

## **Linguistic Diversity and Development: the Language Question and Social Justice in Southern Africa**

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*Language is without doubt the most important factor in the learning process for the transfer of knowledge and skills is mediated through the spoken or written word.*

Ayo Bamgbose, 1992.

### **Abstract**

The linguistic landscape of Southern African states, which includes South Africa, is diverse and complex. Multilingualism being a global norm today, this should be an advantage rather than a disadvantage for individual countries. However, the problem is that African countries in Southern Africa, which include South Africa, favour ex-colonial languages rather than indigenous African languages, but it is these tongues that the majority of Africans use in their day-to-day interaction.

The article argues that the non-use of the countries' pronounced official languages is unjust in the socio-economic and political life, since the citizenry are excluded from fully participating in aspects of their national lives. The central argument, therefore, is that there is absence of social justice to correct the imbalances of the apartheid rule in post-colonial South Africa. South Africa's constitution of eleven official languages, is hailed as one of the most progressive language policies in the world, but this is only gesturising and theoretical. It is mired in undemocratic practices with absence of rights to the majority of its country's citizens. In practice, Afrikaans and English are the *de facto* languages of use in higher education, government, commerce and industry, diplomacy, and in almost all documentation. The linguistic domination continues to politicise the language question and there seems to be lack of the political will to implement appropriate policies.

The article towards the end examines these socio-economic and political consequences of language policies and the impact of the efficacy of various development projects in the region. The challenge is to convince policy makers of the pedagogical usefulness of using African languages in education and also in society, at large, not *instead* of European languages but *in addition* to them.

### **Introduction**

The discussion is confined to South Africa. This is motivated partly by the fact that South Africa is the powerhouse of the African continent, economically and it is the country in which I live. It is worthwhile to mention that in the entire Southern Africa, while terms such as Lusophone and Anglophone are used to refer to Portuguese and English, respectively, these terms are themselves misnomers, because the vast majority of the inhabitants of the region speak neither Portuguese nor English, but indigenous African languages. In spite of this almost all governments in Southern Africa have declared English as the official language in their post-colonial era, while Mozambique has opted for Portuguese as the *de facto* official language, although she is moving

towards English since it is the working language for the Southern African Development Community (SADC), where Mozambique is the only Portuguese-speaking country. Wherever necessary, comparisons in this discussion with other African countries and the Southern African linguistic region are generally made.

The discussion consists of six sections. The first section describes the linguistics ecology and language policies of South Africa. The second section gives the theoretical tenets, which attempt to explain why there is the current linguistic domination of ex-colonial languages. The third section examines the effect of unfavourable language policies and the people's attitudes towards their mother tongues. In the fourth section the relationship between ex-colonial languages and indigenous African languages is made and considered and then the impact of the adopted language policies of the country on development is discussed in the fifth section. A summary and suggestions as well as recommendations as to what ought to be done are made and the conclusion follows in the final section.

### **The language ecology and language policies of Southern African countries**

It is a well-known fact that Southern African, which includes South Africa, is multilingual, where indigenous African languages are spoken as mother tongues, unlike the United States of America and UK where each of these countries has only one official language, English. However, the picture of linguistic diversity in this region is blurred by the powerful dominance of English and not the numerical strength of speakers of English as a first, second or even third language.

### **The mother tongue defined**

A mother tongue means the first language that a child acquires and uses at home before attending school. UNESCO (1953) cautions that a mother tongue need not necessarily be the language, which a child's parents use. In mother tongue education (MT), it is a language that a person has acquired in early years and which normally has become his or her natural instrument of thought and communication (Kobia, 2007).

While, we accept linguistic globalisation, which has adopted the use of English, mother tongues equally need to be used and also developed. In education contexts mother tongues have psychological and educational advantages. Therefore, pedagogical needs for the child and national development need to be sacrificed first, rather than economic and political interests for the few elite. Thus while it could be economically and politically expedient to use exoglossic languages for the few elite and national development in the short run, in the long run, however, such policies remain hollow and have adverse effect to the masses, as children will make no contribution to knowledge and development of their respective countries (Moyo, 2007). Equal access, therefore, has to be given to education, economic resources for the citizenry as well as political and social participation for all. This would ensure the vibrant survival of local languages and cultures in this era of globalisation, where we need to develop paradigms that accommodate MTs rather than exclude them in current language policies.

