition and formal communication.

It is commonly recognised that the low level of proficiency in English is one of the major factors in the high failure rate amongst black students and in the small number of black students progressing to post-graduate study. This recognition has led to the realisation that the majority of the student population at universities is not English-speaking and all universities now offer special courses in English second language (NCHE 1996:379). Many have also introduced bridging or foundation courses which aim at facilitating the acquisition of the core concepts of academic discourse. These programmes are, however, of what could be termed a remedial nature, there is little taking place with regards to facilitating learning by the introduction of auxiliary resources in the students' African first languages. The universities' attempts therefore, as well-founded as they may be, merely serve to expand and entrench the use of English in all spheres of the students' experience.

Of course, access to English does need to be taken seriously if only for the reason that it is perceived as the language of upward mobility. In a survey (Chick 1996:3) done by the Department of Linguistics at the University of Natal amongst a group of African students, the following results were found:

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[3] Since the statutory demise of apartheid in 1993, tertiary institutions have been officially desegregated and the number of black students has increased considerably. Statistics for the year 1986 show that of the total student enrolments at universities and technikons only 15% were African while 73% were white (NCHE 1996:32) whereas in 1995, 53% were African and 35% white (NCHE 1996:48).

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- 57,9% of the respondents consider English as the language of international contact;
- 27,78% see it as a language of national unity;
- 81% anticipate using mostly English in their future profession ;
- 68% anticipate using it when interacting with public servants;
- 46,9% indicate that they anticipate using mostly English in the area where they plan to live;
- as many as 19,7% indicate that they anticipate using mostly English in their home.

It is therefore not surprising that Dr Neville Alexander, chairman of LANGTAG and a powerful campaigner for the valorisation of African languages and the promotion of multilingualism, states that

> ... for many years (possibly for as long as two generations), there will be very strong economic and social pressure on non-English speakers in South Africa to target English as a language of learning for their children. (in de Kadt 1996:16)

Statistics regarding the number of English second language speakers amongst black South Africans are not conclusive, no doubt as the term "knowing English" can be interpreted in many ways (de Kadt 1996:4). However, figures in the 1991 census indicate that only between 36% and 28% of black South Africans are able to speak, read and write English and this survey excluded the former homelands where the majority of people live in rural areas and are less likely to know English.

> It is therefore far more likely that, in reality, less than 25% of the black population of South Africa know English well enough to be able ... to obtain meaningful access through it to educational development, economic opportunity, political participation and social mobility. (Webb 1996:179)

If one accepts to greatly summarise the functions of tertiary education as being to provide this educational development, economic opportunity, political participation and social mobility for a managerial and professional class of individuals, I would argue that tertiary institutions cannot carry out these functions effectively if the hegemony of English is maintained. My reasons for this point of view are briefly as follows:

The post-Fordist approach to management, which is commonly followed in modern-day business and administration, demands communication and negotiation skills, and in a complex plurilingual society, multilingual skills on the part of management would seem a necessity[4]. World markets are increasingly multilingual as a result of the recognition in business that one needs to speak the language of one's client in order to ensure profitable trade relations. Added to this, a unilingual university-trained South African élite would be disadvantaged with regard to access to different cultural groups, and this in turn would limit the growth potential of the economy, political efficacy and the social advancement of the country as a whole. Further, a unilingual system favouring English ineluctably leads to the devalorisation of African languages, of African cultures and eventually of the individual, causing dissatisfaction, intensifying division and leading to social and political strife.

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[4] See Lo Bianco 1995.

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One cannot ignore the experience of other African countries in this regard. Despite OAU policy decisions promoting multilingualism, nearly all universities have opted to use ex-colonial languages, English, French or Portuguese, as the language of tuition (NCHE 1996:382). According to South African linguists, this unilingual policy has been an obstacle to the development of generalised education and to the State achieving self-reliance, it has also led to a high drop-out rate in schools (NCHE 1996:382). Neither can tertiary education ignore that multilingualism is a reality in the entire world[5] and that countries in Europe and Asia have developed their national languages so as to make them suitable as languages of tuition at tertiary level, even though primary source materials may not be available in those languages. Flemish, in Belgium and Catalan in Spain are two outstanding examples of the success of using a regional language in tertiary education.

