

MANIFESTATION OF LANGUAGE VARIETIES IN THE CLASSROOM IN THE PWV

Elizabeth Mathakga Botha

Macmillan Boleswa

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will examine the complexity of the multilingual, multidialectal reality which characterises day-to-day life in many neighbourhoods and schools. Many different African languages are spoken in the PWV region, i.e. North Sotho, South Sotho, Tswana, Zulu, Xhosa, Venda, Tsonga, and siSwati. Each of these languages has many different varieties. It is very common for children to grow up in a situation such as the one described below - which is my own.

I was born in Alexandra Township, North of Johannesburg. My family made up one of the group communities that share the yard in this township. In each yard community lived families with different language varieties. Where we first lived, the spoken language varieties were a combination of all Sotho varieties and Zulu. Overlaps between the different varieties of Sotho make it difficult to categorize them neatly.

Because of being exposed to all the language varieties mentioned, I speak them fluently. Later, in my teens, we moved to another yard where more language varieties were spoken. It was not as easy as before to have a good grasp of language varieties such as Venda and Tsonga. I have a good understanding of what is said in these languages, but I am not conversant enough to carry on a comprehensive communication. I have successfully communicated with my friends in any variety that appeared to be common amongst us. At home I speak both Sepedi and Setswana interchangeably with my family members. The difference in communicating with different age levels is obvious with non-verbal gestures, depending on what the conversation is all about.

When I started school, there were no schools nearby that offered Sepedi medium, my home language, so I was placed in Sesotho medium. The teachers in my first school also spoke a different language variety. My principal was Zulu, but he spoke Sesotho very well. He used both varieties interchangeably in class, although Sesotho was used the most. Outside the classroom we spoke the many languages used in our homes. I am not in a position to judge whether there was a problem towards learning when we used various language varieties in our speech. We understood teachers and we were able to perform well generally. Even later, in my teaching career, I found that children as well as teachers used language varieties and/or dialects interchangeably. At the first school in which I taught, Ga-Mmaila in Northern Transvaal, the dominant spoken language variety differed from the prescribed variety in the classroom. However, there were never major learning problems, because there was mutual understanding between learners and between learners and their teachers. The same was the case when I moved to Pimville in Soweto: the many language varieties persisted both in and out of the classroom.

In the rest of the paper, I shall indicate what linguistic studies have to offer in understanding situations of great linguistic variety so that the challenges these situations create can be dealt with effectively, and so that the rich resources these situations represent can be put to best use.

The scientific study of language greatly helps educators to understand the usage and development of language varieties within a community. Urbe-Villegas (1977:10) defines human language as a general capacity to speak, which is influenced by society and by culture. Speech has become diversified, and we now have many different languages. Each of these languages expresses a people's sense of community, gives cohesion to it and preserves it. In each language is also mirrored the internal differentiation of each society, and sometimes language difference can be used to create further differentiation. Two aspects of language use in the PWV which are significant to educators are that, on the one hand, language variety is an expression of urban community and, on the other hand, that

a contrast and sometimes a tension between the standard language taught and required in the schools and the popular language varieties exists.

Language is a complex phenomenon in nature. In urban areas like the PWV, language practice is more complex because of cross-sectional linguistic traits that occur in the multicultural community. The socialization found in these communities is typical of that described by Dittmar (1976). The society has different instructional agencies which contain instructional places in which individuals learn their social identity, social interactions, role behaviour and speech and rules, among other things. Some of these agencies require the use of the standard dialect, others require the vernacular. The school, which constitutes a secondary stage of socialization, requires the standard dialect.

The two stages of socialization result in major conflict, since contradictory influences cause tensions for the language user. The child who grows up in such an environment is under the control of the agencies of socialization such as the family, the peer group, the school, etc. As educators our concern here is to identify difficulties or obstacles that unfold in distinguishing between the standard language and vernacular variants that may arise in the daily use of the language. We will differentiate the two as high and low varieties ¹.