### **Theoretical tenets: the hegemony theory**

The discussion is premised on the reasoning of Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony. The theory argues that government and state 'cannot enforce control over any particular class or

structure unless there is other, more intellectual and covert methods are entailed' Ndhlovu, 2008:57). Laclau and Mouffe (1985) contend that hegemony is achieved through an intricate balancing of consent and coercion. This means that hegemony is a major concept in understanding the very unity that exists in a concrete social formation. A relationship of hegemony is not essentially a result of a contractual decision because the hegemonic link transforms the identity of the hegemonic subjects. Tollefson (1991:12) has clearly clarified this situation by stating that:

Hegemony may be achieved in two ways: first through its 'spontaneous consent' of people to the direction of social life imposed by dominant groups, and second, through apparatus of state coercive power which enforces discipline on members who do not consent to the dominant ideology.

In view of the above Gramsci (1971:08) argues that the methodological and pragmatic nature of his theory is based on the fact 'that supremacy of the social groups manifests itself in two ways as domination' and also as 'intellectual and moral leadership.'

In his theory he further observes that the way in which society is organised, controlled and manipulated is a direct result of the practice of what he terms 'false consciousness' and the creation of values and life choices, which are to be followed. In other words, the policies and cultural institutions are made to look natural or 'commonsense' so that people do not even question the assumptions made, resulting in culturally induced acquiescence to the dominant class's (Gerbner, 1978).

In the theory of hegemony Gramsci (ibid) also makes it very clear that the articulation of consent is firmly rooted in institutionalised practices, which comprise the belief systems and patterns of thought, which are constructed and essentialised by the dominant groups in society. In other words, the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the central ruling ideas. Thus the ruling elite comprise the ruling material force of a given society, which is at the same time the ruling intellectual force. The ordinary citizenry who do not have the mental production are subjected to whims, machinations and caprices of the dominant class. This notion of ideological control by the ruling elite is essentially useful for generating a dialogue between the history of structures and the history of cultures.

The salient point in the hegemony theory lies in that it relates to social and cultural practices in society to the mental, intellectualist and ideological representation. This entails that any meaningful analysis of the post-colonial language situation in society requires an interpretation of the historically situated material, political and cultural circumstances, out of which policies on patterns of language use are produced. The use of Gramsci's (1971) discourses explain why there is linguistic and cultural manipulation, which results in lack of social justice in society. Owing to this there is domination, subjugation and ideological control in seeking a theoretically and a conceptually well-grounded explanation to the ascendancy of English and to some extent Afrikaans and the subsequent marginalisation of indigenous African languages in South Africa.

It is important to state that the dominant position of English above all other languages, cannot be fully understood outside the context of historical development in Africa, the colonised world and in South Africa, in particular. There is a direct link to the colonising mission. The history of the

majority of Southern African states, which shows that the preponderant position of indigenous languages is inextricably intertwined with European colonial projects, as Brutt-Griffler (2002, 2006); Mufwene (2002) and Makoni (1998) all note. Colonialism has shaped and mediated language ecologies. Brutt-Griffler (2006:37) observes that the languages, which are celebrated as national or native languages today are, in fact, ‘products of an intricate dialectic between colonial projects of knowledge and the formulation of distinctive group identities.’ The main purpose of colonial administration was in developing a keen interest in local language issues to contain fluid identities within colonial contexts so as to facilitate European rule by creating new linguistic and political identities (Brutt-Griffler 2006). What this meant is that the invented ‘constructed versions of specific varieties of indigenous languages epitomised a systematic and deliberate effort, towards developing ‘command over language’ which would ultimately lead to the development of a ‘language of command’ (Ndhlovu, 2007:59).

In the case of South Africa, Nguni languages (isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele and siSwati) and Sotho-Tswana languages (seSotho, seSotho saLeboa (sePedi), and seTswana) are largely fully-fledged languages, while tshiVenda and xiTsonga, for example, are less developed languages and in a way still remain marginalised as they are ‘official’ languages of unequal status.

### **Literacy in Southern Africa**

Definitions of literacy in the developed world or industrialised world are not different from those of undeveloped or developing countries. Modern definitions take the position that literacy can be seen as a cline or continuum along which an individual’s level could be measured (Elugbe, 1997). While many adults can read at very rudimentary levels, they need higher levels of literacy to function fully in society. In the developing world, we could settle with one’s ability to read and write in the mother tongue first. There is no need for literacy with such elasticity. The most rudimentary abilities are all that are required.

A major difference between literacy levels in western democracies and in a typical African country such as South Africa is that in South African society, literacy has to be multilingual, while it is monolingual or bilingual in the west. In Southern Africa and in South Africa, particularly, literacy has to be in a number of languages while in countries like the United States of America, the UK, Canada, Germany, France, etc, these countries deal with only one or two languages or only operate in English, at the best.

