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Socio-Political Factors in the Evolution of Language Policy in Post-Apartheid South Africa

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Preliminary remarks

The history of the language question as a political issue in South Africa is replete with irony. The general colonialist injunction to the effect that “(the) natives should learn our language, rather than we theirs” (see Wilson and Thompson 1969:66), proclaimed by the administrative cadres of the two European powers (Holland and Britain) which conquered and ruled parts or all of what is now the Republic of South Africa between 1652 and 1910, stamped its impression on the sociolinguistic history of the territory. Not surprisingly, the three distinctive periods during which the language issue led to bloody civil conflict have involved struggles that implied or were ideologically justified in terms of competition or rivalry between Afrikaans (Dutch) and English, the languages of the two colonial powers!

This fact, which one does not have to dig up from underneath Carlyle’s proverbial heap of dead dogs, for the simple reason that it obtrudes itself on to the consciousness of the historian or of the sociologist of language, is the key to our understanding of the relationship between language and power in post-apartheid South Africa. It confirms two propositions on which scholars in applied language studies agree, and tells us much about what we can expect to happen in the coming period of transitional ambivalence in South Africa. It confirms, among other things, that

- the hierarchies of the linguistic market are largely determined by the mundane fact of economic and political, or military, dominance, and that
- the “colonised mind” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o 1994) of conquered peoples has often led to a failure on the part of their leadership to realise the power that is latent in the languages of the oppressed and of other subaltern strata or groups.

Concretely, this otherwise unremarkable bit of information is an indicator of those socio-political factors that have tended to obstruct as well as to favour the evolution of a consistently democratic language policy in South Africa after the demise of apartheid.

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1 These periods refer in particular to the reign of Lord Charles Somerset (1814 – 1826) in the Cape Colony, Sir Alfred Milner (1897-1905) and the Soweto Uprising (1976-1977).
Language and class: the hegemony of English and the paradox of Afrikaans

In South Africa, as elsewhere in post-colonial Africa, the English language reigns supreme. In the era of globalisation, during which the language of Shakespeare and of Winston Churchill is fast becoming for the ruling strata of the world what Latin once was for the elites of medieval Europe, this observation is not unexpected, of course. What is remarkable, however, is the fact that, in South Africa, this has “always” been the situation. That is to say, ever since black people in South Africa began to participate on a regular basis in the social and political life of the modern Europeanised colonial state formations that came to constitute the Union of South Africa, i.e., approximately after 1877, the leadership of the oppressed people have seen English as the language of aspiration, indeed as the language of liberation.

It is this “unassailable position of English” (Chinua Achebe) that is the fundamental roadblock that stands in the way of the intellectualisation of the African languages. Partly because of the pre-literate character of most sub-Saharan African societies at the time of European colonial conquest and the consequent disproportionate impact of the literacy practices of the Christian missionaries, the manner in which the languages of the oppressors captured and shaped, in fact subjugated, the minds of the colonised subjects is almost impossible to be imagined by a later generation that has become conditioned to the dominance of these languages. In the colonial context, therefore, the low status of the indigenous African languages – with only very few exceptions – is perfectly explicable. It is the fact of the continuation of this situation in the post-colonial context that is less easily understandable. However, since the pathfinding historical analysis by, among others, Fanon and Ngugi and the generic theoretical exploration of the constitution of linguistic markets by Pierre Bourdieu and his school, this phenomenon has become generally understood. In the South African context, following the analysis of Colin Baker (1996), I call the attitudinal

2 Some might say 1906, when the last act of “primary resistance” to colonial conquest, the Bambata Rebellion, took place.

