The stuttering implementation of language policies in the South African education system

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The current status of indigenous African languages in South Africa has caught the attention of language experts, academics and the general public. The main focus of this article is on the role which schools can play to promote and develop indigenous African languages. Schools are viewed as a fertile ground where second languages can be grounded, particularly urban schools which are multiracial, with learners from different linguistic backgrounds. The article observes that while the South African government is committed to promoting and developing indigenous African languages, the implementation of its sound policies on education is lacking. The Language-in-Education Policy (2004) is cited as an ideal, the goals of which, once achieved, could mean massive progress. The article decries the lack of commitment on the part of native speakers of indigenous African languages, in some instances, to invest in their languages, as a retrogressive step in the promotion and development of these languages.

Introduction

South Africa is a multilingual country with entrenched policies on multilingualism, and on the promotion and development of indigenous African languages, with the view of elevating their status to that of the two ex-colonial languages, English and Afrikaans, which were in fact the only official languages of South Africa up to 1994. The current linguistic map tells us that the linguistic distribution is quite diverse among the eleven official languages across the nine provinces. In order to do justice to the previously marginalised languages, nine indigenous African languages were accorded the official status by the first democratic government in 1994.

Makoni (2005) argues that in recognising the historically diminished use and status of the indigenous languages, the state must take practical positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of indigenous languages. This, it is argued, does not currently obtain in South Africa, seventeen years into democracy, as lack of implementation of government's language policies by some schools is glaring. The article argues that, to this effect, the government has, however, taken a step by formulating policies – the onus is now on native speakers of these languages to also play their part by ensuring that their languages are promoted by themselves, and also by educational institutions they send their children to.

Corrective language policies in the democratic South Africa

In order to do justice to the previously marginalised languages, nine indigenous African languages were accorded the official status by the first democratic government in 1994. Policies were formulated to correct the situation that obtained during apartheid, which saw only English and Afrikaans as the only official languages in South Africa.

Government took a step to redress the current imbalances that were instituted in the past, but nonetheless still linger on. The National Language Policy Framework (2002) was introduced, whose aim was to encourage the utilisation of official indigenous African languages in order to foster and promote national unity. The policy takes into account the broad acceptance of linguistic diversity, social justice, the principle of equal access to public services and programmes, and respect for language rights.

The National Language Policy Framework (2002) states categorically the following:

1. A striking characteristic of multilingualism in South Africa is the fact that several indigenous languages are spoken across provincial borders, shared by speech communities from different communities;

2. There is currently a strong awareness of the need to intensify efforts to develop the previously marginalised indigenous languages and to promote multilingualism if South Africans are to be liberated from undue reliance on the utilisation of non-indigenous languages as the dominant, official languages of the state; and *h*

3. To date management of linguistic diversity in post-apartheid South Africa has been made problematic by the lack of a clearly defined language policy, leading to the use of English and Afrikaans as the most dominant languages in the socio-economic and political domains of society.

Also, the Pan South African Language Board (Pansalb) was established. The sole aim of the body was to:

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(a)   Promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of all official languages; the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and sign languages; and

(b)   Promote and ensure respect for all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa. These include German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu, as well as languages used for religious purposes in South Africa, like Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit, and others.

The Language-in-Education Policy (2004) promotes the use of a learner's first language and English as a medium of instruction in most schools. With the current policies, learners are expected to learn through their first languages at least up to grade 3, and thereafter be taught through English.

If South Africa were to achieve effective multilingualism, this would entail, inter alia, that speakers of the languages that are being developed are able to read and write in their languages. Indigenous languages are spoken widely in South Africa today, and have always been in the past, but they had not been accorded the same status as English and Afrikaans.