In the PWV urban areas, none of the vernacular varieties meets the requirement for a high variety, suitable for use in educational settings. The low variety occurs constantly in day-to-day conversation, inside and outside the classroom. The high variety, which is believed to be prestigious, richer and better for the speaker to express important thoughts and the like, seems to play a lesser role in everyday use of language. This brings us to question the motive for preferring one variety rather than the other, when the speaker's competence and performance are better in the other. It is important then to elaborate on agencies of socialization mentioned that may have any influence over the choice of language and its development in the urban areas.

FACTORS INVOLVED IN LANGUAGE CHOICE

It is common to find that within a particular group of youth there is a low variety which is given preference. This variety usually originates from a combination of linguistic segments from two or more languages. For example, an argot 'Isicamtho' originates from code-mixing and borrowing from various languages. It is a variety used to symbolise identity and solidarity. In order to belong, the youth need to be familiar with the chosen variety and be able to verbalise and to show by means of non-verbal actions which identify the group. This is encouraged by the influence of peer groups. Although it may sound like a minor variety, it is one of the low varieties that has much status among the youth in urban areas, and it has spread further into rural areas. The language variety gives the presence of the group identity amongst the entire community. This is where environment and peer group can be seen to make their contribution to the manifestation of low varieties in a multicultural community.

Apart from 'Isicamtho,' there are various other low varieties spoken in these areas. If a community is a mixed-settlement, where you find North Sotho, Tswana and South Sotho speakers, it is often the case that the children growing up in the environment do not speak any high variety of their origin. There is much code-mixing and code-switching used to develop a common variety for communication purposes. The surprising thing is that although these languages have common linguistic features, the features of one become more prominent than the others, depending on the area. It has been observed that any vernacular may be preferred, depending on the area where it is highly appreciated. For example, in some parts

of Soweto, South Sotho (low) variety is most dominant, despite the fact that the surrounding population includes people speaking other vernaculars. This originates because the other vernaculars have been regarded as having a low standard. In some instances if one is heard speaking North Sotho, for example, one would be called 'plaas jappie', meaning old-fashioned in the urban context.

Thus it happens that even when one still values one's own language variety, one finds oneself having to use code-switching and code-mixing in order to belong. In most conversations, it is unusual to find interlocutors maintaining the same language variety to the end, particularly if they are of different language groups. In the urban areas, language is influenced by people and cultures that exist in there. The urban language is a result of the multicultural groups that form a community.

The home or the family is another factor which has influence over the child's choice of language variety. The family is regarded as a community of interaction which leads to definite role constellations (Dittmar (1976)). In mixed cultural settings, families have more than one language spoken because of 'mixed marriage'. This may result in long-term problems for the child's language development. For example, in the case where the father is Zulu and the mother is North Sotho, the child will be put in a school that provides the father's variety. This happens despite the fact that the family does not use Zulu regularly. In addition, it could be that the father is not always at home to encourage the regular use of

the variety of his preference. What happens is that the child picks up the bits of the high variety in the classroom but receives no reinforcement from the home. Alternatively, the child may be placed in a school nearer home, whatever vernacular medium is offered at such a school. The child who is thrown into such a situation ends up not having mastered either language variety successfully. This factor will not be independent of the influence the child is likely to get from his environment, which may be a different variety from that used by the family.

The parents themselves are not likely to use the high variety as an example for their offspring. From the sporadic interviews with some of the children in and out of the school environment about their family language variety, it became apparent that the issue of maintaining language values, that is, prioritising a particular variety or dialect from another, is not something of importance to them and to their families. To most children the interest was to transmit messages in the language variety that is mutual to all. One of the examples given was that there are some people who think that by speaking other languages they degrade their own language variety. Of course, this is not surprising considering that many would opt to be taught in a foreign language rather than trying to maintain their original varieties. Parents experience the same influences as their children do. If they happen to settle in an area where their variety is in the minority, they automatically opt to speak the language variety preferred in that area. This is an illustration of language shift as discussed by Fasold (1990).

