AFTER APARTHEID: THE LANGUAGE QUESTION

Neville Alexander

Background

In their book, *Writing Science*: *Literacy and Discursive Power*, Halliday and Martin (1993:10) 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 South Africa, where "race" has been the main ideological prism through which people have perceived their realities, this insight has tended to be ignored even by intellectuals working in the social sciences. However, although the racial fault line was the most prominent feature of the South African socio-political landscape for most of the 20th century, there were occasions when the language issue erupted with volcanic menace to remind the world that this is a country that cannot be viewed in simple black-and-white terms. On occasion, the apparently antagonistic contradictions in the language domain became manifest with respect to the status and use of Afrikaans[1], especially as a language of teaching in the educational sphere. During the rule of Lord Milner (1901 – 1905) and of Verwoerd and Vorster (1958 – 1979), social conflict was articulated, among other ways, in terms of the use and recognition of Afrikaans in the schools that catered for Afrikaans-speaking white[2] and Bantu-speaking black[3] children respectively. It was the Soweto Uprising of 1976, as we now know, that set off the series of tremors that eventually caused the implosion of the apartheid state.

In broad historical terms, the issues remained the same throughout the 20th century. The dominance of English in the modern sector of the economy, the challenge to its consequent hegemonic status that came from the rising Afrikaans-speaking elite and the passive but powerful support of most black people for the continued dominance of English as one of the ways in which they could demonstrate their rejection of the racial order, one of the insignia of which was precisely Afrikaans, "the language of the oppressor", influenced and characterised in part the interactions between the contending elites. For reasons that reach far back into the history of colonial conquest, of slavery and of the role of the missionaries, among other things, in the course of the 19th century, English, rather than Afrikaans, became the language of aspiration and eventually the language of national unity and of liberation for the black elites. The pro-English sentiments of the black leadership were never more clearly enunciated than in the well-known words of Dr Abdurrahman in 1912:

---

[1] During Milner's tenure, it was the Dutch language that was nominally at issue. In fact, however, "Dutch"-speaking people used Afrikaans, except for purposes of formal writing.
[2] See Giliomee 2003 for a sensitive account and for numerous references.
[3] See Hirson 1979, Kane-Berman 1979, Lodge 1984 among others.

> The question naturally arises which is to be the national language. Shall it be the degraded forms of a literary language[4], a vulgar patois: or shall it be that language which Macaulay says is "In force, in richness, in aptitude for all the highest purposes of the poet, the philosopher, and the orator inferior to the tongue of Greece alone?" Shall it be the language of the "Kombuis" [kitchen] or the language of Tennyson? That is, shall it be the Taal [Afrikaans] or English? (Cited in Alexander 1989:29).

In what follows, I want to show briefly how vested interest and ignorance about and the consequent neglect of the significance of language policy and language use on the part of the new rulers of South Africa resulted in missed opportunities with respect, among other things, to the deepening and the broadening of the liberal democratic dispensation that was the issue of the negotiations between African and Afrikaner nationalisms during the early 1990s.

"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.

It should be stated quite clearly, therefore, that 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 regional or social 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 social domains such as education. This is why Weinstein (1983:3) makes the point that

[4] This refers to the "Dutch" that was actually spoken by the Afrikaans-speaking population. (See note 1 above)

> … (If) it is possible to show that language is the subject of policy decisions as well as a possession conferring advantages, a case can be made for the study of language as one of the variables pushing open or closed the door to power, wealth, and prestige within societies.

In regard to post-apartheid South Africa, it remains to be said that albeit reluctantly the principle – as well as the practice – of language planning *is* accepted. Not surprisingly, however, lack of implementation planning and, thus, of delivery, tends to negate the principle and to reduce it to mere lip service. This fact, as I have intimated, points to a definite political orientation or stance towards the language question on the part of the ruling strata.

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 relevant 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 have the requisite command of the language(s) of production, one is automatically restricted in one's options as regards access to employment and all that that implies in a state where employment opportunities are hierarchically structured and differentially rewarded. At this point, the relationship between language policy, class and power ought to become intuitively obvious. Rather than take for granted the automatic recognition of this relationship, however, I shall spell out some of the implications of this particular insight for modern industrial societies with special reference to (South) Africa[5].

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.

