

Language Policy and Education in Multilingual South Africa

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Like many other African nations, The Republic of South Africa is a multilingual one. Various different languages are used in South Africa, but in the 1996 Constitution, 11 languages were made the official language of the country; in order of descending number of native speakers, they are: Zulu, Xhosa, Afrikaans, Sepedi, English, Setswana, Sesotho, Xitsonga, Swati, Tshivenda, and Ndebele (Statistics South Africa 2004:8). Aside from those 11, it was estimated in 1996 that close to 25 languages were spoken regularly in the country (Kamwangamalu 2001), and that number has most likely increased in the years since, so the diversity of language in the country of South Africa is quite apparent. English seems surprisingly low on this list, as it is along with Afrikaans one of the dominant languages in the country. The dominance of the “white” or non-indigenous languages is partly due to apartheid, but post-apartheid practices have strengthened the country’s smaller indigenous languages as well, to the point that a multilingual policy is present in the country’s constitution. Empowering indigenous languages instead of replacing them with more dominant languages also strengthens the culture and social standing of its speakers, primarily the indigenous peoples oppressed under apartheid. However, the true test of a language’s strength and power lies in education, with the languages used in teaching in schools. Part of the country’s multilingual policy includes education for all 11 languages, but there is often a distinct difference between policy and actuality. While a good idea in theory, the language policy and situation in South African education may not work for the benefit of all native speakers of its multiple languages.

South Africa’s history can explain much of its current language situation. The period of apartheid, from 1949-1994, segregated the country into White, Black, Coloured, and Asian races. Apartheid was only overturned fairly recently, less than 20 years ago, and the effects of its segregation are still being felt today. Furthermore, apartheid did not stop at social levels and discrimination, but affected languages as well. According to Nkonko Kamwangamalu, “Each racial group had to have its own territorial area within which to develop its unique cultural personality” (2001), in which ‘cultural personality’ extended to language and not only confined a language’s speakers to a region but discouraged linguistic mixing. Despite efforts by the South African government to end language discrimination along with cultural and racial discrimination, it would not be unexpected to find that there are still some problems in the system. For one, the language dominance of English and Afrikaans, the white languages of power during apartheid, are somewhat stronger than in other countries, and since the

nine African languages official today were only added to the mix, they are on a long, difficult road to recognition and equality. The multilingual education policy has many good and bad points, but it is difficult to estimate the success of South Africa’s multilingual policy, thanks to factors such as globalization and language prestige.

One thing that makes South Africa’s situation interesting is Afrikaans. Having nearly equal status with English, Afrikaans has the dubious honor of being a second white oppressor language. However, being ‘nearly’ equal is a point of contention for the Afrikaner people and Afrikaans speakers. Afrikaans is not really an African language, despite its name, and being a mixture of Dutch and Zulu born from white Dutch settlers, it seems like it should be rightfully classed as a creole. However, since the white Afrikaners were in power and feared to lose their position, Afrikaans was made official in the early 1900’s, and this power play is the main reason it became its own language instead of a dialect of Dutch or a creole. The British presence in South Africa also tended to regard Afrikaans as ‘low’ Dutch or an inferior language, which is why officialization was so vital to the language’s survival. It seems somewhat ironic that Afrikaans would have to suppress every other language in the country in order to keep itself alive, but it is not entirely safe yet. With the arrival of nine new official languages, Afrikaans may be threatened enough to lose its balance in the linguistic power situation of South Africa, falling below English in prestige, as already schools turn to English over Afrikaans for a language of better opportunity (Kamwangamalu 2001). This situation is interesting for several linguistic and political reasons. First, Afrikaans’ status as both a weakened language in its creole identity and a strong language as one of the language of power makes it difficult to find an easy answer to this dilemma. Secondly, as Afrikaans is a language of power, but not the only language, it seems more likely to have the Afrikaners’ claims dismissed as either simply trying to regain some of their former exclusive power or as something that is not a real or immediate threat due to its prominence. Even if English were to gain power over Afrikaans, it is unlikely that the language would ever lose enough of its power and prestige to fall out of use entirely. It would most likely still thrive outside of official English settings, unlike some of the smaller native languages have done. However, ignoring the claims of languages due to their high prestige does not seem like the right course of action either. Ignoring the formerly dominant language can be seen as retaliation to the oppression of Afrikaans during apartheid, which is perhaps justifiable to some but does not offer a solution to the issues of multilingualism.

