

## Language Identity and the Development of Multilingualism in South Africa

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**ABSTRACT** Eleven languages have been declared official in the South African Constitution, which was adopted in 1996. Some citizens, especially Blacks, fail to acknowledge that the African languages are just as good and official as English. Black South Africans were to a greater extent made to believe that it is civilized to speak a “prestigious” European language. It is very important to develop all official languages into functional languages in all spheres of life. Terminology plays a pivotal role in language development and the promotion of multilingualism. Terminology, as a discipline, is governed by the language policy of the country. Language and culture are inextricable. Through language, people convey their sense of belonging, solidarity and some cultural practices, for example, educational child-rearing norms. If African languages in education are phased out, their users’ social identity as South Africans is also phased out.

### INTRODUCTION

Apartheid used the African languages to divide and rule the country. Today the same languages are used to increase social cohesion and economic participation. People have realized that if they do not think and learn in the languages that they understand, that is, their mother tongues, they are certainly not free. They should also try to see how these languages could assist to improve social cohesion by means of vocational-specific additional language courses. The main reason for this is that people who learn about a language, culture and identity that are not their own broaden their horizons. This also creates cultural awareness, sensitivity and tolerance. This is very important for a country like South Africa where social cohesion is largely needed. There is also the simple reason that learning someone else’s language allows for better communication and less misunderstanding between people from various linguistic and cultural groups. For these reasons, a multilingual South African citizen will no doubt be a better citizen. The emphasis on linguistic structure is superficial and hence, people lesion the language for communication. It is clear that the differences between languages are for the most part political and cultural rather than linguistic. It is, therefore, possible for one to speculate that

any process, which has either to do with adoption or the phasing out of African languages should seriously consider the cultural inclinations and political ramifications embedded in such languages (Haviland 2014: 34-35). Any language serves as a repository of people’s values, cultures, belief systems, lifestyles, as well as a medium of people’s cosmologies and cosmographies. It should, therefore, be seen to be socially responsible, culturally sensitive and morally enhancing in the way it is used by its different speakers (Dei 2007). What is important is for the speakers of the languages to justify their continued existence, relevance and viability in terms of the needs of all the people in South Africa.

### METHODOLOGY

For data collection and the findings of this study, the research relied on participant observation and interviews conducted at Botlokwa, Thohoyandou, Giyani and Bushbuckridge in Limpopo Province between 5<sup>th</sup> June 2013 and 20<sup>th</sup> October 2013. Participant observation involved the researcher unobtrusively recording certain instances where people were talking about both, the foreign and native languages, in an attempt to display the language situation of South Africa in a realistic way. This paper also

examines the status of the different languages used in South Africa as well as South Africa's language in education policy. The researcher's identity was declared so that the interviewees could feel free when this research was conducted. Recording their data was done to ensure that data would not get lost to memory or blurred with the passing of time. The researcher found participant observation to be a very appropriate data gathering method, affording an undistorted picture of the speech behavior of the participants. The behavior of the people is a central aspect in any enquiry. Interviews afforded the researcher the opportunity to come face-to-face with the participants. In this way, the researcher was in a position to observe the facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice used by the participants. Robson (2013: 191) indicates that such non-verbal cues accompany the responses made by the informants and this helped the interviewer understand the feelings of the people about the language situation in South Africa. Focusing on those areas enabled the researcher to be more focused and to delve deeper into the dynamics of multilingualism in South Africa.

## RESULTS

In terms of the African cultures and traditions, beliefs and practices are verbally transmitted from one generation to the other, based on specific cultural mechanisms that are usually communicated by community elders. In many cases, the knowledge bearers are not recognized and researchers claim that the ownership is theirs. Researchers take advantage of the knowledge bearers in that most of them are unable to read and write. The apartheid laws encouraged the total neglect of the African origin and identity. Factors such as community and home-level poverty, weak school functionality, weak instructional practices, inadequate teacher subject knowledge, and a need for greater accountability throughout the school system, all represent much more severe constraints to achieving better education.

