

“Language, class and power in post-apartheid South Africa”

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Introductory statement

In their book, *Writing Science: Literacy and Discursive Power*, Halliday and Martin state what ought to be obvious but for the fact that most of us never think about language as an issue in our societies. They postulate that

The history of humanity is not only a history of socio-economic activity. It is also a history of semiotic activity.

In what follows, I want to explicate this statement in the context of post-apartheid South Africa by way of analysing a few simply formulated programmatic propositions that are derived from the insights of various schools of thought operating in the discipline known as the Sociology of Language.

My immediate purpose is to alert especially the privileged elite layers of the new South Africa to the fact that we ignore the details of the language question at our peril. I should like, beyond that, to leave with the listeners and the readers of this contribution the insight that implementing a consistently democratic language policy is a critical component of the consolidation and expansion of the democratic society we are committed to. Because of its programmatic character, this essay can be no more than a starting point for a much more in-depth discussion and for wide-ranging research on the impact of language policy in the critical domains of social life.

My approach is based on and influenced by my understanding of Marxism as a method of social analysis, by the social reproduction paradigm of the late Pierre Bourdieu, whose work in this domain has been exceptionally creative and illuminating, and by the theoretical and political practice of V. I. Lenin in respect of what used to be called “the national question”.

“Leave your languages alone”: the fallacy of common sense

In his *Planning Language, Planning Inequality*, James Tollefson (1991:2) wrote

... (Language) is built into the economic and social structure of society so deeply that its fundamental importance seems only natural. For this reason, language policies are often seen as expressions of natural, common-sense assumptions about language in society.

The purpose of his book is to rebut this all-pervasive notion and to demonstrate by way of many significant historical and contemporary examples that language policies

are governmental strategies designed, mostly consciously, to promote the interests of specific classes and other social groups.

This is, therefore, the first proposition to note; it is not true that languages simply develop “naturally”, as it were. They are formed and manipulated within definite limits to suit the interests of different groups of people. This is very clear in the case of so-called standard languages, as opposed to non-standard varieties (dialects, sociolects). The former are invariably the preferred varieties of the ruling class or ruling strata in any given society. They prevail as the norm because of the economic, political-military, or cultural-symbolic power of the rulers, not because they are “natural” in any meaning of the term. The importance of this proposition derives from the fact that it validates the claim that languages, just like cities or families, *can* be planned. Indeed, it is a fact that in any modern state, whether or not it is explicitly acknowledged by governments, languages are *always* planned, in that legislation prescribes, often in great detail, where and how one or more languages are to be used. This is universal practice and, as I shall have occasion to show, it has significant consequences in critical domains such as education.

In regard to post-apartheid South Africa, it remains to be said that the principle – as well as the practice – of language planning is accepted. However, lack of implementation planning and, thus, of delivery, tends to negate the principle and to reduce it to mere lip service.

The power of language and the language of power

There are two fundamental sources from which language derives its power, i.e., the ability of the individuals or groups to realise their intentions (will) by means of language (empowerment) or, conversely, the ability of individuals or groups to impose their agendas on others (disempowerment of the latter). For human beings to produce the means of subsistence, they have to cooperate and in order to do so, they have to communicate. Language is the main instrument of communication at the disposal of human beings; consequently, the specific language(s) in which the production processes take place become(s) the language(s) of power. To put it differently, if one does not command the language(s) of production, one is automatically excluded and disempowered. At this point, the relationship between language policy, class and power ought to become intuitively obvious. But, as I know from many years of experience, this is an optimistic view. Consequently, I shall spell out some of the implications of this particular insight for modern industrial societies¹.

For reasons connected with the colonial history of southern Africa, the language of power in post-apartheid South Africa is undoubtedly English. Afrikaans continues to play an ancillary role in the processes of economic production in the so-called formal economy even though there are determined attempts to reduce its significance in this domain as well as in other high-status domains. The question that we will have to consider presently is whether this fact in and of itself implies, as is often said and universally assumed, that “English is enough” and what the implications of this belief are for democracy and development.