Before I deal with these issues, however, I refer briefly to the other source of the power of language, i.e., its function as a transmission mechanism of "culture" or, more popularly, its role in the formation of individual and 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 power and democracy. Suffice it to say, 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

[5] In doing so, I base my analysis and comments on the insights derived from the many historical and sociological studies informed by the approach of the late Pierre Bourdieu.

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 the words of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (1983:138),

> "… (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" (Emphasis in the original).

It is this aspect of the language question that has fuelled and often justified ethnic-nationalist and separatist movements during the last three centuries, including that which eventually led to the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

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. This insight derives primarily from the meticulous theoretical and practical studies of Bourdieu and his associates with respect to the evolution of linguistic markets. For our purposes, however, I simply draw attention to the immediately relevant propositions as they apply to our South African context[6]. 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 and among 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 historic event became common sense 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, until 1994 more or less, in some social domains, of Afrikaans, as the legitimate languages.

[6] 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.

In South Africa, unlike most other African countries in the British sphere of influence, the presence of a relatively large group of first-language 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 below. 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.

While it remains the case that proficiency in the dominant languages of European origin co-determines one's class location in most countries on the continent of Africa, it 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"[7] or exclusion of the masses by means of language policy[8]. 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 habitus[9] 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

---

[7] 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" (Meyers-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. (Meyers-Scotton 1990:27-28)

[8] Ayo Bamgbose, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics and African Languages at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, 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 remains to be realised in practice. (See Bamgbose 2000)

[9] 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.

character of a social pathology, one which I have called the "Static Maintenance Syndrome"[10].
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)

Post-apartheid South Africa is, in spite of numerous improvements on its predecessor, a textbook example of this paradox. 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 trans-national 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

[10] This means simply that most African people are willing to maintain their first languages in the primary contexts of family, community, elementary 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 monolingual habitus, in spite of the fact that most African people are proficient in two or more languages. My use of the term was inspired by the analysis of Colin Baker 1996:173.

legitimate language is exceptionally strong in "anglophone" territories [11]. One of the most serious strategic errors in this respect has been the failure to introduce mother tongue-besed education.

One step forward, two steps back

The history of language policy and planning in post-apartheid South Africa is one of exhilarating potential and great expectations being squashed at regular intervals. By the time the formal negotiations process began in earnest in about 1991, with respect to the language dispensation in the new South Africa, the situation might be described in broad brush strokes as follows. On the side of the white minority, specifically the Afrikaner nationalists, represented in the main by the National Party, there was a clear commitment to the retention of the formal constitutional equality of Afrikaans and English. The white nationalists had little doubt that Afrikaans would continue to be one of the dominant languages in the new republic. On the side of the liberation forces, represented in the main by the African National Congress, the predominant instinct was to press for English as the only official language on economic as well as political grounds. These two positions reflected in woodcut simplicity the historical experience and the aspirations of the two divergent nationalist movements. The Afrikaner nationalists had gained political power by mobilising the votes of the Afrikaans-speaking white population during the decades of the pigmentocracy known as the Union of South Africa and the elite had used the language in order to entrench its economic power, based initially on agriculture but increasingly also on mining and, much later, on manufacturing industry. The African nationalists, on the other hand, had experienced exactly the same developments that established and augmented the sectionalist power of the Afrikaners as a process of dispossession and disenfranchisement as well as racial and class disempowerment in the same Union of South Africa which, for them, was a brutal pigmentatorship. For reasons that have been discussed in detail by numerous scholars[12], it was high proficiency in the English language that appeared to the black elite to hold out the promise of liberation, unification and empowerment. The anti-apartheid leadership would have followed unerringly in the footsteps of their anti-colonial predecessors by opting for the officialisation of English only. Indeed, in 1990, at the very time they began their historic dialogue with the "racist Pretoria regime", the leadership of SWAPO had declared English to be the only official language of the free Namibia.

That this did not happen in South Africa eventually had two main reasons, both of which had very little, if anything, to do with the strategic vision or theoretical clarity of the leadership of the negotiators on either side. To begin with, there was the simple political fact that if the representatives of the black majority conceded equality of status to Afrikaans and English, they could not justify not doing the same for all the indigenous African languages. Had they done so, they would have been seen as adopting a neo-apartheid language policy that it would have been impossible to sell to their constituency. The ironic consequence of the Afrikaner nationalist demand, therefore, was the wholly unplanned for and unexpected officialisation of 11 South African languages[13].

---

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

[12] See, among others, Alexandre 1972, Herbert 1990, Bamgbose 2000.