3 I do not use the term “intellectualisation” in pursuit of any hidden elitist project. According to Garvin (1973:43, cited in Finlayson and Madiba 2003:1), “intellectualisation” means the conscious development of “… more accurate and detailed means of expression, especially in the domains of modern life, that is to say in the spheres of science and technology, of government and politics, of higher education, of contemporary culture, etc.” Philippine linguists and sociolinguists, who have been among the most prolific scholars of this subject, go back to the Prague School’s innovative work. They cite “Havranek’s paradigm” as their source. Intellectualisation is, thus, understood as the adaptation of a language “… to the goal of making possible precise and rigorous, if necessary, abstract statements; in other words, a tendency towards increasingly more definite yet abstract expression. This tendency affects primarily the lexical, and in part the grammatical, structure” (Cruz 1995:83; Llamzon 2001:17). In his introduction to the seminal work of Halliday and Martin (1993), Allan Luke underlines their basic understanding that “… the languages and discourses of science … have characteristic features that have evolved to do various forms of cognitive and semiotic work which the ‘common-sense’ language of everyday life cannot: including, for instance, the representation of technicality and abstraction…. “. 
malaise that afflicts the majority of African-language speakers by the name ‘static maintenance syndrome’. This means no more, but also no less, than that most of them are willing to maintain their languages in the primary domains of the family and of the community as also in religious contexts. They do not believe, however, that these languages have the capacity to develop into languages of power. In terms of Bourdieu’s paradigm, their consciousness reflects the reality of the linguistic market and they have become victims of a monolingual habitus, in spite of the fact that most African people are proficient in two or more languages.

As against this self-deprecatory attitude, in South Africa, English, for mostly instrumental reasons, is considered to be the passport to, as well as the badge of, modernity. In a manner similar to that which prevails in most of the rest of “anglophone” Africa, proficiency in the language secures for one a well-remunerated job, high social status, secondary and tertiary educational qualifications and access to the cosmopolitan culture of the international glamour set as it is projected via television advertisements. Very little has changed in the perception of the political and cultural elite from the almost sycophantic attitudes that were manifest among their progenitors at the beginning of the 20th century and for most of the subsequent decades. If anything, the harshness and brutalisation attendant on the imposition of apartheid rule after World War II, which is associated in the popular mind with the dominant linguistic medium of that imposition, i.e., Standard Afrikaans, tended to make the youth see English as even more desirable than had been the case with their forebears. The irony, of course, is that the rejection of Afrikaans as “the language of the oppressor” did not lead to a stance of valorising the African languages themselves, as one would have expected. This fact can only be explained in terms of the lack of role models. Or, to put it differently, the fact that their political and cultural role models generally spoke and wrote English in all public contexts, especially on prestigious occasions, made the young people believe that English, rather than the African languages they know best, is the way to go.

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4 My favourite quote comes from one of South Africa’s first black middle-class professionals and political leaders, Dr Abdurahman, who, in the period when the possible union of the four South African colonies was being debated, stated unequivocally that

The question naturally arises which is to be the national language. Shall it be the degraded forms of a literary language, a vulgar patois; or shall it be that language which Macaulay says is ‘In force, in richness, in aptitude for all the highest purposes of the poet, the philosopher, and the orator inferior to the tongue of Greece alone?’ Shall it be the language of the ‘Kombuis’ [kitchen, NA] or the language of Tennyson? That is, shall it be the Taal [Afrikaans, NA] or English? .... (cited in Alexander 1989:29).

5 It should be mentioned, though, that this result was not a foregone conclusion. In what might turn out to be one of the more catalytic contributions to the discussion of the language question in South Africa, Ngugi wa Thiong’o (2003) recently foregrounded the debate that took place in the early years of the 20th century between what we might call the “Anglophiles” and the “Africanists” in respect of the medium of creative and other writing. At about the same time, a related debate was taking place among black first-language speakers of Afrikaans (see Adhikari 1996:102-103).
As in other independent African states, the post-apartheid leadership professes that selecting any one or even two African languages would necessarily play into the hands of tribalists by sowing the poisoned seeds of ethnic jealousy and social division. Hence, they, too, offer this as the main reason for promoting English as a kind of lingua franca. As in the case of the political generation of Dr Abdurahman and Dr Dube at the beginning of the 20th century, the post-apartheid leadership at the beginning of the 21st century has decided very deliberately to promote English rather than one or more of their own languages, even though none of them, today, would go to the extremes that Abdurahman himself was prepared to go.

That such attitudes were, among other things, the expression of a middle-class aspiration to enjoy the advantages of an urban, industrial civilisation ought to be obvious. In the context of colonial oppression and, subsequently, of segregationist and apartheid social engineering, the debilitating effects of this positioning of the elite have in the course of a century given rise to the social pathology I have referred to as static maintenance syndrome. In South Africa, as elsewhere on the continent, English came to be viewed by the vast majority of the black people not only as the language of economic power and social status but particularly also as the language of national unity and of liberation. Paradoxically, only a very small percentage of the people are actually proficient enough in what for most of them is a third language in order to be able to empower themselves by means of it.