## DISCUSSION

### Language, Self and Society

As a general rule, every group of people conforms to the will of the community. The orga-

nized customs and behavioral patterns of every group of people represent the considered morality of that community. It is the right of every individual to talk directly to the community of which he/she is the part, and thus bring about some possible and desirable changes. This is exactly the way in which every community moves ahead. The proposals for reforms and changes should not violate mores and conventions, which would represent the majority of the people. People live together by means of a language in a world of meaning only because there is a prior undergirding cultural and social processes within which all aspects of their biological lives are set. Downey et al. (2014: 108) also assert that:

*The biological nature of man, his capacity to use language, and the nature of his environment, which has been built into its present form over thousands of years require that man exists in groups.*

In a symbolic communication on the higher conscious level, an individual achieves greater sense of individuality and communality. In this case, the mind is a product of communication within a social process. Plamenatz (2013: 53) makes an addition by stating that the mind of every human being is a system of corresponding systems linked to the totality of social groups as seen from a particular position, and that through African languages, different groups of people can be made to serve better ends and to modify their behavior. This means that groups must maintain the common cultural practices, which they always display. From these cultural practices, one is made to believe that when people are inspired to action by common end, they have also a common will. The African languages, including the Northern Sotho language, are regarded by their speakers as the principles of social organizations, which have made distinctly human societies possible. Every African language shows the organized cultural responses, which are found in the community from which this organization is taken over into the nature of the individual. It is important in the establishment of cooperation in a social activity in which an individual and others are modified and regulated by the common act. Without the use of language, every person would be confined to his/her biological requirements and practical interests. In other words, people cannot find an access to higher reaches of symbolic reasoning, world of religion, philosophy and art. Vocal lan-

guage in human beings has a greater technical advantage over the body language. Without the vocal language, the human world would remain deaf and mute. Every language simply indicates a process by means of which a human being, who is engaged in cooperative activity, can find the attitude of other human beings involved in the common act. Language seems to constitute the cultural attitudes and values of a community. This idea is succinctly laid down by Miller (2014: 263) in the following way:

*Part of the occupational culture is the development of jargon and a technical language and argot.*

Language is the mark of man. Man as an individual is incomplete, and therefore, is set in families and communities as one of the conditions of his being. By means of language, human beings have the capacity to indicate to themselves the entire series of responses. Every person is thus, in a position to engage in a complex cooperative activity. What all the African people must know and understand is that every African language is central to the nature, origin and development of human selfhood. Through it, the human conduct contains the elements for ethical action and social process. There is always a very sensitive core of personality, which is able to transcend its culture. The basic step of human reality is man with man, that is, human beings are bound up in mutual relationships with others through language. Even though integration of other aspects such as religion and philosophy of thinking in mixed groups is important, the ethical test of individuals or communities lies not only in the mere fact of social integration, but also in the level and range of integration and in the truth and the goodness of the interests integrated.

### **Language as the Career of Culture**

One of the impersonal cultural influences is the language. Every African language has cultural reflections of what the African people saw and incorporated in the rituals, customs and aesthetic traditions. The differentiation between the areas along the same track occurs at the level of languages, that is, people who live together in one particular area of the track speak in a certain manner by which they can be differentiated from others who live in other areas. Many children are denied access to their cultures by their par-

ents and expose them to foreign culture. This fails them in addressing the existing challenges, and as long as the Western systems of knowledge still dominate the African systems, people will still be faced with a number of challenges that remain mysterious and hard for them to solve. This will make them forget their roots. It is destructive of their identity. Any language lost implies that the entire library of human heritage gets lost.