The other source of the power of language is its function as a transmission mechanism of “culture” or, more popularly, its role in the formation of individual and

¹ In a recent paper prepared for a conference on Language and Poverty, held at Cornell University in the U.S.A., I discussed these implications in detail as they pertain to the educational system.

social identities. In this essay, I shall not deal with this matter any further even though it is necessarily implicated in the general discussion of the broader topic of “language, class and power”. The reason for this is that consideration of the psychological and sociological issues involved in the question of identity would tend to blur our focus. Suffice it to say, therefore, that being able to use the language(s) one has the best command of in any situation is an empowering factor and, conversely, not being able to do so is necessarily disempowering. The self esteem, self-confidence, potential creativity and spontaneity that come with being able to use the language(s) that have shaped one from early childhood (one’s mother tongue) is the foundation of all democratic polities and institutions. To be denied the use of this language is the very meaning of oppression. In Lenin’s words,

“... (a) democratic state is bound to grant *complete freedom* for the native languages and annul all privileges for any one language. A democratic state will not permit the oppression or the overriding of any one nationality by another, either in any particular region or in any branch of public affairs” (Lenin 1983:138. Emphasis in the original).

English is enough: the class character of the monolingual habitus

The hegemony of English, or of other languages, is not merely tolerated in the ‘developing’ world; it is considered a legitimate model for society. In many newly independent states, a tiny English-speaking elite controls state policy-making organs while the masses of the people remain excluded. ... A world system that is more just and equitable depends upon an understanding of how people can gain control of their own institutions. A key issue is the role of language in organizing and reproducing those institutions (Tollefson 1991:201).

Twenty years earlier, Pierre Alexandre (1972:86) had shown clearly how for post-colonial Africa, proficiency in the language of the former colonial power (English, French or Portuguese) constituted “cultural capital” and was an index to the class location of the individual, since this ability almost automatically elevated the speaker into the ruling elite. At this point, it would be necessary to discuss in some detail Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the evolution of linguistic markets, from which this insight derives. For reasons of focus, however, I shall simply draw attention to the immediately relevant propositions as they apply to our own context². The hierarchical relations between different varieties of a language or between different languages are a reflection of the historically evolved relations of domination and subjugation between the speakers of the relevant varieties or languages. In the South African case, Dutch, English and, later, Afrikaans, came to be the “legitimate languages” in different periods of our history. This legitimacy was/is the result of colonial conquest in the first instance but, as the structural transformations that accompanied that cataclysmic event became routine, dominance was complemented and reinforced by hegemony. That is to say, consent of the victims of colonial subjugation became the major factor for the maintenance of English and Afrikaans (until 1994 approximately) as the legitimate languages. In South Africa, unlike most other African countries in

² An excellent summary of Bourdieu’s theory as it pertains to the language question is Niedrig 2000:21-27. It is, however, only available in German. The classic English exposition of the relevant theory is Bourdieu 1991.

the British sphere of influence, the presence of a relatively large group of L1-speakers of English reduced the potential “profits of distinction” that came with proficiency in the legitimate language, although the rate of profit remains relatively high. For, according to Bourdieu, the smaller the number of people who are proficient in the legitimate variety and the more widespread the perception of the value of that variety in the relevant population, the greater the profits of distinction. This is, incidentally, the objective economic reason for the phenomenon of “elite closure” referred to later. I make the point here, simply to stress the fact that there is a material reason for the maintenance of a particular language policy in any given period.

This insight, true as it is, does not tell us anything about the class consciousness or the class position of individual members of the elite. What has to be established in any given case, therefore, is the degree of consciousness of the ruling strata of the de facto policy of “elite closure”³ or exclusion of the masses by means of language policy⁴. To do so is no easy task, since the levels of mystification and, more problematically, the veils of ignorance that delude policy makers and other power brokers into believing that their understandings are “scientific”, defy the logic of mere argument and historical experience.

The relevant essential proposition is simple enough. It states that in a multilingual society, it is in everyone’s interest to learn the dominant language (of power), since this will help to provide equal opportunities in the labour market as well as in other markets. In post-colonial Africa, this has led to the almost complete marginalisation of the local languages of the people and the valorisation of English, French and Portuguese in the relevant African states. Indeed, in most other African states, the distinction between “official”, i.e., European, and “national” (African) languages ironically highlights in an unintended manner the social distance between the elite and the masses of the people. Because of the role model status of the middle class in most societies, the monolingual habitus⁵ becomes generalised in such a manner that the vast majority of the people come to believe that all that matters is knowledge of English in so-called anglophone Africa. This utterly disempowering disposition assumes the character of a social pathology, one which I have called the “Static Maintenance Syndrome”⁶.