THE SCHOOL AND THE LANGUAGE

The emphasis on standardization in institutions is intended to promote uniformity in the language used. The standardization of languages originates from a strong tradition of the grammatical study of high variety forms. The established norms for pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary allow variation only within certain limits. If we take North Sotho as an example, no dialect has ever been strong enough to serve as a standard variety, which supports the notion stated by Herbert (1992) that the creation of ethnic groups and standard languages has been used to justify apartheid policy. This is because there is a large number of dialects within this language group that gets no recognition in terms of standard language variety taught in schools. The choice of some dialects rather than others is a decision by the language board that usually represents the people of the chosen language varieties.

By contrast, low variety forms are regarded as being either 'not language' or of relatively recent origin and poor in quality. This is the attitude that persists among educationists not involved in day-to-day teaching. Such varieties receive no recognition even when they play a wider role and are an important centre for communication. In educational settings, the low varieties are discouraged, but the fact is that they are a prominent form of speech in communities in these settings. The teacher has no different effect on the children in the use of the low variety. Most teachers are the product of a community that is overwhelmed by low

varieties, and are therefore perpetrators of these varieties without even consciously realising it.

The school language and other varieties that children bring with them should be acknowledged as interrelated, interdependent systems. The teachers' awareness of language expendability and changeability will limit the attitudes that may be common among users of different varieties in the same environment. In a sense, in varieties of the same vernacular, the lexicon and grammar overlap and it is often possible to have people reaching mutual understanding.

Fasold's (1984) discussion of language variety that follows 'class stratification', whereby certain variants are used by the highest status class, does not apply to my study. In the urban situation, speakers use a particular variety for identification, and intra-group influence, and this is sometimes a process the speaker follows unconsciously. This is what Bailey (as cited in Fasold (1984)) terms sociocommunication ², which emanates from the study of sociolinguistics.

Fishman (1971) describes sociolinguistics as a means of widening the contextual horizons of linguistics, beyond the phrase, beyond the sentence, beyond the utterance, to the speech act, the speech event and the speech occasion. However, he goes further than this. He focuses attention on the descriptive sociology of language. In other words, 'who speaks what language or what variety to whom and when and to what end?' Descriptive sociology of language tries to disclose

the norms of language usage, which is socially accepted for social network and community. The dynamic sociology of language seeks to determine how changes in the fortunes and interactions of networks of speakers alter their ranges of the verbal knowledge.

The sociolinguistic and ethnographic studies of language varieties enable the concerned educator to realise and to come to terms with existing language diversity, which might be problematic to developing varieties in the educational setting. It is also important that although the maintenance of the values are of concern, it should also be realised that the standard language originates from the development of a myth of linguistically and culturally homogeneous communities. In heterogeneous languages as found in the urban areas of the PWV, there is no variety that can be maintained strongly enough to serve as a high variety.

CONCLUSION

Language, like culture, is dynamic. As such, it will be relevant to accept the changes that occur in culture as in the case of language. This will have to incorporate the study of language shift which has received a considerably lengthy discussion in Fasold (1990). The issues of resettlement, culture mix, dominance of one variety over the other and lack of values towards one's original language result in language shift. The understanding of these helps in the realisation of the developments of low varieties in the school situation, where people from different backgrounds come together.

Thus, knowledge of linguistics is of great importance to all educators, either in classrooms or in the administration of education. Although it is important for them to nurture the richness of the languages prescribed in various educational settings, it is also essential to accommodate other varieties that are manifested within the learning situation. Today, some minority vernaculars which were previously insignificant to urban people are developing and are heard in public. This may lead to a situation where people will want dialect varieties will want to be given the same status as any other within the community. Understanding the significance of language variety is important for the user and for others in the community, particularly teachers.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Ferguson regards high variety as referring to the superposed variety and he calls low variety the regional dialects.
- 2 Sociocommunicational is used to mean that there are factors that shape language which are to its use by people when they talk to each other. The influence can be of gender and or style in the situation related to.