According to de Klerk (1996), the language distribution was: isiZulu (21,9%), isiXhosa (17,2%), Afrikaans (15%), Sepedi (9,6%), English (9%), seTswana (8,6%), seSotho (6,7%), Xitsonga (4,3%), siSwati (2,6%), Tshivenda (2,2%) and isiNdebele (1,5%). However, the 2001 census reveals a steady increase in the number of speakers of indigenous African languages and a decrease in the number of speakers of English and Afrikaans, see the 2001 statistics below: SOUTH AFRICAN LANGUAGES 2001

Table 1 Language distribution in South Africa

Language	Number of speakers*	% of total
Afrikaans	5983420	13.35%
English	3 673 206	8.2%
IsiNdebele	711825	1.59%
IsiXhosa	7907149	17.64%
IsiZulu	10677315	23.82%
Sesotho sa Leboa	4 208 974	9.39%
Sesotho	3 555 192	7.93%
Setswana	3 677 010	8.2%
SiSwati	1 194433	2.66%
Tshivenda	1 021 761	2.28%
Xitsonga	1 992 201	4.44%
Other	217 291	0.48%
TOTAL	44819777	100%

*Spoken as a home language: Census 2001 (*http://www.southaf-rica.info/about/people/language.htm*).

The 2001 statistics show a steady general increase in the number of speakers of indigenous African languages, with only Sesotho sa Leboa and Setswana showing a slight decrease of 0.21% and 0.4%, respectively. IsiZulu, Sesotho, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Tshivenda, Siswati and Xitsonga show an increase in speakership of 1.92%, 1.23%, 0.44%, 0.09%, 0.08%, 0.06%, and 0.01%, respectively.

This shows, among other things, the demand for speedy implementation of policies on multilingualism, and development of official indigenous African languages, not in order to replace English and Afrikaans, but to fully function alongside the two languages. So far, multilingualism has not yet been meaningfully promoted. This is due to either lack of policy implementation, or counter-productive implementation, which defeats the whole purpose of promoting multilingualism.

Although the government has expressed emphatically the call for the promotion of and use of indigenous African languages nationally, there is no evidence that the policy on multilingualism is in force. In fact, there seems to be no change at all that is aimed at developing indigenous African languages or to accord them a status equivalent to that given to English and Afrikaans, in practical terms as functional languages in the socio-economic life of the majority of South Africa's population. The two have been languages of national use and as such they have been developed to suit this purpose. The promotion of multilingualism in South Africa requires efforts that do not discount the knowledge that exists in societies where indigenous official languages are prominent (National Language Policy Framework, 2002). If these languages cannot be fully utilised in South Africa, where will they be utilised? Roy-Campbell (2001) writes:

Despite the overwhelming evidence that the use of foreign languages negatively impacts the acquisition of school knowledge by the vast majority of African students, throughout most African countries the foreign languages continue to be afforded dominance in the educational sphere. The colonial imposition of these languages as the languages of knowledge that should be valued and as the languages of cultural capital has contributed to the naturalisation of English, French, or Portuguese as an indispensable part of what it means to be educated in many African countries. Those who are considered the knowers speak the language of power - English, French, or Portuguese – while the knowledge of those who do not speak the language of power is devalued.

Before the first democratic rule in South Africa, English and Afrikaans were the only official languages, despite the fact that the majority of South Africans were not competent in them, which made education through this medium an uphill struggle. Despite this fact, second language speakers of English had to compete with first language speakers of the language at interviews, etc. Worse still, these second language speakers came from disadvantaged backgrounds, where teachers had themselves received poor education, and were in many ways quite frankly ill-trained or unqualified to teach English or Afrikaans, or even to teach through these mediums. Buthelezi (1995), argues that under apartheid rule, these schools had been run almost exclusively by Black non-native speakers of English who were often unqualified or under-qualified for the task. In research conducted by Wildsmith (1992), cited in Buthelezi (1995), it was found that most non-standard features exhibited by the pupils were actually teacher-induced. All this resulted from the segregated and unequal education, which actually limited the 'naturalistic environment' (Krashen, 1987) conducive to second-language learning by reducing the potential social interaction between second and first language speakers.