Language remains a prime contributor to the strengthening of the group's cultural belief, values and behaviors. It is regarded not only as a tool for communication, but also as a cultural inheritance and marker of identity. People develop a sense of belonging to a particular group of people. Phaahla (2012: 127) also notes that:

*Members of a language community identify themselves with that language and take pride in its use and in the cultural accomplishment it represents and makes possible.*

Efforts should be made to protect the African languages by making sure that the young generation does not look down upon them. It is important to note that this should not prevent the Black Africans from embracing the world of science and technology. Many people from all walks of life regard the past as providing a set of proven values, which are still relevant to contemporary issues. All cultures emanate from communities. All the eleven official languages are regarded as tools of communication and vehicles of the divergent cultures. No culture should dominate others because of other people's economic status. In any given cultural context, behavioral patterns are fixed by norms.

### **African Languages and Education**

The speakers of all South African indigenous languages can develop a vision of desirable outcomes. The types of the outcomes, which are achieved, will be a vision of an 'ideal society'. Every African language forms part of the education for every group of people even though it needs to be supplemented. Peterson (2011: 65) declares that:

*This traditional practice of education had nowhere been explicitly formulated as a theory, partly because each generation accepted it as inevitable, partly because the whole conception of education as a "science" had yet to be developed.*

Education without African languages is insufficient. This type of education is not democratic if the term really means the freedom of enquiry and equality of educational opportunity for all. The aim of education must not be ornamental, but pragmatic. Nakosteen (2015: 88) asserts that:

*...the ultimate aim of education is to help each individual manage his life properly, and the degree of success in this self-management is related to the relative understanding each individual has of himself and his environment.*

Language forms a part of education and prepares people for life. It undertook teaching where schools were not playing a major role, more especially in rural areas. There are social changes in the Republic of South Africa, but these changes must not continually widen the generation gap. The gap between successive generations must be closed. It is, therefore, the task of educational institutions to cope up with these changes. The teaching of African languages becomes the task of some institutions founded for these purposes. What everybody should notice is that the language situation in the multilingual developing South Africa is quite complex. Barron (2012: 8-15) acknowledges that there are many instances successful mother tongue-based multilingual programs being implemented around the globe. The researcher goes on to say that:

*The staff working in linguistically and culturally diverse settings are aware of key ideas around the intercultural communications and cultural competence, and are better equipped to foster participatory development.*

The key ideas involve knowing the languages, listening carefully, finding ways to match and align the key concepts where appropriate, and communicating respectfully and effectively. Learners who receive a strong educational foundation in their mother tongue are in the best position to move forward with confidence, to learn other languages and to make a contribution to their societies' future. This seems to be true because it is stated that, *"Among children in schools of a similar quality and coming from similar home background, those who were taught in their home language during the first three years of primary school performed better in the English test in grades four, five and six than children who were exposed to English as the language of instruction in grades one, two and three"* (<http://mg.co.za/paper>). This clearly

shows that the advantages of mother tongue instruction in the early stages of children's education should be promoted. This helps equip the learners and their communities with sufficient knowledge, capacity and self-confidence to engage in decision-making about development and to protect their rights. This can succeed when the medium of an institution, which is the mother tongue, is at the level appropriate to the learners' understanding and this paves a very good understanding of what is really needed without guiding them. Section 29(2) of Chapter two of the *Bill of Rights*, states as follows: Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that language is reasonably practicable. In order to ensure the effective access to, and implementation of this right, the state must consider all reasonable educational alternatives, including single medium institutions, taking into account,

- a. Equity;
- b. Practicability; and
- c. The need to redress the results of past racially discriminatory laws and practices.

Multilingualism helps learners towards the goal of involvement, socialization, democratization and citizenship. They learn to make allowances for the differences between them. Competition of cultural activities such as traditional dances, songs, games, poems, to mention a few, should be encouraged within the school. In planning and organizing these competitions, the learners themselves should be involved. Therefore, a learner-leadership structure, designed to coordinate all cultural activities, termed the Central Cultural Committee, should play a significant role in arranging sound cultural educative competitions. The activities also stimulate interest in the environment and learners develop a keen interest in nature conservation.