[13] The 11 languages were those that had enjoyed national and/or regional official status under the previous regime.

This decision was facilitated by the availability to the liberation movement of a comprehensive theory of language planning as an integral aspect of the programme for the liberation and democratisation of South African society[14]. This theory was derived from a body of both international and domestic research on language use in many domains of life. It postulated, among other things, that language is a resource, not a problem, that multilingualism is the global norm today and that individual multilingualism[15], together with the proliferation of link languages, is one of the keys to intercultural communication and social cohesion. This latter insight is important, since it provides the answer to one of the persistent fallacies of post-colonial African states, i.e., that the officialisation of indigenous languages would inevitably lead to ethnic rivalry and separatist movements.

With this theoretical life jacket at its disposal, the liberation movement took the plunge and in so doing made history, or appeared to do so. In order to gauge to what extent history was made, we have to consider what was actually done between 1995 and 2007. To begin with the new constitution: the negotiations of the early 1990s, for reasons I have intimated above, resulted in one of the most progressive sets of constitutional provisions on language use in the world. Section 6 of the constitution (Act 108 0f 1996) reads as follows:

(1) The official languages of the Republic are Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu.
(2) Recognising 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.
(3) (a) The national government and provincial governments may use any particular official languages for the purposes of government, taking into account usage, practicality, expense, regional circumstances and the balance of the needs and preferences of the population as a whole or in the province concerned; but the national government and each provincial government must use at least two official languages.
(b) Municipalities must take into account the language usage and preferences of their residents.
(4)The national government and provincial governments, by legislative and other measures, must regulate and monitor their use of official languages. Without detracting from the provisions of subsection (2), all official languages must enjoy parity of esteem and must be treated equitably.
(5)A Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must:
(a) promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of:
(i) all official languages;
(ii) the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and
(iii) Sign language; and
(b) promote and ensure respect for:
all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu; and Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa.

[14] For an account of how this position evolved in South Africa, see Alexander and Heugh 1999.
[15] In the Council of Europe's usage, this aspect of multilingualism is now referred to as "plurilingualism"

Other significant sections of the constitution refer to rights in the domains of education (29)(2); culture (30); (31); (185) and (186); and the judiciary (35)(3)(k) and (35)(4). All of these protect and promote the right of the individual or the relevant "linguistic community" to use their mother tongue or other official language of their choice in all interactions among and between themselves and between themselves and the state.

Because of the pro-English attitudes that prevail among most of the middle class elites and other formally educated South Africans, with the significant exception of a majority of Afrikaans-speaking citizens in these categories, the realisation of these provisions in daily practice is beset with very serious problems. The shaping of a consistently democratic multilingual language policy and practice reflecting the values and the aspirations of the constitution will require decades, perhaps even generations, of see-saw progress.

Achievements

In the 12 years since democratisation, the beginnings of the requisite language infrastructure have been put in place.

- The Pan South African Language Board (Pansalb), representative of all the official languages as well as South African Sign Language[16].
- Nine Provincial Language Committees. Their main task is to represent Pansalb and to watch over the implementation of official language policy at provincial level.
- 14 National Language Bodies whose main task is to see to the corpus development of their respective language.
- 11 Lexicographic Units, each of which has ultimately to create and maintain a comprehensive monolingual explanatory dictionary as well as promote and publish other dictionaries for the respective language.

Although it has constitutional autonomy as a statutory body, administratively, Pansalb falls under the Department of Arts and Culture, which has responsibility for managing language matters in the new South Africa. Since the National Language Service (NLS), which, originally, was no more than the translation and terminology service to government, also falls under this Department, overlapping concerns and conflicts of interest inevitably occur and, in fact, in recent years, there have been numerous, sometimes paralysing, tensions between the two entities. It should also be noted that important departments of state, among others, Education and Defence, have tended to make policy independently, with only nominal consultation with Pansalb.