³ This concept is described by its author as “a tactic of boundary maintenance. It involves institutionalizing the linguistic patterns of the elite, either through official policy or informally established usage norms in order to limit access to socioeconomic mobility and political power to people who possess the requisite linguistic patterns” (Scotton 1990:27). She also makes it clear that in sub-Saharan Africa, we are invariably dealing with cases of “strong elite closure”, where the social gap between the elites and the masses is deepened by the dominant position of foreign, i.e., European, languages in which more than half of the population do not have adequate proficiency. (Scotton 1990:27-28)

⁴ Our Nigerian colleague, Ayo Bamgbose, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics and African Languages at the University of Ibadan, published an elegant study of the many ways in which elite closure has operated in post-colonial Africa. His justified optimism about the evolving language policy in the new South Africa at the time still has to be realised in practice. (See Bamgbose 2000)

⁵ Ingrid Goglin (1994), basing herself on Bourdieu’s work, coins the term “monolingual habitus” in order to describe the ironical phenomenon of, among other things, colonially oppressed peoples who “voluntarily” deny that their indigenous languages have any value and valorize only the former colonial language(s). In metropolitan European states, this valorisation is manifest in the standard variety of the relevant language.

⁶ This means simply that most African people are willing to maintain their first languages in the primary contexts of family, community, primary school and religious practice but they do not believe that these languages have the capacity to develop into languages of power. Their consciousness reflects the reality of the linguistic market and they have become victims of a

To add insult to injury, as it were, Tollefson's paradox notes that in modern societies,

... while vast resources are directed toward language teaching and bilingualism, especially involving English, more people than ever are unable to acquire the language skills they need in order to enter and succeed in school, obtain satisfactory employment, and participate politically and socially in the life of their communities. ... The great linguistic paradox of our time is that societies which dedicate enormous resources to language teaching and learning have been unable – or unwilling to remove the powerful linguistic barriers to full participation in the major institutions of modern society. (Tollefson 1991:7)

Tollefson arrives at the conclusion that inadequate competence is not mainly the result of poor books and other texts, inadequate pedagogy or lack of motivation and other similar suggested deficiencies. Instead,

... language competence remains a barrier to employment, education, and economic well being due to political forces of our own making. For while modern social and economic systems require certain kinds of language competence, they simultaneously create conditions which ensure that vast numbers of people will be unable to acquire that competence. A central mechanism by which this process occurs is language policy. (Tollefson 1991:7)

While it is understandable, given the colonial and racist history of South Africa, that before 1973 the ruling class was fundamentally concerned with maintaining the limited markets in raw materials and semi-processed commodities which South Africa, because of its place in the international division of labour, had to provide to the transnational corporations and other imperialist entities, the implicit continuation of such policies in post-apartheid South Africa is something of an anomaly. For, whereas in apartheid South Africa, the rulers could afford to, and did, approach African languages as though they had no economic or cultural value, in the new South Africa, this attitude is clearly self-limiting and self-defeating, if not self-destructive. Unless we are prepared to grant that we are simply trotting along the same footpaths as those pioneered by the neo-colonial states after 1960, where the indigenous languages of Africa were not seen as resources but as problems. In this connection, it is germane to our focus to point to the fact that Africa, including South Africa, is today subject to the intensified pressures of "globalisation" and that the pressure to adopt English, which is incontestably *the* global language, as the only legitimate language is exceptionally strong in "anglophone" territories⁷.

In this respect, a caveat is in place. We have to be exceptionally careful not to fall into the trap of prescribing cures that turn out to be worse than the sickness itself. A recent strand of analysis that attempts to view the political economy of language in terms of "functional multilingualism" in economic life runs the risk, in my opinion, of promoting a kind of economic diglossia where the "minority" languages are confined as instruments of communication in the processes of production, exchange and distribution to the so-called informal sector, as against the nationally dominant languages (in Africa, these are almost without exception languages of European

monolingual habitus, in spite of the fact that most African people are proficient in two or more languages.