South Africa has committed to keeping its multilingualism alive after the overthrow of apartheid, as it is written in the country’s constitution that “[r]ecognizing 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" (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1993, Clause 1[6]). However, this part of the constitution is a broad and sweeping statement. The constitution also stipulates the creation of the Pan South African Language Board, which is in charge of the well-being of not only the official languages, but African languages such as the Khoisan languages, and even South African sign languages, along with maintaining those immigrant and foreign languages used significantly in the country. Despite the creation of the Board, there has been some discussion of reducing or condensing the number of official languages, such as limiting official status to English, Afrikaans, Zulu and Xhosa as the largest and most influential languages, or combining related languages. The Nguni languages of Zulu, Xhosa, Swati and Ndebele are close enough to be considered dialects (Guthrie via Kamwangamalu 2001), but due to the regional factors and identity issues involved, these suggestions have not met with much enthusiasm by the speakers themselves, and were even regarded with suspicion as an attempted forced assimilation into more prominent societies. Identity and language cannot be easily separated, as according to Matthias Brenzinger, "Ethnic identities are an essential part of the societal reality in most African states, although often neglected by the governments" (88). South Africa's current acceptance and promotion of multilingualism goes against the policy of other African nations, who fear that allowing different languages and ethnicities would compromise their nation's unity, but the success, says Brenzinger, is in countries that allow a choice, "not forcing them to choose between different identities" (92). These identities would be threatened by being lumped together based on language classification rather than speaker distribution, but they are also threatened by encroaching Western languages and ideas as the dominant force, namely English.

English is not the majority language in South Africa by some degree, but it is widely spoken as a second language, so there is a high level of bilingual and multilingual people. This mix of languages presents a problem when it comes to education policy in the country, as it is not feasible to simply create fair distribution of schools for all 9 languages, and especially not one unbiased towards the dominant English language. The literacy rate in South Africa is relatively high, but currently all this means is that there are higher levels of English use. There is a large disparity between native English speakers and African students speaking English as a second language on international test scores, with only English native speakers scoring above average on reading tests of each language, and native speakers above other language speakers in English writing tests (Howie et al. 2008).

During apartheid times, each region was made responsible for its own people's education, which further separated the groups, but surprisingly enough, indigenous education was promoted and actually

enforced during that period. The Bantu Education Act in 1953 stemmed partly from religion and politics and ended up with each 'mother-tongue' or native speaker forced to go to their mother-tongue schools as well as learn English and Afrikaans. The Act's influence extended to British and Dutch white children as well, as they were placed into English and Afrikaans schools, respectively. This separation created a two-fold effect: it boosted the prestige and position of white speaking children through schools and limited the opportunities of African children. Even the creator of the Bantu Education Act, Minister of Native Affairs Hendrik Verwoerd, was open about his goals in separating black and white children, with black children firmly below white on the scale with "no place for him in the European community above the level of certain forms of labor" (Verwoerd via Kamwangamalu 2001:228). While teaching in indigenous languages seems like it would strengthen and provide opportunities for speakers of those languages, in this case it was used actively against indigenous peoples, and could not continue in its former setting.