Notable among Pansalb's achievements have been the successful piloting and inauguration of a Telephonic Interpreting Service of South Africa (TISSA), the commissioning of the vital *Language Use and Language Interaction in South Africa. A National Sociolinguistic Survey* (2000) and the institution of the structures referred to above. In general, however, it has not been a prominent force and has been obstructed by the hegemonic national and global forces that shape the asymmetrical power relations of all multilingual states. Except for the South African Broadcasting Corporation which has an improving record as far as the use

[16] See Pansalb website www.pansalb.co.za for details.

of indigenous languages is concerned, most media, the public service and the vital tertiary education sector have tended to join the slide towards a unilingual public policy delivery, in spite of the fact that this disposition favours the English-knowing elite and, thus, deepens the asymmetry of power relations in South Africa. Since each province has its own official languages, the Provincial Language Committees, potentially, play a decisive role with respect to developments on the ground. In practice, however, few of them have the necessary skills and resources at present and the de facto language policy in most provinces is a laisser-faire English-mainly policy. As long as mother tongue-based multilingual education does not become the default approach to language medium policy in the schools of South Africa, these divisive and ultimately oppressive practices will continue to ensure economic and cultural constraint and stagnation.

Two other important language policy initiatives should be noted. The National Language Policy Framework[17], approved by Cabinet in 2002 was shaped by a dedicated task team that reported directly to the Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. The same team formulated the South African Languages Bill which, at the time of writing (April 2007) has not yet been placed before the National Assembly even though it was similarly approved by Cabinet. The Language Policy for Higher Education (2004) also resulted from the work of a special committee, appointed by the Minister of Education.

Challenge and response

By way of demonstrating the complexity of the problems faced by the new South Africa with respect to the practical realisation of a consistently democratic language policy, I shall consider briefly the challenges posed in the central domain of education.

Bourdieu stresses the social reproductive role of education. 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 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[18], since most black people continue to equate mother tongue-based education with the ravages of Bantu education. Without analysing the matter any further, I maintain that this tendency, even though there are currently some hesitant beginnings of countervailing tendencies, will continue to undermine South Africa's ability to expand and consolidate democracy and at the same time represents a built-in

[17] The NLPF is an important interim provision, since all departments of state and provincial governments can and do use it as a set of guidelines for the formulation and implementation of language policy. As such, it constitutes an important guarantee for the practical realisation of a democratic policy of multilingualism and language equality in the longer term.

[18] See p. 6 above.

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 studies show 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. It should be noted, however, that not much detailed research has as yet been done in this area. The numbers quoted here 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 mini-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. This was, for the Xhosa L1 speakers the only subject in which they were taught and assessed in their mother tongue[19].

These findings have been reinforced by a recent survey of selected matriculation 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 (read English N.A.) 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)

[19] See October 2002:76-77.

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).[20] Their study, although limited and preliminary in many respects, has advanced the argument for mother tongue-based education from postulating a correlative to demonstrating a causal relationship between educational success and language medium[21].

At a quantitative level, our project 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 in the matriculation examination in the period 1987-2002. 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 recent Human Rights Commission hearings appear, after initial silence on the language factor, to have realised its significance as a valid, indeed a crucial research question! A major revision of policy in respect of languages of learning and teaching has in fact been initiated. Thus, for example, in the Commission's report on its public hearing on *The Right to Basic Education*, one of the recommendations reads as follows:

> Given the recognised importance of mother-tongue learning, the Department (of Education, N.A.) must re-evaluate the decision of granting SGBs (School Governing Bodies, N.A.) the power to determine language policy. Possible amendment to SASA (South African Schools Act, N.A.) should be considered. Affected parties need to approach the issue based on what is in the best interests of the child. (HRC 2006:43)

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 who, 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.

Dr Nic Taylor, one of South Africa's most prominent educational analysts and researchers who, until recently, was at best agnostic about the demand for 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

[20] 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.

[21] 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.

> 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)

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 will be investigating the financial and training implications of extending the system into the secondary school.

However, 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 hegemony of English. We have understood for many years already that the previous and current 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 more effectively 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 underfunded and bureaucratised 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.

Language policy as a class project

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), viewed as an instrument of the African Renaissance and of the cultural revolution on the continent during this, the "African century", both of which were so hopefully proclaimed by President Mbeki at the end of the 20th century. As a specialised bureau of the African Union, ACALAN is beginning to influence decisively the direction and modalities of language policies on the continent[22]. 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. The success of ACALAN will have direct and enduring consequences for all African countries, not least for the Republic of South Africa.

It is clear that the future direction of language policy in South Africa will be influenced as much by exogenous as by endogenous factors. If mother tongue based multilingual education proves to be a success, the pressure for the expansion of the system and the related practices will become irresistible. The key challenges that have to be addressed at the beginning of the 21st century are the increasing hegemony of English, the need to raise literacy levels by means of, among other things, the successful implementation of appropriate language medium policies in the schools and universities and, closely related, the need to demonstrate the positive relationship between functional multilingualism and economic efficiency and productivity. The inculcation and nurturing of a culture of reading in African languages is the key to all of these issues.