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of this aspect of the issue, see Alexander 2005 (a).

origin) that perform these powerful functions in the “formal” economy⁸. This approach to the issue derives from a dual-economy paradigm that has a long history but, even if it had been useful in earlier times, is particularly irrelevant and misleading in the era of globalisation. Ultimately, it may do no more than serve as an apologetic justification for the perpetuation of existing social stratification. In Africa specifically, the languages of the majority of the people have to become the dominant languages, in whatever combinations, in the respective economy, taken as a whole, of the individual countries. Only if this happens will the danger of a two-tier citizen-subject social model be countered in favour of a democratic system where all are citizens and all have similar life chances. Djité (2005) has written a useful analytical essay on the subject from the point of view not of minorities in Europe, North America, and elsewhere but from that of the “third world”, where the “informal economy” is often the major contributor to the GDP or the main source of employment (Djité 2005:15).

Both Djité and Edwards (2005) in mercifully jargon-free essays have demonstrated how in economically more developed countries, this informal sector constitutes a set of niche markets in which, necessarily, local languages are essential for lubricating the economic processes. Edwards also points to the fact that these niche markets are often rapidly occupied by the products of multinational firms. In so doing, she gives one more indication that the notion of a “dual economy” is no more than an abstraction. Both of them also insist that the economic benefits of multilingualism should be transferred to the central economies. In respect of Africa, Djité (2005:22) concludes with unerring logic that

Communication facilitated in the local languages will remove the inefficiencies introduced by the selection and promotion of the official language, and policies that promote growth with equity are necessary to achieve socio-economic inclusion for all.

Edwards (2005:164) similarly warns against the establishment of economic diglossia or ghettoisation of the “minority languages” by stating clearly that

English may be the language of global trading, but the ability to speak other languages none the less ensures a competitive edge. The multilingual populations of inner-circle countries are a valuable resource, which we overlook at our peril. Their contribution to international business is becoming increasingly evident in areas such as China and the Middle East. ... Initiatives that target minorities rely heavily on the knowledge and experience of minority-language speakers. ... Bilinguals are a marketable commodity; the ability to speak other languages opens up a far wider range of better-paid employment opportunities than might otherwise be the case.

The centrality of education

Bourdieu stresses the social reproductive role of education in this regard. Through compulsory education, individuals are forced – *and also want* - to learn the legitimate language, mainly because of its pivotal role in the production processes and the social status that proficiency in it confers on its speakers. An array of certificates, diplomas and degrees constitute a market, regardless of the real levels of proficiency and competence, and are traded like any other commodity. They take on the character of “cultural capital” (assets) and can be translated into economic assets via

⁸ See Stroud and Hyltenstam 2005 for an introduction to the field.

enhanced salaries, wages, bonuses, and other rewards. Linguistic capital is necessarily the most important component of this cultural capital.

The legacy of apartheid education in South Africa exacerbates the Static Maintenance Syndrome referred to above, since most black people continue to equate mother tongue-based education with the ravages of Bantu education. Without analysing the matter any further, I want to maintain without fear of contradiction that this tendency, even though there are currently the beginnings of some hesitant countervailing tendencies, will continue to undermine South Africa's ability to expand and consolidate democracy and at the same time represents a built-in constraint on economic development, the magnitude of which remains to be established by means of carefully designed research in all branches of the economy.

The following are a few examples of how we unnecessarily restrict the capabilities of our workforce and the efficiency of economic production besides the not unimportant factors of inadequate job satisfaction and a reduced work ethic. I should warn, of course, that not much detailed research has as yet been done in this area. The numbers we quote are indicative and they do not reflect the real magnitudes of the phenomena. Let me add, none the less, that these magnitudes in all probability will be found to be much greater than our statistics indicate at present.