Despite this fact, it is true to say that

In South Africa, English has become the language people like best following the social changes accompanying political events of recent years. Even if people speak other first languages at home, for the most part they want to go to school in English and they believe that the economic future of South Africa requires a knowledge of English (Eastman 1992:109).

6 In the official newsletter of the African People’s Organisation, of which he was the president, Dr Abdurahman (probably) himself wrote that the coloured people should
… endeavour to perfect themselves in English - the language which inspires the noblest thoughts of freedom and liberty, the language that has the finest literature on earth and is the most universally useful of all languages. Let everyone...drop the habit as far as possible, of expressing themselves in the barbarous Cape Dutch (i.e., Afrikaans, N.A.) that is too often heard (APO, 13/8/1910, cited in Adhikari 1996:8).

7 For a more detailed discussion of the implications of these elite positions, see Alexander 2000.

8 A survey commissioned by the Pan South African Language Board in 2000 brought to light some astounding facts. Among other things, it found that isiZulu is the most widely understood of the 11 official languages, that only 22% of the people surveyed reported that they “fully understand” their political and business leaders when the latter speak in English, as they most often do. More significantly, however, it found that some 90% of the people would like to have their children taught through the medium of the mother tongue and English. This latter finding has major implications for language planning during the next decade or so. (See PANSALB 2001:16-20).

9 It is essential to stress, however, that agreement with this assessment does not imply agreement on the language-medium policy and other pedagogical and sociolinguistic inferences derived from it by Eastman.
Verification of this assessment is provided by most recent language attitude surveys. By way of example, I cite a few relevant findings from a survey undertaken on behalf of the Western Cape Education Department by Abel et al. (2002). Their conclusions are even more striking if we bear in mind the fact that the area covered by their survey, i.e., school communities in the Western Cape province, is more than 60% Afrikaans-speaking. According to their report,

… English on its own is the language most valued by the school community in the public domains of higher education (64%) and the job market (55%). If we add the figures of the Afrikaans-English combination to the English-only figure, English becomes overwhelmingly dominant: over 80% of respondents regard it as the language of ‘cultural capital’ in these domains.

They also found that Afrikaans is “on the retreat” and predict that this process will accelerate in the near future because of hostile attitudes deriving from government officials and political leaders, including the Minister of Education himself. Most disturbing of all is their finding that, in the view of the respondents,

… Xhosa has virtually no currency in the market place or in higher education. Only 7% regard it as a valued intellectual and economic resource.…

In South Africa, the language question is complicated by the fact of Afrikaans. This ‘language of the oppressor’, as it was widely referred to by black people during the apartheid era, is on the one hand one of only four or five standard written languages to have evolved into languages of higher education, of science and technology, during the last century or so. On the other hand, in its standard form, it is associated so closely with the political, cultural and economic depredations of apartheid that it still functions for many black South Africans as a hate symbol, reminiscent of the nightmare of the recent past. However, in its diverse spoken varieties, it is also the first language of millions of South Africans who are not labelled white. The most important fact about the language in post-apartheid South Africa is that the vast majority of the intellectuals and professionals, whose mother tongue it is, have come to realise that the future of the language, like that of its speakers, lies in an entente cordiale between Afrikaans speakers and speakers of other African languages. This alliance is not conceived of, at least not by the more far-seeing and responsible people, as one that is directed against the English language. It is very clearly an attempt to ensure the maintenance, even the survival, and definitely the development and promotion of the local African languages. In practice, it amounts to a determination by those linguists and applied language professionals, who acquired their considerable skills on account of the pro-Afrikaner affirmative action strategies of apartheid, to put these at the disposal of the other African languages, i.e., of those which had been systematically denied these developmental resources and facilities during those 40-odd lean years of apartheid.