The education system understandably changed quite a bit after apartheid, and became compulsory instruction. While the system of teaching in native languages was kept, indigenous elementary school students now had a choice of which language to use in school, usually their native language, which actively promoted the use of indigenous languages in their home communities for the first years of primary education. Beyond the first few years, the language of instruction often changes to either English or Afrikaans with a choice of second language which is required for all students. In English language schools, English is learned as a first language and another of various languages is taught secondarily, whereas in Afrikaans-language schools the second language choice is usually English. The difference is that while indigenous languages speakers may enter into English schools, it is usually not the case for Afrikaans schools - they are all native speakers of Afrikaans. Therefore, they have less interest in learning an indigenous language over the more prominent English. But if a large enough number of students choose to learn an indigenous language, even if it is not their mother tongue, the school is required to offer it (Dyanati 2005).

Although African language students have the choice of being taught in their native language for the first few years, 80% of indigenous language students change their language to English or Afrikaans at grade 4 while continuing to learn their first language as well (Howie et al. 2008). This change is only among African students, as Afrikaans and English children are taught in their own languages without any pressure to be bilingual. Although it is an official policy to offer indigenous language schooling, schools are reluctant to teach indigenous languages due to lack of resources and little enforcement from the government. Even for Zulu, the most widely used language, there are little resources to teach the language for things like science

and math that are dominated by Western, English ideas and authors; and with the strong presence of English in the country it is less urgent to acquire these resources. This lack is a problem throughout the world, with English being the language of instruction and code-switching used in classroom situations between formal instruction of mathematics and informal speech (Vandeyar 2010). Although mathematics may seem language-neutral, the explanations and terminology that appear are hugely important in education, and so English is required. In a study by Vandeyar of students' tests in both English and an indigenous language, it was surprisingly reported that most English test-takers did better whether or not it was their first language. It was cited as due to students' illiteracy in their mother tongues which may have been caused by an early English focus. However, for a few students the indigenous testing was beneficial, so there may be some hope in using indigenous mathematics teaching (2010).

Many children simply go into English education without going through native-language schools first. Many parents want the best for their children and don't find indigenous languages beneficial, which can apply to both the schools and the languages themselves. English and Afrikaans (but mainly English) with their higher prestige offer better opportunities for students who are able to speak it proficiently, which goes back to the Bantu Education Act as it sabotaged the ability of many students to become proficient enough in English or Afrikaans to effectively participate in a white-dominant society. English as an international language is especially strong, as growing globalization provides English-speakers with a vastly larger amount of opportunities in modern times. These opportunities would prompt many parents to choose English schools for their children, but it is not the only reason. Stemming from apartheid era, many African language schools are simply not as good as their dominant language counterparts. Since Afrikaans and English schools were deemed more important, they received much of the Afrikaner government's benefits, and the indigenous schools have not all caught up. The schools' struggle can also be seen in the lack of resources discussed earlier. Many parents are choosing what is best for their students by sacrificing to some degree their native tongues. Indigenous languages are used in education, which makes them seem relatively safe, but they can still be classified as deprived in language use due to the continued dominance of English and Afrikaans (Bamgbose via Brenzinger 1995). This deprivation may be distressing to those concerned for indigenous languages, but at the same time "[m]any linguists... tend to forget that languages belong to their speakers, not to the language scholars" (Brenzinger 1995:88). No matter how much policy and how many good intentions go into educational language planning, given a choice, the language speakers will ultimately decide what works best.

Although the language policy in education was designed to promote indigenous languages, it could not stop their decline. Tshivenda and Xhosa actually lowered fractionally in percentage of speakers between 1996 and 2001, the period immediately following apartheid, proving that the new policy may not be doing anything good. English and Afrikaans use also decreased slightly, which discourage the argument that new accessibility to English would result in more speakers of that language, and other African languages with the exception of the majority language Zulu rose by less than 1% if at all (Statistics South Africa 8). However stagnant the situation may seem, there has been a change in recent years with another *push* to use African languages. Indigenous students often have poor English skills but also poor skills in their first language as well, so promoting language use would help support those communities that choose to send their children to English schools instead of their first language. This promotion would hopefully boost the status of the languages as well as keep them in use. According to one professor, "You can only learn other languages once you have mastered your mother tongue" (Janse van Rensburg via Dyanti 2005). Universities in South Africa are mainly English or Afrikaans, but are also starting to require students' knowledge of one indigenous language in order to comply with multilingual policy. Blade Nzimande, the Higher Education Minister of South Africa, was the main proponent of this, keeping English and Afrikaans as vital parts of education but working to prevent their use from crowding out the other official languages that are currently not used in tertiary education ("Nzimande" 2011).