A University of Cape Town M.Phil. mini-dissertation on the subject of *Medium of Instruction and Its Effect on Matriculation Examination Results in 2000 in Western Cape Secondary Schools* hypothesised that

... African language speaking learners in the Western Cape will tend to do badly in the matriculation examination largely because the medium of instruction and assessment is not the mother tongue, but a second or third language. (October 2002:5)

The dissertation, among other things, compares the results of Afrikaans L1 and English L1 students with those of Xhosa L1 students in key subjects and confirms the hypothesis. The actual statistics are, in the context of the "new" South Africa, ironic and extremely disturbing because they demonstrate all too clearly some of the avoidable continuities between apartheid and post-apartheid education. Probably the most significant finding of this study is that the only "learning area" in which all the matriculation candidates performed at comparable levels was the First Language (Higher Grade) subject, i.e., English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa First Language (Higher Grade). This was, for the Xhosa L1 speakers the only subject in which they were taught and assessed in their mother tongue. Ironically, the results for isiXhosa First Language (Higher Grade) in 2000 happened to be better than for the other two languages! (See October 2002:76-77)

These findings have been reinforced by a recent, much larger survey of matric results by Simkins and Patterson (2005). Although their point of departure for their inquiry into *Learner Performance in South Africa* is, pedagogically speaking, somewhat conservative, since its preferred model appears to be a transitional bilingual one, they none the less arrive at the conclusion in respect of the causal significance of the language of teaching (medium of instruction) factor that

... social and economic variables at the individual household level do not play an enormous role in determining performance, with the exception of the language variables. Pupils whose home language is an African language are at a considerable disadvantage in the language of instruction by the time they reach Grade 11 if the

language of instruction is never spoken at home. This can be offset somewhat if the language of instruction is spoken sometimes at home and it can be offset considerably if the language of instruction is spoken often at home. (Simkins and Patterson 2005:33)

They also claim that competence in the language of instruction is crucial for performance in Mathematics. "Every extra per cent earned in the language test is associated with an addition of one-sixth of a per cent in the mathematics test in Grade 9 and one-third of a percent in Grade 11" (Simkins and Patterson 2005:34).⁹ Their study, although limited and preliminary in many respects, has advanced the argument for mother tongue-based education, whether single- or dual-medium is irrelevant in this context, from postulating a correlative (October) to demonstrating a causal relationship between educational success and language medium¹⁰. At a quantitative level, we calculated a few years ago that, on the assumption that in a properly functioning educational system, a 90% pass rate would be reasonable, we have been wasting approximately R3 billion annually on paying the salaries of the teachers employed in Grades 10-12 who produce the average 50% failure rate we have experienced over the past 15 years or so. If these impressions do nothing else, they ought to demonstrate the need for in-depth educational research, in which the language issue, specifically the language-medium policy and practice, should feature centrally. The current Human Rights Commission hearings once again seem not even to be aware that this is a valid, indeed a crucial research question!

Shifting perspectives?

We can only hope that evidence such as this will lead to a shift in the perceptions of the political and cultural leadership which, it should be noted, have in recent months begun to speak more openly and frequently in public about the virtues and benefits of mother tongue-based education.

One of South Africa's most prominent educational analysts and researchers who, until recently, was at best sceptical about the virtues and practicality of mother tongue education, remarked recently in response to a question about fundamental changes between apartheid and post-apartheid education that

... we haven't made much progress in realising the potential of poor children in terms of giving them quality schooling. ... The legacy of apartheid-era education is seen in the poor education of black teachers who, generally, teach black children. The (Joint Education) trust's research shows that the average mark a sample of grade three teachers in 24 rural schools in SA achieved on a grade six test in their subject was 55%. Teachers are shaky in terms of the subject they are teaching, and this is exacerbated by the language problem. They are not teaching in their own tongue. He praises Education Minister Naledi Pandor for her promotion of mother tongue education, at least in the earlier years of school ... (Blaine 2005:17)

⁹ However dubious such number-crunching might be, the authors have grappled with a large measure of success with the issue of relative weighting of causal factors, which October (2002:77) had been forced to leave in abeyance. Their statistical methods for weighting the effects of different relevant variables are explained in Chapter 3 of the study.

¹⁰ Other important variables such as a good meal once a day and a favourable home literacy environment are essential, of course, but for the first time in post-apartheid South Africa, the language medium issue has been demonstrated to be a central cause of success or failure.