Banda (2000), reports that the Afrikaner nationalist government went on a deliberate campaign uprooting White English mother-tongue teachers from Bantu Education, thereby denying Black children authentic models of English and well-trained, experienced teachers.

Resistance by some schools to transform in line with the prevalent diversity in South Africa

All schools were founded in order that a particular educational purpose could be fulfilled in a particular community. Certain schools were founded solely to serve the interests of the White communities in the areas then designated as Whites-only areas. Hence, Afrikaans or English was selected as the medium of instruction. Others were meant for other racial groups. Surely, these schools served well the interests of their respective communities and the residents of the relevant towns.

However, with the phasing out of the Group Areas Act, people of all races were allowed to buy property anywhere, and become rightful residents. When this happened, there were changes in the composition of the communities within which the schools were situated. As a result, all schools, rural or urban, are attended by learners from all racial groups, with diverse cultures and languages. One would expect the schools to incorporate this kind of diversity and reflect it in their school curricula.

This could be done by introducing indigenous languages to cater for the needs of African learners who enrol in these schools, and who have become part and parcel of the community within which the school is situated, and whose interests it should serve. On the other hand, the diverse community should ensure that the schools serve their own interest, and fight hard for transformation to take place.

The culture in most former Model C schools does not reflect the diversity in terms of the communities, both inside and outside the schools. Black learners and parents who now subscribe to such schools have had to adapt in order to fit into the culture and philosophy of the schools.

Some schools argued that parents sent their children there to learn English, and therefore there is no demand for indigenous languages. It is absurd to even suggest that parents are happy to enrol their children where English is the medium of instruction without admitting that both parents and learners need isiZulu, not necessarily as a medium of instruction, but in order to preserve it by ensuring that their children can speak, read and write it. This is solely for preserving this language in its spoken as well as written form. IsiZulu is a rich language which needs to be developed, especially now that it is as official as English and Afrikaans. This means that more writing in this language, as well as in other official indigenous languages, is needed desperately, if these languages are really meant for wider use for this generation and other generations to come.

Indigenous African languages, like any other languages of the world, should not be allowed to decay, for, this would entail loss of heritage of the native speakers of the languages, among other things. K. David Harrison, cited in the *Sunday Times* (2011) writes: "When we lose a language, we lose centuries of human thinking about time, seasons, sea creatures, reindeer, edible flowers, mathematics, landscapes, myths, music, the unknown and the everyday".

Stuttering implementation of language policies in education

With the sound and progressive language policies South Africa has, the biggest challenges that lie ahead are: the lack of will by stakeholders to bring about transformation to schools in their neighbourhood, and by extension, to the education system as a whole; and also, neglect of indigenous African languages by their native speakers.

Lack of will to transform South Africa's school system

In spite of the government's policy on additive bilingualism, schools have generally continued teaching as before. This means that primary and secondary schools are teaching through the medium of Afrikaans or English. It can be argued (see Mncwango 2007) that some schools that were Afrikaans medium of instruction (MOI) only have opened an additional English medium of instruction (EMOI) stream. Also, some former Afrikaans only and English only 'White' schools are now offering African languages such as isiXhosa or isiZulu as optional subjects. Interestingly though, the token use of isiXhosa or isiZulu does not mean full integration of languages and language groups. In practice, the majority of working-class children from mainly Black and Coloured families cannot afford the high fees of these former 'Whites only' schools.