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10 The others are Bahasa Indonesia, Hindi, Hebrew and Kiswahili (See Giliomee 2003).
11 For a detailed analysis of this history, see Giliomee 2004.
rule12. By far the best example of this phenomenon is the manner in which the lexicographic expertise of the Woordboek van die Afrikaanse Taal is being put at the disposal of the fledgling lexicographic units that are being established under the guidance of the Pan South African Language Board for the nine officialised indigenous African languages13. Similar advances are being made in the application of state-of-the-art human language technology to these languages. In this regard, the universities of Stellenbosch and of the Free State, which under apartheid were reserved for mainly Afrikaans-speaking “white” students only, are leading the way. In my view, the extension of this approach into all spheres of applied language is the one certain guarantee not only of the “survival” of Afrikaans (which is not in serious contention) but, much more pertinently, of the continued growth and development of the language.

**Illusion and reality: constitutional and legislative smoke and mirrors?**

Lack of political will with the consequent lack of role models is clearly one of the main obstacles to the intellectualisation of the African languages and, therefore, to the realisation of a consistently democratic language policy in post-apartheid South Africa. As intimated before, the prior reality of the economic, political and cultural power (or capital) with which the English language is charged in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent is the fundamental reason for this deficit as well as other related ones. If the debilitating language attitudes of the middle class elites can be explained in terms of these backward linkages, the forward linkages are equally catastrophic. For, since this stratum of people, especially in the enchanted situation of an “emerging” market characterised by policies of black economic empowerment and affirmative action, is projected as the role models for the rest of the (urban and rural working class) population, the static maintenance syndrome is devastatingly reinforced on a daily basis. This has a paralysing effect, one which tends towards reproducing a state of mediocrity as a comfort zone.

The real challenge, therefore, with which applied language studies and the sociology of knowledge are faced is whether and how these disciplines can contribute towards turning this situation around. In short, is it possible to help to create a situation where the African, rather than the European, languages are dominant in the market place as well as in most other domains of social life? For, there can be no doubt that a laissez-faire policy will see South Africa end up on the same detour and in the same cul-de-sac where most other African countries have marked time during the past 40 years, more or less. Left to themselves, the South African black middle class would instinctively head in the same direction as, for example, the Namibian elite, which made English into the only official

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12 This is, incidentally, one of those areas where “organic” affirmative action can take place. That is to say, this kind of training and transfer of skills does not depend on the apartheid category of so-called race.

13 See Bureau of theWAT 2000.
language of that country, even though the overwhelming majority of the new citizens are unable to understand, let alone speak, the language.\textsuperscript{14}

Whatever else this state of affairs may signify, it indicates clearly that the powers that be do not have a coherent national language plan. It also shows that they do not understand, or do not care about, the relationship between language policy and economic development and between language policy and social cohesion in a multilingual society. This is not a unique situation at all. I make bold to say that most political elites are in a similar position. However, given “the advantage of backwardness” (Trotsky), i.e., of the latecomer, and the specific experience of South Africa in respect of misconceived language policies in the recent past, one would have expected a different sensitivity to such matters at the top.

Viewed superficially, we appear to be very well situated in post-apartheid South Africa, certainly when we compare our situation with that of any other African country. We have during the past 10 years or so been endowed with one of the most impressive constitutional and legislative foundations for the construction of a modern language infrastructure that would be capable of servicing the needs of a complex language situation. In the period I am referring to, an ambitious and potentially effective institutional architecture has been set in place for the avowed purpose of promoting multilingualism and ensuring, in the words of the constitution, “parity of esteem” (equal status?)\textsuperscript{15} for all 11 official languages.

For our present purposes, I shall refer to only a few of the more significant features of this work in progress. The most important language planning agencies in South Africa are the National Language Service (NLS) and the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB). The former is a public service institution located in the Department of Arts and Culture, which is the line function department for language matters. The PANSALB is a statutory body, the existence of which is explicitly provided for in section 6 of the South African constitution. Between these two agencies and their numerous affiliated organs, all official language planning and draft language policy evolution is managed, not always without tension. Originally, PANSALB was intended to be an independent statutory body that would be subject to oversight by and accountable to Parliament. By the beginning of 1998, however, the new Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology seemed to want

\textsuperscript{14} I have pointed out in numerous articles that the real reason why the new South Africa has a policy of promoting multilingualism and of recognising 11 official languages is the passionate commitment of most white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans to their language. The black elite would have found it impossible to negotiate for Afrikaans what they were not prepared to give to the other African languages, i.e., continued equality of status and use with English. However, this fact implies at best a long period during which the decision makers will have to get accustomed to the consequences of a policy of multilingualism; at worst, it will, in fact it has already in certain respects, give rise to a policy of tokenism.