It is necessary that we "return to the source" and pose once again a question first suggested by Amilcar Cabral with respect to the continent as a whole: 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. 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 languages[23]. My colleague, Michellé October, among others, has begun 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[24]. The parastatal South African Broadcasting Corporation

[22] An introduction to ACALAN is Alexander 2005(b).

[23] 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.

[24] By the end of 2006, isiXhosa and SeTswana had been added to the menu of language options.

found that during the financial year 2003 – 2004, they had a jump in revenue because of the increased provision of local content programmes in African languages. [25] 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.

[25] M. October, personal communication.

References

Alexander, N. 1989. *Language Policy and National Unity in South Africa/Azania*. Cape Town: Buchu Books.

Alexander, N. & Heugh, K. 1999. "Language policy in the new South Africa". *Culturelink Special Issue 1998-1999. Cultural Change and Development in South Africa.* (edited by A. Zegeye and R. Kriger). Zagreb: Institute for International Relations.

Alexander, N. 2002. Linguistic rights, language planning and democracy in post-apartheid South Africa. In Baker, S. (ed.), *Language Policy: Lessons from Global Models*. Monterey, CA.: Monterey Institute of International Studies.

Alexander, N. 2005 (a). The impact of the hegemony of English on access to and quality of education with special reference to South Africa. (Lecture delivered at the Language and Poverty Conference, Cornell University, Ithaca, N.Y. 14 October 2005). Unpub. Mimeo.

Alexander, N. (ed.). 2005 (b). *The Intellectualisation of African Languages*. Cape Town: Praesa/University of Cape Town.

Alexandre, P. 1972. *An Introduction to Languages and Language in Africa*. London: Heinemann.

Baker, C. 1996. *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Bamgbose, A. 2000. *Language and Exclusion.* Hamburg: LIT-Verlag.

Blaine, S. 2005. Losing the legacy of apartheid education. *Business Day* (20 Years Anniversary Edition Supplement), August 23 2005, page 17.

Bourdieu, P. 1991. *Language and Symbolic Power*. (Edited and introduced by John B. Thompson. Translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson) Cambridge: Polity Press.

Giliomee, H. 2003. *The Afrikaners. Biography of a People*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Gogolin, I. 1994. *Der monolinguale Habitus der multilingualen Schule*. Münster and New York: Waxmann.

Halliday, M. and Martin, J. 1993. *Writing Science: Literacy and Discursive Power*. London: Falmer Press.

Herbert, R. (ed.). 1990. *Language and Society in Africa. The Theory and Practice of Sociolinguistics*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

Hirson, B. 1979. *Year of Fire, Year of Ash*. London: Zed Press.

HRC. 2006. Report of the Public Hearing on the Right to Basic Education. Pretoria: South African Human Rights Commission.

Kane-Berman, J. 1979. *Soweto. Black Revolt, White Reaction*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.

Lenin, V. 1983. *Lenin on Language*. Moscow: Raduga Publishers.

Lodge, T. 1984. *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945*. London and New York: Longman.

Mesthrie, R. (ed.). 2002. *Language in South Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Myers-Scotton, C. 1990. Elite closure as boundary maintenance. The case of Africa. In B. Weinstein (ed.), *Language Policy and Political Development*. Norwood, NJ.: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Niedrig, H. 2000. *Sprache, Macht, Kultur. Multilinguale Erziehung in Post-Apartheid Südafrika*. Münster and New York: Waxmann.
October, M. 2002. *Medium of Instruction and Its Effect on Matriculation Examination Results for 2000 in Western Cape Secondary Schools*. Praesa Occasional Papers No. 11. Cape Town: Praesa.
Republic of South Africa. (1996) *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*. (Act No. 108 of 1996). Pretoria: Republic of South Africa.
Simkins, C. and Patterson, A. 2005. *Learner Performance in South Africa. Social and Economic Determinants of Success in Language and Mathematics*. Cape Town: HSRC Press.
Tollefson, J. 1991. *Planning Language, Planning Inequality. Language Policy in the Community*. London and New York: Longman.
Weinstein, B. 1983. *The Civic Tongue. Political Consequences of Language Choices*. Norwood, NJ.: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
Wilson, M. and Thompson, L. (1969) *The Oxford History of South Africa*, vol. 1. Oxford: Oxford University Press.