### **What is the Voice of the People?**

Many people feel that every community is comfortable in its cultural practices. The voice of the people is that there could not be a national framework of education to be given by different people belonging to different cultural communities. The fact of the matter is that the philosophy of education and the system of independent thinking are solely based on the philosophy of life of a particular cultural group of

people. People want to restructure the educational stance in a scientific disguise. During the apartheid era, African languages were taught not to provide African masses with a clear literary base for cultural development, but rather to keep them apart from each other and the rest of the South African community while maintaining strict control over the type of literature provided. English and Afrikaans were held swayed over and above the indigenous African languages. Today, many people want to be intellectually liberated from past bondage. They want to use these languages to increase social cohesion and economic participation between cultural groups. Communities are usually best served by those who are part or in tune of their culture. In cultural diversity, there are differences among cultural groups of people with unique cultural backgrounds, and as such, no culture is better than the other. Mogorosi (2012: 160) also acknowledges that:

*Respect for cultural diversity means that everyone in a society needs to be interacted with, with dignity and acceptance of their particular cultural practices.*

People believe that there are plenty of cultural contrasts, but the message is that everyone must be treated with similar respect. Policymakers are faced with a difficult task of choosing the national or official language(s) in a multilingual and multicultural nation, South Africa. This has caused riots. This is supplemented by Prah (2006: 9) when saying that:

*The process of achieving cultural and linguistic supremacy, more or less, continued uninterrupted until 1976, when African school children in Soweto decisively rejected and revolted against the use of Afrikaans as medium of instruction in schools.*

The very same idea is echoed by Phaahla (2012: 132) when she says that:

*People have fought and rioted over popular choices, frequently in defense of their own language or of the language of preference. This was evident in South Africa in the 1976 Soweto riots when students demanded a policy change regarding the language of teaching and learning.*

This shows that authorities did not listen to their voice. They contend that language varieties are a salient means of confirming group identity, and are equal. It is important to note that any variety can be developed for use in any

situation. People go on to assert that South Africans should not associate ethnicity with apartheid. Language is the most sufficient carrier of culture. For this reason, Africans should make it a point to ensure that their indigenous languages do not disappear.

### **Curriculum Development for the Developing South Africa**

For any curriculum to succeed, it must surely be responsive to the external environment. All African languages in the curriculum provide the social, cultural and political history of South Africa. The Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) should be included as a part and parcel of the curriculum. It is important to note that indigenous people always had a wide knowledge of how to live sustainably. They had, for example, their own ways of treating various diseases, preserving food, dealing with unacceptable behavior and general rules associated with the culture of politeness, amongst other things. According to Nel's (2008: 94) definition of IKS, "it is that knowledge base in terms of which local indigenous communities have survived and adapted to new challenges through the ages to maintain their customs and livelihoods." He also notes that by including the IKS in the curriculum does not mean generating new knowledge, but rather entail processes of learning from the elders and making the past part of the present.

The systems encompass economic, social, technology, educational, legal and governance systems of a particular group of people. They are practiced locally to suit the needs of the local people. In this way, the original information is used by various cultural groups. Dances, songs, games, poems, folktales, animals and plants, to mention a few, are the main ingredients of the Indigenous Knowledge Systems. This original information is free from the Western scientific way of doing things. Traditional healers have, for example, unique ways of curing various diseases, which is totally different from the Western ways. They use divining bones to detect patients' illnesses and problems. Each community has its Indigenous Knowledge Systems. In the Northern Sotho culture, for instance, a person should go to the initiation school in order to become a man or woman. That person receives a new name after all the formalities of initiation were followed to signify that he/she is

a new person with new responsibilities. Black South Africans should ensure that Indigenous Knowledge Systems are practiced freely without any criticism because many people depend on it for their survival.