\textsuperscript{15} My impression from numerous interactions with government officials and political leaders at the top managerial and policy making level is that in their more benign moments, these men and women cherish a notion of English as a kind of first among equals.
to exercise direct control over the activities of the institution, mainly because PANSALB’s finances were – and continue to be – routed through that Department. Because this approach led to what some of the members of the Board considered to be unwarranted interference, especially on the part of the Deputy Director-General of the Department at the time, the entire relationship between the Board and the National Language Service, which is a public service bureaucracy, became extremely problematical\textsuperscript{16}.

Although fences have been mended in the interim, there are continuous discussions about territorial responsibility and the division of the limited revenue that is allocated to language matters in the annual budgets of the Department\textsuperscript{17}. A 1999 amendment to the Pan South African Language Board Act placed the Board under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, i.e., no longer under the National Council of Provinces (Parliament). In effect, the Board has been reduced to an integral part of the bureaucratic structures of the Department of Arts and Culture. There seems to be consensus that PANSALB should focus on language, i.e., corpus, development while the NLS should focus on language planning and implementation. At the time of writing, there appears to be renewed tension between the two agencies, which has led to delayed publication of research findings and reports. Recent critiques\textsuperscript{18}, while acknowledging the important and constructive work of the Board and of its sub-agencies, are sceptical about the acuity of the vision of the leadership and of their understanding of the, mainly unintended, consequences of the Board’s rights protection and promotion functions.

A fundamental critique, which many of us who helped to conceptualise and institute PANSALB, have levelled at the political decision makers, who serve on the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Arts and Culture and on related bodies, is the fact that the original mandate of the Board “to promote multilingualism” has slowly but surely been replaced by an ethnic focus. This is manifest, for instance, in the fact that 11 National Language Bodies have been established as silos rather than three or four such “Bodies” whose work it would be to oversee and promote the corpus development of the related clusters of languages. Put differently: a deliberate (?) decision has been made to perpetuate the apartheid practice of promoting Abstand-languages rather than to create conditions in which linguistic convergence among mutually intelligible languages might take place\textsuperscript{19}. The current composition of the Board is evidently determined by the language background (= mother tongue) of the individual members and not by their language planning or applied language studies expertise.

\begin{itemize}
  \item As a result of such interference, I resigned from the Board and gave up my position as Vice-Chairperson of the Board in March 1998. The most recent updated account of the vicissitudes of PANSALB is Heugh 2003:Study VI.
  \item In 2001, a little more than R30 000 000 had to suffice!
  \item See Heugh 2003 and Perry 2003.
  \item See Heugh 2003 Study VI, pp. 13-15 for details of discussions in the Board regarding the 34 sub-structures that were eventually established.
\end{itemize}
To complicate matters further, the recent institution of the (Section 185) Commission for the Protection and the Promotion of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities has added a third potentially important official language planning structure to the spectrum. The boundaries between the three main structures are extremely porous and we can expect numerous and often extremely hostile territorial battles in the short to medium term. This is so especially because the paradigms within which all three of these structures came into being and are expected to operate are in many respects diametrically opposite. Whereas, for example, PANSALB’s mandate of promoting multilingualism in principle requires it to refrain from prioritising any given official language – quite apart from all the other languages listed in the constitution – it is the precise mandate of the section 185 Commission to ensure that each “linguistic community” is enabled to promote its own language and all that goes together with such a project!

Of course, it is quite possible that in the longer term these contradictions will be resolved (and “new” South Africans have a deserved reputation for miraculously muddling through) but it is also very obvious that many unintended compromises will have to be accepted. And these may bring about conditions that are not compatible with the thrust of the post-apartheid South African constitution, ostensibly negotiated to bring about a united, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist dispensation. My colleague, Kathleen Heugh (2003:19), after a careful and detailed analysis of the unplanned and opportunistic manoeuvres that have characterised the evolution of the PANSALB, concludes, among other things, that

... Instead of moving away from language bodies associated with apartheid, PANSALB, with the very direct collusion of the department (of Arts and Culture, NA), reinvented bodies which would continue linguistic balkanisation. .... Parallel structures instead of underscoring linguistic rights, have recreated and perpetuated conditions for ethnolinguistic rivalry and competition for scarce resources ....

