

South Africa's Evolving Language Policy: Educational Implications

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Received: May 5, 2018

Accepted: June 21, 2018

Online Published: August 6, 2018

doi:10.5430/jct.v7n2p27

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v7n2p27>

Abstract

South Africa is facing the challenge of creating a viable nation from a situation of interplay between diverse racial, ethnic and linguistic forces. This article discusses the implications for education of the evolving picture of language policy as South Africa addresses the task of nation-building. Language policy is important because of its key role in developing and maintaining identity, particularly that of emerging generations. The results of a bad language policy can be violence and civil war. Language policy, particularly in education, can be instrumental therefore in building a harmonious nation.

Keywords: South Africa, language policy, education, nation-building

1. South African Language Policy

The African continent is noted for its linguistic complexity, with over 5,000 language names that have been identified in sub-Saharan part of the continent (Spencer, 1985: 387). South Africa has nine major African languages which are spoken by 67 per cent of the country's population of more than 50 million, but only after the implementation of majority rule in 1994 did these languages gain official status. Prior to that, only Afrikaans and English had official status.

With the settlement in 1652 of Europeans in Southern Africa, Dutch was the official language, but when the British gained control of the takeover of the Cape Colony in 1814, English became the official language, although Dutch was still given some official status. When the Union of South Africa was created in 1910 as an independent member of the British Empire, Dutch was given equal status with English. Because of its isolation from the Netherlands, as imposed by Great Britain, and large inputs from African languages, English, French, Portuguese and Malay, the 17th century form of Dutch that existed in South Africa gradually evolved into the new language of Afrikaans, sometime between 1800 and 1850, and slowly gained some official recognition. In 1875 a group of teachers and clerics in the Cape founded a Society of True Afrikaners to stand for 'our language, our nation, our land' and published a newspaper in Afrikaans which asserted their 'God-given destiny' (Worden, 1995: 88). In 1918, a secret society, the Afrikaner Broederbond, was established and by 1929 it had achieved the creation of a Federation of Afrikaner Cultural Associations which had the mission of unifying Afrikaners and promoting among them a strong sense of language, culture and race-based identity. In 1925, Dutch was replaced by Afrikaans as equal official language of South Africa alongside English, a position that continued until the arrival of majority rule in 1994.

2. Language Policy Under Minority Rule

The period of minority rule can be seen as conflict between Afrikaners, (also called Boers), and White South Africans of British background, reaching a climax in two Anglo-Boer Wars, (1880-1881 and 1899-1902), with the languages of Dutch (later Afrikaans) and English as a background area of conflict. This was intensely felt by the Afrikaners, for whom '...the people's very existence was manifested in the "living language" of Afrikaans' (Giliomee, 1997: 122).

In addition to this conflict there was another conflict, that between the two colonial languages and the African languages. Educationally, two differing concepts of colonialism have been identified: that of the Latin-speaking Europeans (French, Portuguese, Italian and Spanish), and that of the Germanic speaking Europeans (British, Dutch, German). The former tended to assert cultural and linguistic superiority and with a downgrading of 'native cultures' and

indigenous languages while the latter tended to assert racial superiority resulting in a segregation of the races in educational and other venues (Mazrui, 1988: 89). However, while tolerating African languages, the British were slow to expand the teaching of English because of a fear of possible politicisation and mobilisation through the common medium of communication. This found expression in the desire to '...maintain the linguistic distance between the Englishman and his coloured subject, as a way of maintaining the social distance between them ...' (Mazrui, 1988: 98).

Upon the gaining political dominance in 1948, the South African Afrikaners deployed language education policy as an important part of the total approach designed to slow down or stop the 'Westernisation' of the African population:

"Language policy was part of this deceleration of the Westernising process. Afrikaners preferred "Bantu Education" as a device of keeping Africa "African" and white power supreme!" (Mazrui, 1988: 90).

The language education policy of the Afrikaner-dominated Nationalist Government, the so-called 'Bantu Education' policy, sought to steer Black South Africans towards the Afrikaans language. It did this through making as its central feature a policy called Mother Tongue Education, which meant that education for Africans was required to be in the vernacular up to and including tertiary level (Bunting, 1969: 273). This policy caused much distress and an official commission in 1963 received reports from an overwhelming majority of witnesses that '... the standard of English had declined considerably and was still deteriorating.' (Bunting, 1969: 273). The difficulty of this policy was that Afrikaans was seen as a symbol of White oppression, (even though it was in a slightly different form the mother tongue of a large population of mixed race inhabitants of the Cape Province), and a language of racial oppression while English was seen as a language of Pan-African communication (Mazrui, 1988: 90).