### Languages and the New Constitution

South Africa is a multilingual country with eleven (11) officially recognized languages. The languages are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu. Both linguistic diversity and cultural pluralism are viewed in a positive light. They set a stage for the modern nation. The South African Constitution of 1996 (Act no. 108) indicates the total emancipation of the previously marginalized people. Chapter one of the Constitution clearly shows that every language that indicates culture of a specific group of people should never be ignored. Section 6 (2) of this chapter, that is, *Foundation provisions*, says that:

*Recognizing 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.*

The Constitution raises the issue of multilingualism with regard to language identity. Multilingualism, without any doubt, implies equal status of languages in terms of education, language identity and language policy implementation. Moyo (2002: 150) states that a country whose language policy does not give equal status to all languages spoken in the country should not be called multilingual, but rather a country with language diversity. The languages of a country are the ones that are historically and culturally linked to ethnic communities who speak them. Section 30 of Chapter two of *Bill of Rights*, continues by saying:

*Everyone has the right to use the language and to participate in the cultural life of their choice, but no one exercising these rights may do so in a manner inconsistent with any provision of the Bill of Rights.*

This is supported by Makgopa (2009: 52) in the following way:

*The Constitution encourages intercultural encounters within the Black communities, which were previously separated by apartheid laws. The dismantling of apartheid in South Africa*

*facilitated communication and movement within the country. Black South Africans, in particular, were discriminated against on the basis of color, language and culture.*

The status of any language is often measured from its use in schools, business, media and national administration, just to mention a few institutions (Kamwangamalu 2000). The Constitution does not differentiate between native and foreign languages. Even if all the languages enjoy the equal status, English is still the only language, which is used "in law courts, in government offices, and all public notices and directives, and in international trade, tourism and diplomatic affairs" (Rajaram 1994: 2398). It is true to state that South African languages and cultures are unique and divergent.

It should be borne in mind that language is one of the natural assets owned by every human being. It is seen as an instrument with which thoughts, hopes, values and ideals are articulated and with which the community and the laws that govern it are as well articulated. People face daily challenges by means of language. Any person has the right to use the official language of his/her choice. Section 9(3) of the Chapter two of *Bill of Rights*, further states that:

*The state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, color, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture language and birth.*

During the apartheid era, language was used as a political instrument to divide and rule the country's marginalized multilingual population. The issue of language has always been a subject that gave rise to emotional debates in South Africa's journey towards democracy. It was used for political dominance, protection of power structures and unequal distribution of economic resources. There seems to be a mismatch between language policy and language practice. The Constitution was compiled to satisfy all the citizens of the country. The previously disadvantaged languages of the oppressed majority were elevated. It goes without saying that language is a basic human right.

### CONCLUSION

For any country to succeed, there must be a sense of community and trust among members of various language groups. Multilingualism

seems to be a valuable resource, since knowledge of more than one language might be an asset in both an immediate economic sense and the wider social sense. In South Africa today, there is absolutely no single language that qualifies to be the only official language on the basis of the number of its speakers alone or their social status. It is the view of this paper that the government must take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of South African heritage languages, and provide arrangements regarding foreign languages that are widely spoken in the country. All the official languages should be used in all official domains like parliament, education, administration, business and media. All South African groups should refrain from criticizing each other. They should accommodate and learn each other's cultural belief systems, values and ethics. Restructuring in African languages is important in order to accommodate and promote authors, actors, journalists and radio announcers. This does not only cater for the needs of the new generation, but for all generations to come. African people should first consider their languages before they can consider the languages of other people. Charity begins at home.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

People should first of all acknowledge and respect the importance of cultural diversity as well as their unique and culturally defined needs. They must have the ability and readiness to adapt their own generic helping skills to accommodate culturally diverse environments. People must also be aware and anticipate possible misconceptions, miscommunication, misinterpretation and misjudgment on the basis of cultural differences. The education system should be responsive to the needs of the community and this will only be realized once the curriculum is structured in a way that it includes relevant aspects and best practices from Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). Oral tradition should be protected in order to advance the people's cultures and this can be achieved through the African languages. The introduction of the term 'African Renaissance' must be taken seriously and be spread to all different types of African people because it really means a lot in terms of Black people's pride, identity, history and origin.

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