Perry (2003:225-227) comes to a similar conclusion and warns against complacency in this regard.

On the more positive side, it should be recorded that under the stewardship of Dr Ngubane, the first post-apartheid and also the present Minister of Arts and Culture, a determined push towards the formulation and the legislative entrenchment of a national language policy and a national language plan has been made. In November 1999, he appointed a Ministerial Advisory Panel in order to take further the detailed work of drafting

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20 Heugh’s analysis is based on her own participation in and observation of these developments during the period of her membership of the Board (1995-2000).

21 “The material and non-material incentives that PanSALB implicitly promises may yet furnish the spark for an ethnic conflagration. Likewise the Section 185 Commission … may distinctly invite rent-seeking complaints from mobilized ethnies. The probability of both these scenarios increases with each degree by which the poor become poorer and more disenchanted, or face “ecological stress” …. (Perry 2003:226).
a National Language Policy Framework and a South African Languages Bill. This panel has driven the process in the course of the past four years to realise these objectives and has hit every conceivable political and bureaucratic speed bump on the way\(^\text{22}\). One of these, the request by a Cabinet Committee in September 2001 that the draft National Language Policy and Plan be costed before Cabinet could be expected to arrive at a considered view on the matter, turned out to be an exceptionally important intervention not only because of the (quite unexpected, even counter-intuitive) findings of the costing exercise but also because of its spin-offs for language planning as a professional practice in South Africa. (See p.12 below)

**What is to be done?**

A brief note about the ways in which the academic community concerned with the language question is reacting to these perturbing developments is called for. Instead of responding to the *Realpolitik* of linguistic engineering as described above, some of the best-known South African applied language scholars have recently criticised the language planning agencies for operating with simplistic and reified concepts of the “languages” of South Africa. The thrust of their critique, if one were to formulate the matter consequentially, seems to be that language planning is at best futile and, if effective, oppressive and, ultimately, linguistically genocidal in its consequences. A recent example of this approach, which specifically criticises the National Language Policy Framework for being blind to, or even ignorant of, “pluralist alternatives” (in Lo Bianco’s formulation), is Ridge (2003)\(^\text{23}\). However, there are others that tend to be even more scathing of the “language planners” of the new South Africa (see, especially various articles by Sinfree Makoni).

This critique has its uses, of course, since it reminds us that on the ground, we are confronted more often than not with issues of communication in the actual speech varieties of citizens or clients rather than only with the standard written forms of the “languages” of a country. However, at the level of state planning and the structuring of interactions between the state and the people as well as within and between state structures, it is precisely these written standards that are decisive. Indeed, as any historian or sociologist of language knows, at the very least since Benedict Anderson’s little book on *Imagined Communities*, standard print languages were an integral part of the becoming of modern industrialised states!

In my view, our immediate priority must be to persuade the political and cultural leadership to take the language question much more seriously than they have done hitherto. In attempting to address this issue, we are led into the heart of the politics of the elite. The immediate answers are abundantly obvious. It is essential that the African languages acquire

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\(^\text{22}\) I speak from personal experience, having served as the Convenor of the panel up to the time of writing!

\(^\text{23}\) Unfortunately, I only have the draft text of this essay to hand. As it is not for quotation, I have to leave the matter at the general point made above.
market value in the short to medium term and it is clear that they will only do so if there is bold leadership from the front. While it is wrong to suggest that the political and cultural leaders alone have to break the logjam, it is clear after many years of reflection and intervention at many different levels that political will and commitment are going to be the decisive elements if we are to move from the point where the European languages dominate our societies to a point where African languages do so. In the midst of the rhetoric surrounding the African Renaissance, few other questions can be more relevant than the language question\textsuperscript{24}. Indeed, the next few years may well be the last opportunity we have in order to profile this question in a manner such that it can no longer be ignored. Above all, the leadership has to ensure that both the public service and the private sector adhere strictly to the national language policy and plan and to the provisions of the South African Languages Bill\textsuperscript{25}. It is extremely unlikely that of their own accord, the political leadership in the ruling circles will take decisive steps in the direction of closing the yawning gap between exemplary policy documents and real-life practice. Unless some dramatic opportunity for cashing in on the language question presents itself to one or other major political party, we are likely to see the same developments in South Africa as those which have characterised the post-colonial societies of most of the continent.