To date, almost without exception, school application forms and other documents in South Africa have a 'Home Language' section. Ironically, despite the overwhelming evidence on multilingualism and government's additive bilingualism policy, it is still assumed and expected that South Africans are typically monolingual, using a 'Home Language' in their neighbourhoods. The argument is sometimes used by a school to deny a child entry on account of his or her 'Home Language' if it is deemed to differ from the medium of instruction of the school. In such a situation a child is 'encouraged' to enrol in another school (Banda 2000). Banda (2000: 60) adds:

> Although laws have been promulgated to transform and integrate higher education, there is still no university offering instruction through the medium of an African language. Moreover, there has been minimal curriculum transformation apart from the fact that English is increasingly becoming the de facto MOI in institutions of higher learning. Those institutions that used to offer instruction in Afrikaans only are being forced to open English streams as well. The reason is that to get government subsidy they need Black students to swell their numbers as well as to show that transformation is taking place. But Black students prefer EMOI and have had their secondary school education in English (or a mixture of English and an African language). Thus the majority of South African schools and tertiary institutions have a monolingual orientation despite the government's policy of additive bilingualism. The situation is unlikely to change in the near future.

Neglect of indigenous African languages by their native speakers

According to the latest statistics from the Department of Education (DoE), there is an increase in the number of Black learners at English medium schools who opt for Afrikaans as an additional language. Figures show that out of 590 000 candidates writing matriculation examinations in 2008, 113 902 candidates write Afrikaans as an additional language compared with only 12 723 who chose one of the nine indigenous African languages available in the school curriculum. The vast majority, 491 104 of them, chose English as an additional language (*Sunday Times* 2008).

Development of indigenous African languages is intended to bring about parity of esteem among all official languages. However, if indigenous African languages are downplayed by their native speakers, the problem becomes insurmountable. The government can only put policies in place which allow for the development of indigenous languages to take root, but the eminent lack of will on the part of speakers of the languages reneges on the government's position, unfortunately. The decline in the number of learners taking indigenous African languages in schools in South Africa today (*Sunday Times* 2008) is a case in point.

Promoting multilingualism in local government

The South African government has thought it appropriate to build capacity for language facilitation in local government. In order to ensure that some members of South Africa's communities are not left behind due to their inability to understand the main language/s of government communication, the Municipal Systems Act of 2000 makes provision for municipalities to take into account:

(a)   the language preferences and usage in the municipality; and

(b)   the special needs of people who cannot read or write.

The Act goes on to say: "when a municipality invites the local community to submit written comments or representations on any matter before the Council, it must be stated in the invitation that any person who cannot write may come in office hours to a place where a staff member of the municipality named in the invitation will assist that person to transcribe that person's comments or representations, and when a municipality requires a form to be completed by a member of the local community, a member of the municipality must give reasonable assistance to persons who cannot read or write, to enable such persons to understand and complete the form".

This shows serious commitment on the part of government in terms of putting policies in place. However, pragmatically, implementation of the multilingual ism policy at municipality level has not been achieved, at least fully. In some cases, it has not even taken root.

It is of concern that, despite the extensive work that government has committed itself to do in recognition of language diversity in South Africa, the language of official business continues to be English. This is despite the statistics that indicate an increase in the speakership of indigenous African languages, and a decline in English and Afrikaans between 1996 and 2001.

Conclusion

While the issue of promoting multilingualism is the ultimate goal of the South African constitution, most schools seem to hide and remain rooted to the principal's wishes with the persuasion of the School Governing Body (SGB), especially in former Model C schools. This is by not allowing the introduction of an indigenous African language, which also ought to be acquired with full competence by learners by the time they attain grade nine. Introduction of indigenous African languages would ensure their restoration, and also encourage literacy in them.

This seems a rather weak point in that it lacks the DoE's sanction to be reinforced. No school could be sued for not introducing an indigenous language as a second additional language. The argument, therefore, is that the Language-in-Education Policy (2004) ought to be sanctioned by the DoE for schools to be a fertile ground, where the promotion and development of indigenous African languages would take root.

Again, the government alone cannot oblige learners to choose an indigenous African language over another second additional language (Afrikaans in most cases) which the school offers. The realisation of the dream to develop indigenous African languages will be brought about by a conflation of government policies, will on the part of native speakers of the languages, and change in the mindset of all stakeholders.

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