The imperatives of education, the economy, democratisation and culture are not mutually exclusive, they are, on the contrary, fundamentally interrelated and evolve together in a dynamic way. In a multilingual country, therefore, the precondition for development - of the individual, the group, and the nation as a whole - is that public life and civil society need to be multilingual too. If English alone remains in a privileged status position, the majority, that is 86% of the population is excluded from development. One does however need to remain realistic, and it is fast becoming a well documented fact that the African languages as they currently stand have not been sufficiently developed to be used as languages of tertiary education and of scholarly communication and debate. A model therefore needs to be implemented which sets out a language policy that works with and not against the socio-economic and linguistic reality of the country, a reality in which English, even though a second language to the majority, is accorded its *de facto* status as a nationally unifying and internationally and economically necessary tool, but in which too, the 10 other languages making up the first languages of the majority are indispensable communicative tools for that same majority.

Such a model is comprehensively described by Heugh as a language policy option that she calls functional multilingualism and which is defined as follows

> African languages are rehabilitated by means of comprehensive and mutually complementary strategies in the political economic and educational sectors. ... English is adopted from an instrumental point of view as the lingua franca, with the proviso that that another South African language might later occupy this role. (Heugh1995:331)
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> Functional multilingualism can achieve a vibrantly multilingual society in which people are not marginalised by the hegemony of any particular language. (Heugh 1995:346)

The report of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE 1996), a comprehensive analysis of tertiary education in South Africa making recommendations for change, cogently

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[5] Iceland being the only unilingual country in the world.

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argues in favour of introducing African languages at tertiary level in a manner that falls within the ambit of the above model :

> The problem is not *whether* to use a colonial or an indigenous language. Rather we should consider *what* languages should be used in *which* domains and how to train the population accordingly. (My italics.) (NCHE 1996:383)

The implementation of such a language policy needs to be carefully planned and phased-in without being too ambitious while remaining flexible so as to be able to respond to the changing reality. Each institution would first need to ascertain the first language of the majority of its students and decide which South African language, alongside English, would be the language of tuition[6] . The first stage of promotion of this language would be to require all students, in all faculties, to study an African language in the course of their university career, further incentives would be offered to academic staff to become proficient, over a number of years, in the African language the institution has chosen as the other medium of instruction. The next step would be to gradually make auxiliary teaching and learning resources in the African language available to students. This presupposes research into the language, the development of terminology, and the modernisation and elaboration of the language in order to make it suitable for use as a medium of academic discourse, eventually at all levels.

The African languages and literatures themselves would be taught in the medium of the relevant languages and subjects which lead to regular contact with people speaking those African languages, for instance in the social sciences, would offer courses, or modules, in either English or the African language. Finally, and eventually, a wide range of university courses would be offered through the medium of the African language alongside those taught in English.

The NCHE report similarly concludes:

> We should implement a strategy that sets realisable short-term goals and gradually progresses towards the ultimate goal of using African languages as languages of tuition next to English at tertiary level. (1996:386)

The challenge therefore, facing tertiary education in South Africa with regards to language policy is to actively transform the language practices in their institutions. Tertiary education needs to be a primary instrument for the practical promotion of South African languages. Tertiary education needs to work with and not against the multilingualism which is the sociolinguistic characteristic of South Africa. With a policy of functional multilingualism tertiary education will not only redress the educational inequalities of the past but will ensure that these inequities do not take hold in another form. As African languages are valorised and developed, at all levels of the educational system, for the majority of South Africans these languages will be made viable as a way to knowledge and social, economic and political

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6 At the University of Natal in 1995, 3044 of the 4802 African students enrolled, 63%, were Zulu speakers.

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power. It is only by embracing a functionally multilingual language policy that tertiary education will be able to fully realise its objectives as generators of knowledge and educators of an élite able to contribute meaningfully to national development. It is also the way of entrenching a democratic society based on the principle of equity.

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