In South Africa at present, there is a move away from the de facto neo-apartheid policy of English and Afrikaans dominance of both the public and the formal private sector. But it would be a mistake to think that the movement must be in the direction of the valorisation, equalisation and intellectualisation of the indigenous African languages. It is, instead, a single-minded movement in the direction of a unilingual, English-only dispensation. In this way, the ruling elite, besides pushing the Afrikaans-orientated middle class on to the political margins, ensure their “profits of distinction” (Bourdieu). The question forces itself on to us: are the people who are driving this policy aware of its anti-democratic and class-exploitative implications? The short answer must be in the negative, simply because, like most other people, the politicians and even many of the cultural leaders have never thought deeply about the language question. They are guided in the first instance by what they consider to be the immediate positive effects of the policies they are pursuing. It is not clear to them, to take a few random examples, that an English-only or even an English-mainly policy

- prevents the majority of the people from access to vital information and, therefore, from full participation in the democratic political process;
- undermines the self-confidence of L2-speakers and even more so of the vast majority for whom English is effectively a foreign language;

\textsuperscript{24} See Alexander 1999.

\textsuperscript{25} This Bill is likely to be enacted by the South African Parliament in the course of 2004.
by the same token smothers the creativity and the spontaneity of people who are compelled to use a language of which they are not in full command, and

at the economic and workplace levels causes major avoidable blockages that have significant negative impacts on productivity and efficiency.

If we give these men and women the benefit of the doubt, we would expect that should they become aware of these and the many other socio-political and socio-economic impacts of the current language policy, they would be eager to switch to more appropriate policies. I believe that for many of them, this is indeed the case even though it would be naïve to underestimate the weight of bureaucratic and systemic inertia and the invisible force of convenience and vested interest.

Certainly, on the basis of recent experience with regard to costing the implementation of elaborately formulated policy, there is reason for this optimism. Indeed, what initially most of us in the language planning field thought of as the most sensitive feature of the official policy of promoting multilingualism and the development of the marginalized languages, i.e., the common-sense expectation of the increased cost of such a policy, has turned out to be a moment of strength. It transpires that in all cases, a consistent application of reasonable implementation plans based on the approach of phasing them in over three to five years, requires no more than, on average, an increase of 0,5% to 0,7% in the annual budget. This is true at the national, the provincial and the institutional levels. Above all, it is completely in line with the findings of similar multilingual structures in other parts of the world, notably in the European Union. While the initial investment in the language infrastructure that will make such a policy work is undoubtedly considerable, it has to be seen as both inevitable and profitable in the longer run. The economic and social costs of not making this initial investment and following it up with the negligible increments to the annual budget are almost incalculable. Certainly, in so far as ill-considered language policies are one of the causes of dysfunctional societies and communities, victim to illiteracy, unemployment, crime, violence and drugs, among other social pathologies, language policy reform is an essential and progressive move. For the language planning profession, the most important lesson to be drawn from this experience is obviously the fact that the costing of any language plan, no matter how limited, should be an integral aspect of the planning process. It is in the final analysis the most influential argument for the feasibility and acceptability of the new policy.26 If we are to get the middle class elites of Africa to “commit class suicide”, as I have demanded elsewhere27, it is within this research area we have to begin our effort.

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26 An excellent example of the persuasiveness of the costing exercise in respect of the implementation of South Africa’s national language policy and plan is Emzantsi Associates 2001. Also see Emzantsi Associates 2003.