It was the issuance of the order for Black school pupils to be taught in Afrikaans and not English that triggered the explosive riots in 1976 in Soweto, a satellite town of Johannesburg, in which 600 people died. In addition, when the 'homelands' that had been created under the apartheid policy were granted a very limited degree of 'self-government', they one after another chose English and an African language as their official languages (Giliomee, 1997: 123).

As the future for Afrikaans started to seem less secure, it was decided that the mixed-race people, a predominantly Afrikaans-speaking group almost as numerous as the Afrikaners themselves, could be given a higher degree of recognition. In this way, after 36 years of exclusion, the ruling National Party widened its definition of an Afrikaner to include anyone who spoke Afrikaans (Schiff, 1996: 219).

Thus, South African language education policy under minority rule attempted to create within the nation a multiplicity of separate nations. Language education policy played a major though still somewhat unrecognised part in the process by which South Africa went from minority to majority rule.

3. South African Language Policy After Majority Rule

The Constitution of the new South Africa was adopted in 1996 and Section 6 of Chapter 1 Founding Provisions laid down the principles of policy as to language. It recognised 11 official languages and stated that practical and positive measures, (and one could add, especially educational), must be taken to elevate the status and advance the use of the indigenous languages, while 'all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and be treated equitably'. (South Africa, 1997: 1).

Although all official languages are constitutionally equal, there is great difference in demography, body of written literature, and educational and international use. The estimated numbers of speakers of each language as a home language and proportion of the population is

IsiZulu	22.7%
IsiXhosa	16.0%
Afrikaans	13.5%
English	9.6%
Sepedi	9.1%
Setswana	8.0%
Sesotho	7.6%
Xitsonga	4.5%
Siswati	2.5%
Tshivenda	2.4%
IsiNdebele	2.1%
Other	1.6%

(Source: South Africa Census in Brief, 2011)

The question that arises is one of why did the Afrikaner-dominated minority government accept majority rule without a struggle, given the likely effect on their language and identity? The answer must include the fact that the ANC-led majority government adopted a generous policy towards Afrikaans, allowing it a place in the new South Africa.

In the words of Giliomee

“... there was every prospect that a black government would elevate English to the status of being the sole official language, spelling the end of Afrikaans and the Afrikaner culture-and with it the demise of the Afrikaner people.” (Giliomee, 1997: 123).

When the newly-independent Namibia chose English as sole official language, though with recognition of educational rights in other languages (Namibia, 1990), it was rumoured by many Afrikaners to be an indication of a lack of future in South Africa.

The majority-rule African National Congress government chose to follow a path of official recognition for nine indigenous languages, plus English, while allowing Afrikaans continuity as an official language in the new South Africa, with a strong role for all these languages in education. Nelson Mandela's distinct contribution was to see the new South Africa as the ‘rainbow nation’, where there would be a place and a role for even his former persecutors and their language. On this last point, one commentator has noted that (ex) President Mandela has been ‘...highly sensitive to the language issue’ (Schiff, 1996: 221) and goes on to cite as further evidence the opposition of Mandela to the elimination of the use of Afrikaans in the South African military (Schiff, 1996: 221). The creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, also provided a mechanism for adjustment to fundamental change.

The future role of language policy in the political development of South Africa will be critical. There are fears that have been aroused by the ANC-led government refusal to grant approval to either exclusive mother-tongue education or single language schools and universities (Giliomee, 1997: 137).

In the case of the African languages, it is necessary to de-stigmatise them from the hangover of their previously assigned position of inferiority and to give them an enhanced status, while noting that equality is not in itself enough to achieve the desired outcome (Kamwangamalu, 1997: 122). A cause of major concern in the post-apartheid phase is the effect of the ‘all-mighty English language’ on the survival of all other languages (Kamwangamalu, 1998: 122), and the implications of these issues is currently being assessed by the Pan-South Africa Language Board created in 1995.