There are twenty-four indigenous African languages in South Africa clustered into the following five language groups: Nguni, Sotho-Tswana, Shangaan-Tsonga, Venda and Khoisan (Miti, 2006:07). South Africa has a population of more than 47 million. The literacy rate in the country per racial group is estimated as follows:

- i. African - 50% of 38 million, which is 40.43% of 47 million
- ii. Coloured - 62% of 4.2 million, which is 5.5% of 47 million
- iii. Indian or Asian - 69% of 1.2 million, which is 1.7% of 47 million
- iv. White - 99% of 4.3 million, which is 9.05% of 47 million

However, in the above literacy rate we still note the glaring disparities of the literacy rate among the different racial groups. Indigenous Africans are the least literate and this illiteracy is in their mother tongues, where they can neither read nor write.

We also note from South Africa's population that she has the largest population in Southern Africa and has the highest number of official languages in the region, with the highest number of indigenous African languages as official languages than any other country. She has eleven official languages, namely: seSotho sa Leboa (sePedi), seSotho, seTswana, siSwati, tshiVenda, xiTsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Afrikaans and English. In addition to this, calls have been made for the South African sign language to be declared as one of the country's official language. While in the apartheid era, Afrikaans and English were the only official languages; the current constitution of the Republic stipulates that:

every one has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in the public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable (South African Constitution, 1996).

Miti (2003) has, however, observed that in practical terms, English and Afrikaans still serve as the de facto official languages. The two are also the only official languages in all South Africa's nine provinces, where not a single indigenous African language, other than Afrikaans alone, is an official language in any of the nine provinces.

Finlayson and Slabbert (2002) have aptly observed that indigenous African languages other than Afrikaans, were only passively added to ex-colonial languages Afrikaans and English at the Congress of Democracy for Africa (CODESA), where the issue of official languages was discussed and declared. MeKoko (2004) contends that the African National Congress (ANC) did not seriously think about this at CODESA and only hurriedly agreed to add the nine indigenous languages to the list of official languages to make eleven, which he says impressed the Black population in general. The central issue, however, remained 'messy, inelegant and contradictory' as put by judge Albie Sachs, a South African judge, who played a key role in constructing the South African Constitution. This situation has been glossed over by most sociolinguists.

Brutt-Griffler (2002) and Makoni (2003) argue that the current South African constitution remains divided in 'bounded units' or hermetically sealed units (Makoni, 1998). In a way, this makes indigenous African languages still bounded, socially alienating and thus cognitively disadvantaging the very people that these languages are intended to serve. This tends to create a self-serving amnesia by encouraging Africans to 'unremember' the historical and material contexts in which the so-called indigenous African languages were intended or 'cobbled-together' to use Brutt-Griffler's term (2002).

Mkangwani (1992) notes that the language policy in South Africa denied the majority access to communicate effectively in languages widely used and known to them. The purpose of this was to discourage national unity and promote Bantustan 'states' that were created and where English

and Afrikaans played a pivotal role in shaping the supremacy of these ex-colonial languages, which also fostered linguistic barriers and further undermined communication.

Mazrui and Mazrui (1998:75) argue that English links the rest of Africa to the world and that it has a vehicular paradoxical role, where it has ‘both enriched and stultified many indigenous African languages.’ It has weakened indigenous languages by marginalising them, as most of them do not seem to pursue and explore the use of indigenous words. For example, the use of such words as banana, orange, pineapple, orange, bedroom, etc, in a language such as isiZulu, the widely spoken language in South Africa. Indigenous languages have thus become weakened in education, national life and in interpersonal communication as such. The result is a huge imperial prestige that is enjoyed by English, which in many ways has come to distort educational opportunities and diluted the esteem in which African languages were held. Furthermore, this weakening has given psychological damage where many Africans have come to accept their own indigenous languages as fundamentally inferior to the English language and a considerable number of people feel that there is little that they could do about such a situation. This linguistic fatalism is part of the colonial condition, which needs to be addressed in the wake of the African renaissance.