I wish to stress that I am not suggesting that we have found the key to unlocking the iron gates of anglocentric prejudice. The political class is adept at devising shibboleths to catch out and retard those who think they have made out an irrefutable case. The middle-class, elitist character of an English-mainly policy involves ideological class struggles for the formulation and implementation of a democratic language policy that will truly empower the ordinary people on the ground. No amount of planning and perfect theory can obviate this. It is only the mobilisation and organised pressure of the first-language speakers of the marginalized languages that will, in the end, make the difference. In this connection, the real danger of opening a Pandora’s box of ethnic conflict exists. Hence, it is of the utmost importance that not group rights but rather solidarity rights\(^\text{28}\) that straddle all the groups be the strategic objective.

**Concluding remarks on the language situation in post-apartheid South Africa**

From the above account of the dynamics of language policy evolution and language practices in South Africa since 1994, it is clear that we are faced with two related dangers or challenges. On the one hand, there is the danger of stagnation, i.e., the refusal on the part of state authorities and other decision makers to tackle the language issue as a matter of urgent social policy which has direct and enduring impact on the perpetuation or attenuation of social inequality in a country that faces serious redistributive challenges. Ultimately, this laissez-faire approach entrenches the static maintenance syndrome, prevents or retards the intellectualisation of the African languages, condemns the majority of the people to permanent dependence on an English-knowing elite, impedes the consolidation of democracy and downgrades Afrikaans to a secondary and increasingly marginalised position. The worst aspect of this scenario is the fact that we are wasting the rare historic opportunity of moving in a totally different direction from that on which the self-aggrandizing policies of colonialism and apartheid placed the national community of South Africans. For this, future generations will judge us harshly.

The second challenge is that of sliding down the slippery slope of ethnic politics. In this matter, the language planning agencies are certainly not the only entities that have to be alerted. Besides the legislature and the executive of the country, it is in the schools and in the universities and other training institutions that proactive measures have to be considered and acted upon. Among such measures, an anti-ethnicist language policy of genuine regard for multilingualism and “pluralist alternatives” has to be propagated and implemented.

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28 Defined by Perry (2003:48) in the following context: “One can sufficiently distinguish a situated individual right assertion from a situated group right assertion by ascertaining whether the goods, or object, of the right is divisible or indivisible. If divisible, the right is individual in character. If indivisible, the right is group in character. If the goods are both indivisible and, indeed, devolve to an entire state populace or to all people in the world, that right is a solidarity right ….”
In order to do address these two challenges adequately, major reform of language planning structures is essential. For, although the tensions and overlapping areas of interest and activity between the Pan South African Language Board and the National Language Service are being addressed, there is still a considerable degree of duplication. Since both are subject to the Ministry of Arts and Culture, it is difficult to understand why they are expected to operate as separate and autonomous entities. In addition to these agencies, the newly established Section 185 Commission also has a language component in respect of the “linguistic communities” and much of its work will duplicate directly the linguistic human rights monitoring function of Pansalb. As if this were not enough of a maze, a language competency also resides in the Office of the President, so that there are potentially four points from which confusion and contradictory trajectories could emanate. It remains my view that the Pansalb should consist of a small number of competent applied language scholars with language planning experience. Their main task should be language planning strategy and advice to central and provincial government in respect of language use and language development and they should be accountable directly to Parliament. Most of the work that is now centralised in the Pretoria offices of the Board should be contracted out to the universities, technikons and other relevant research units. In that way, the burgeoning bureaucracy that is beginning to characterise the Board could be minimised.

Having said this, it is necessary to state clearly that in spite of initial problems, the Pansalb has achieved many important milestones. It has, specifically, begun to establish the infrastructure (lexicographic units, provincial language committees, national language bodies, databanks, etc.) which are essential for planning and for the implementation of policy.

Developments elsewhere in Africa, especially the move towards the establishment of an African Academy of Languages (ACALAN) as a specialised agency of the African Union, are beginning to create a climate of opinion on the language issue which, ultimately, will impact positively on South Africa. The African Renaissance, if it does nothing else, could well be the calm before the storm that will sweep away the myths that litter and also clutter this fundamental terrain of social life. South Africa could play a pivotal role in this connection. Beginning with the LANGTAG process in 1995-96, which was itself the culmination of almost 15 years of “language planning from below”, there have taken place at all levels of government some of the most promising language planning exercises that the continent has hitherto experienced. Our hope is that through the mediating mechanisms of ACALAN, these insights and others from the rest of the continent will become generalised in such a manner that they will inform all language policy interventions in the “African century”.

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References


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