The salient arena of language policy is education. In 1997, a ‘Language in Education Policy’ was unveiled after a process of extensive consultation and enquiry. The policy recommended the promotion of equal treatment and use of the 11 official languages including redress for those that had suffered discrimination and a commitment to the non-diminution of the rights of language communities that historically had been favoured. But the implementation of this policy was confronted with many difficulties, as Mda has pointed out: specifically, a movement towards English, yet, in the view of one observer, ‘the policy may succeed in promoting the use of African languages in South African schools.’ (Mda, 1997: 374). Against this, it has been noted that 80% of instruction in South African schools is given in English (Kamwangamalu, 2007: 272).

Although Afrikaans must come to terms with the negative connotation of its earlier association with apartheid, there are signs that this is happening. In 1996, Matthews Phosa, the Premier of Mpumalanga, one of the new provinces of South Africa, published an anthology of poetry in Afrikaans (Van Rensburg, 1999: 88).

These considerations reflect the major concern caused by the hegemonic power of the English language within the highly fluid linguistic situation in South Africa. Moreover, English is impacting on the discursive formations of the African languages (McLean, 1999, 10).

In light of the above discussion, one could say that the maintenance and development of the new South African State depends upon the emergence of a new consciousness in which language education policy can make a contribution by avoidance of what has been called ‘linguistic exclusion’ (Ridge, 1996: 33).

Thus, the survival of languages is important to the survival of communities and to the State, which is dependent upon a sense of nationhood, as state and nation have a close symbiotic relationship, not unlike body and soul (Bostock and Smith, 2001).

As has been stated in specific regard to languages

“Charity begins at home. Unless a community makes a deliberate effort to maintain and promote its own language, the chances are that the language will face attrition and death.” (Kamwangamalu, 1998: 122).

4. Present-day Language Dynamics

As noted, throughout the African continent there is a market place of languages, as on other continents, where English appears to have the highest ascribed value and local languages have least value (Kevlihan, 2007: 533).

The granting of official status to nine indigenous African languages was intended to help nation-building. (Mazrui, 2005: 75). A similar policy of officially recognizing indigenous languages was followed in the European Union, which now has 24 official languages (Agarin, 2014: 349), while a policy of denial of official status to indigenous or locally-used languages can lead to civil war, as it did in Sri Lanka (Bostock, 1997), though the precise role of language in civil conflict can be the subject of debate (Lo Bianco, 2016).

Various studies have shown that there is a steady shift away from African languages towards English, and it has been argued that the language policy of the Constitution was never going to work (Kamwangamalu, 2007). The result is that English has become the language of an increasing number of Black South Africans, that is, it has become their “we-code” and no longer just their “they-code”, and in fact is becoming their naturalized language and vehicle of identity (Kamwangamalu, 2007: 264).

With regard to Afrikaans, the language has been found to be holding its place in rural communities, notwithstanding the power of English, and this has been attributed to its identity-maintaining function (Dyers, 2008). An expression of this process is the semi-autonomous community of Orania, in Western Cape, where Afrikaans is the medium of communication in schools, churches, meetings and official correspondence (de Beer, 2006: 110).

Other research shows that the use of Afrikaans is in decline. In the South African Police Service there is a discrepancy between language policy and language practice, such that English is the predominant language, while Afrikaans is also used in official situations as are indigenous languages. The languages other than English, while viewed positively, are mainly used in informal situations (Vergie, 2006).

In the media, Afrikaans has, since majority rule, become a very marginal language, and there is pressure from political and business elites to abandon it altogether (Louw, 2004: 56).

Further to these views, du Plessis, among others, has observed that in South Africa, the policy of official multilingualism is problematic, and the state is in fact proceeding with a non-official policy of monolingualism in English (du Plessis, 2006: 37). This is particularly noticeable in the sphere of education at all levels, from pre-school to university.

5. Conclusion

When in 1994, South Africa’s majority came to power, a language policy was embodied in the Constitution and South Africa went from being a country of two official languages, Afrikaans and English, to a country of 11 official languages. Afrikaans had been heavily promoted by the State, particularly in education, but English had the power of being the predominant global language. Since independence, the nine official languages that are indigenous have continued in common use. However, despite some gains, an increasing proportion of young Black South Africans are now using English, a change of direction that is being reinforced in the educational sphere. Afrikaans has undergone a loss in status and use but will continue to exist as a medium of education and a vehicle of identity formation but on a reduced scale. It is becoming clear that South Africa has adopted an acceptance of market forces in language education policy and this will play a still-evolving role in the task of nation-building.

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