In the Western Cape, the government is firmly committed to the implementation of mother tongue-based bilingual education for a minimum of seven years of primary schooling and is investigating the financial and training implications of extending the system into the secondary school.

Unless African languages are given market value, i.e., unless their instrumentality for the processes of production, exchange and distribution is enhanced, no amount of policy change at school level can guarantee their use in high-status functions and, thus, eventual escape from the dominance and the hegemony of English. We have understood for many years already that the language-medium policy caused cognitive impoverishment and, consequently, necessitated investment in compensatory on-the-job training by the private sector in order to enhance the “trainability” of the just-from-school recruits. This wastefulness would be completely avoidable if there had been a national development plan in which reform of education and economic development planning were integrated. This would mean that fundamental changes in the language-medium policy would be directly related to the increased use of the African mother tongues, where relevant, in the public service and in the “formal” economy. An articulated programme of job creation and employment on the basis of language proficiencies would, in the South African context also serve as an organic affirmative action programme, one that would not have the unintended consequence of perpetuating and entrenching divisive racial identities inherited from the apartheid past.

At a more general level, it is my view that we have to move rapidly beyond mere posturing and gesturing in the direction of implementing a consistently democratic language policy in South Africa. We have to do so not only in order to improve and consolidate the democratic political culture that has been initiated here but also in order to expand the potential of national economic development that will become possible because of a higher level of general education of the workforce and a deeper substratum of ordinary South Africans attuned to the needs and dynamics of modern science and technology that will have been mediated through local languages as well as English. In order to do this, we shall have to review and refurbish the impressive but under-funded and bureaucratized language infrastructure established since 1995. It is, in my view, of the utmost importance that the original independent statutory character of the Pan South African Language Board be restored and reinforced so that real progress, as opposed to the uneven achievements hitherto, can be initiated and accelerated.

This new phase of the development and use of African languages in high-status functions should be approached and understood against the background of the strategies, activities and programmes of the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), a bureau of the African Union that is beginning to influence decisively the direction and modalities of language policies on the continent¹¹. South Africa, because of its own recent history and its human and material resources, is bound to play an important role on this new road and clarity about our own positions on and commitment to a democratic language dispensation is, therefore, fundamental.

Allow me to conclude with what many people consider to be a provocative and utopian challenge, i.e., with a question first suggested by Amílcar Cabral: will South Africa’s middle class find the courage, have they got the imagination, to commit class suicide by moving away decisively from the current English-mainly and often English-only language policy, with all its negative consequences for a democratic polity? My answer to this apparently rhetorical question is simple but, I suspect, only too true.

¹¹ An introduction to ACALAN is Alexander 2005(b).

This can happen if we can demonstrate the economic value of the African languages. Moves in this direction are now increasingly evident, even though they are still offset by negative attitudes in respect of African languages¹². My former student, Michellé October, who has become a colleague, is researching this area. Preliminarily, she has discerned a definite move on the part of major economic players such as the banking sector, parastatal communications firms and the public service administration towards increased use of African languages at the workplace, in their administration and especially at the interface with customers. One of the country's biggest banks, for example, has made available on their autobank screens instructions in isiZulu and Sesotho and not only in English and Afrikaans, as was the case in the past. According to their latest data, just under 30% of their customers use the two indigenous African languages. They intend making this facility available in all of the 11 official languages of the country. The parastatal South African Broadcasting Corporation has found that during the past financial year (2003 – 2004), they have had a jump in revenue because of the increased provision of local content programmes in African languages. (M. October, personal communication). It is clear that if this trend continues, in all the different economic sectors and large institutions, including especially the educational system, the market potential of the languages will be enhanced in ways that cannot now be anticipated.

The challenge, however, is not only to the political, business and cultural leadership of the country. It is a challenge also to applied language scholars and language practitioners of southern Africa. Above all, it is high time that the intelligentsia begin to move out of their comfort zones and accept that language policy, class and power are tightly interwoven and that unless we devise our own agendas in the interest of our people as a whole, we are willy-nilly carrying out others' possibly nefarious agendas.

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¹² This is largely a function of the fact that proficiency in African languages continues to be inadequately remunerated except at the highest levels of translation and interpreting.

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