South Africa's more economically prosperous status in comparison to the rest of Africa gives it more opportunity to revive its official languages, as it has been attempting to do. The educational policies, however flawed and ignored they may be, give a boost to the life expectancy of any of the 9 Bantu languages recognized by the country. As such, issues on language endangerment and death are generally focused on the more deprived parts of the continent - that is, everywhere else. In addition, it is not always an issue of minority languages as is usually the case for endangered languages, as Zulu is spoken by 23.8 percent of the population as compared to English's 8.2, with Sepedi and Xhosa between them in size as well, making at least 3 African languages the actual majority languages of the country (Statistics South Africa 12). But the 9 official Bantu languages are not the only African languages spoken in South Africa, as the Khoisan language group, unrelated to Bantu aside from lending clicks, are in more danger throughout Africa but also in South Africa where their non-official status does not give them the safety they need. Looking at the smallest Bantu language of Ndebele as an example, while it is still outnumbered by all other official languages, the number of speakers has actually grown when measured in the South African census from 1996 to 2001 (Statistics South Africa 2004). The Xiri language, on the other hand, had

only a recorded 87 speakers in 2000 (Moseley). It seems as if the South African government chose the indigenous languages that it would commit to preserving and abandoned the rest of what are truly minority languages, like Xiri. It is admirable enough that the effort is being taken to preserve so many of the indigenous languages, and some languages such as Xiri may not seem worth the effort of revitalization for so few speakers with so many other languages crowded into its peripheries. However, it could be argued that the officialization of the 9 languages changed them from endangered deprived languages to dominant oppressors, in a sense. While it should not hinder their rise in status, as they are still deprived in themselves, it is a good argument against condensing or reducing the amount of official languages. While it might reduce the tangle that is South African multilingualism, it may just doom the other languages to extinction without decent protection.

There is a huge and varied amount of information on South Africa's language situation since it came out of apartheid not too many years ago. It is difficult to get a complete picture of the situation in both education and multilingual policy, and also to look critically at the information presented. Due to the history of apartheid, South African languages are in a touchy situation, and that may be why it is so interesting a study, not just for its oppression but for its turnaround. It seems the most important that choice is offered in education and language use, but if that choice is the dominant language, what can be done for indigenous and minority languages? From looking at all sides of the issues and the concerns of all, it does look like a solution cannot be reached, but there are things that could help. For instance, having more available and more modernly relevant resources available for indigenous language schools could help keep indigenous language education thriving without any use of force. Recognizing English and Afrikaans' relationship to indigenous languages and also to each other is essential to keep a balance in status, without one language dominating the rest and also without intentionally depriving a language in order to advance another, which was a concern of Afrikaans. The last issue is what should change and what will change. Concerns about Afrikaans will most likely be addressed faster and given priority over those of indigenous languages, and so on down the list of languages in power, such as Zulu over Tshivenda.

South Africa has done much to overcome its history of apartheid and linguistic oppression. However, despite good intentions and pretty constitutional statements, English and Afrikaans continue to dominate schools and society in the country due to their higher prestige and global potential, even though most South Africans are not native English speakers. Indigenous languages are spoken by the vast majority, nearly all South Africans, and it is their languages that are being deprived as the gap between educational language policies and actualities result in higher illiteracy rates among indigenous

language speakers and smaller numbers of non-English teaching schools. Lack of interest in indigenous languages prevents educational advancement, but lack of resources is also a real problem, one that probably has the best solution for balancing the power and opportunity of educational languages. Even with changes and reforms in language policies and practice in education, it is not enough to grant a language or languages equal status; it needs the ability to provide for its speakers in a global world.

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