The United Nations reports that 234 languages have already disappeared in the last century and African governments are doing very little, if any, to conserve those languages and their respective cultures. Pressures of linguistic globalisation in the name of modernity seem to cause homogenisation of life patterns. The issue, though, is not to deny the use of English given the linguistic globalisation. There is a possibility that communication transaction with some foreign tourists and other clients, where English does form part of the commercial process – hence the need for a particular level of English literacy for this particular sector, such as street vendors, etc, (Cele, 2004:49). But there is need for parallel development of all official languages, which would give an effective way of social redress, giving credibility to the political will, not only to redress the historic social imbalances, but the pragmatic realities of the current times in which we live. As observed all languages need to be:

granted space wide enough to conjure sovereign individual identities while being collectively integrated into mainstream domains of the state, public and private enterprise. Failure to take this position will always lead to the creation of a new platform of language inequality beyond the one advanced by colonialism.

(Cele, 2004:51)

### **The impact of unfavourable language policies on national development**

The continued use of foreign languages in all domains hampers development efforts in so many ways on the African continent, Southern Africa and South Africa. Talk about language rights is gaining ground in academic circles, despite the inferior status that African governments have been giving to indigenous languages (Miti, 2006:11). As a result, a number of conferences and publications on the subject have taken place (see Kamwendo 2005). The main reasons for this interest in language rights include:

1. Finding solutions to language rights issues, which contribute to conflict resolutions, since, some of the world's politically motivated ethnic conflicts are linked to language rights issues.
2. Democratisation is gaining ground, particularly in South Africa, where language rights is one of the issues and the new political dispensation seeks to address the inequalities that existed in the apartheid era.
3. It is hoped that issues which deal with language rights-inspired policies may come to rescue some of the endangered languages of the world.
4. We have to recognise that the enjoyment of certain human and people's rights is dependent on language rights.

We also need to add to the above list the fact that rural development projects in the entire Africa are best carried out through the use of local languages of the community whom these development projects are meant to benefit. There are a number of international development and non-governmental organisations (NGO's), including human rights groups, which have realised the need to include language rights amongst their development programmes or portfolios.

### **Concluding reflections**

This discussion has shown that South Africa, just as the rest of the Southern African region, indigenous African languages are accorded a subordinate place to ex-colonial languages such as English, Portuguese, etc, which enjoy prestige official status as powerful languages. The low status accorded to indigenous local languages has made the citizenry of these countries look down upon their mother tongues. This has resulted in creating a vicious circle, where English, in the main, serves a gate-keeping function such that indigenous languages are not sufficiently developed compared to ex-colonial languages – to cope with technology. Little effort, if any, is made to document key official policies and documents or translate these into local languages. Besides, major daily newspapers in the region are published in English and Portuguese only, with the exception of *Ilanga*, *Isolezwe*, *Laduma* and *Umlozi* in South Africa as daily papers, which are published in isiZulu. This results in leaving the majority of the citizenry uninformed about the social, economic and political trends in the country.

Failure by governments and development agencies to use these languages means that the majority are excluded from participating fully in all aspect of national life. For instance, it is impossible to achieve Educational for All (EFA), where learning and teaching are essentially carried out in a foreign language. Those who do not know the foreign language well cannot fully participate in matters that deal with socio-economic and political life.

In view of the above, it would appear that there is need for more government initiatives to strengthen intra-governmental and international multilingualism in South Africa and the entire Southern African region. This includes the harmonisation of orthographies of indigenous languages that are spoken as cross-border languages in the region (see the role of the Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society (CASAS) in Cape Town). In addition to this, there is need for practical linguistic research that would help foster the role of language in empowering citizens, the youth and marginalised groups in South Africa and the region.

Finally, while English remains the international language of main communication, it has to be noted that it can hardly replace indigenous African languages, as these constitute the 'bedrock of a country's cultural manifestation' (Bodomo, 1997:480). The languages that the majority speak and use daily in their interpersonal interactions are indigenous mother tongues. European languages should be acquired not *instead* but *in addition* to indigenous African languages (Rubagumya, 2008). European languages should thus not entirely replace African languages. In this light we would go along with Chinebua (1976) in Bodomo (1997:480) who states that if:

the African is to have roots in the way into which his earliest emotional and social experience have their setting, he must be taught an appreciation of the culture of his people and his native tongue, in which that culture finds fullest expression. Otherwise his education system will only succeed in producing men and women who are linguistically and culturally displaced persons.

Prah (1993) has further argued that:

the real and only basis for sustained and realisable socially emancipating development for Africans, hinges on the usage of African languages, as the instrumental premise of African scientific and technological development.

Linguistic and cultural diversity is thus a natural condition and a norm today, where multilingual language development has to be aimed at, at all costs. The influence of the western legacy should not continue to have a universalising impact on languages, if there has to be linguistic democracy in South Africa and Southern Africa in both formative education and in the wider society.

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