

The Issue of the Use of African Indigenous Languages as Media of Instruction for Higher Education in South Africa

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Languages and cultures are not static concepts. Particularly in the Twenty-first century, if indigenous African Languages are to survive in a world that is changing at an exponential rate, they must be adaptable and capable of assimilating words from different languages and different disciplines and they have to accommodate the growing need for use in electronic media. This is one of the reasons why English has evolved into what is now, arguably a language of international commerce and *alingua franca*, if not *thelingua franca* in many multilingual regions of the world such as the European Union with its two-hundred languages and India with its three-hundred languages. Here in South Africa our eleven official languages plus a few more to follow such as sign language and two or three San languages, should present far fewer problems but, demonstrably, there is still the need, from a purely practical point of view, to have a *lingua franca* and again English is historically, the main contender despite the fact that isiZulu is spoken by more people in South Africa than any other language. The concern is that the hegemonic influence of English is so very strong that it could endanger the continued existence of many indigenous languages. Its dominance in the media prevents the majority of the people from gaining information in a language they can understand, it makes those who lack facility in English feel disadvantaged and betrayed by the education system, and when forced to communicate in what is effectively a foreign

language people can feel inhibited and lacking in self-confidence. For many who have, historically, already been so grossly disadvantaged, the imposition of the use of English can be an added disadvantage. The threat of language extinction is real. Crystal (1999) claims that of the approximately 6000 languages in the world about half will disappear within the next 50 years and that one language becomes extinct every two weeks somewhere in the world. The only way some of the African indigenous languages will survive, is if they increase their presence and usage and this will require a major intervention in formal education, and in the electronic media.

There is a counter argument to this. If one accepts that entropy is the natural condition of man and of mankind's cultures and languages, then the argument could well be put, that we should allow this process to evolve naturally without our unnatural intervention. Nor should we take steps to preserve either because all we would be doing is preserving a snapshot of a culture at a certain moment that would then be in the past, and capturing a moment in the development of a language that has inevitably moved on. Change is inevitable no matter what we do, so why waste our time, energy, and money on keeping a finger in the existing dyke when a new one is speedily being constructed? In the midst of these interesting debates a dramatic event occurred:

In January 2016 the Minister of Arts and Culture, Nathi Mthethwa took the unprecedented step of dissolving the board of the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB). Giving his reasons for taking this step, the Minister outlined six critical objections to its functioning, including difficulties in fulfilling its objectives, leadership issues, lack of compliance with statutory obligations, governance problems, lack of consistency in the execution of its legislative mandate, and a lack of understanding of its strategic role.

This paper will not concern itself with the merits or demerits of the objections themselves but it will seek, instead, to place the focus on the urgent need for a properly functional body or bodies to be reformed or created and vested with the mandate to develop, promote, preserve and encourage the rich range of official and other languages in South Africa and to build upon the undeniable achievements of PANSALB to date. It is suggested that in order to achieve the status, sustainability and respect that is their due, as many of these languages as possible should be supported to become languages of instruction in higher education. The implications of this suggestion will be explored in this paper.

All of the issues to be raised are important but, amongst the most problematic of the issues facing any language that seeks the status of being regarded as a language of instruction in

Higher Education is the fact that, there must be a sufficient body of literature in the language to underpin the academic offerings. When it comes to South African indigenous languages this is, for the most part, lacking especially in the areas of technology, science, medicine, psychology, and many other fields. That having been acknowledged, we have to remember that Afrikaans was once in that position and that it too is an indigenous language, however much it derives from Dutch and Flemish. But today the libraries in former 'Afrikaans Universities' are filled with books on a very wide range of subjects in Afrikaans and that the transition from *Kombuistaal* to a respected academic language at a higher education level, took little more than fifty years to accomplish. In theory, then, any of the indigenous African Languages in South Africa could achieve the same status in a similar period of time or, in some instances, a great deal sooner because they have already taken the necessary steps that apparently need to be taken in order for them to achieve that objective. However, a number of issues arise from this that need to be considered, including the ethical issue of whether or not it is right for oral cultures to be replaced by literate societies using the same languages because when literary culture predominates over the indigenous oral culture, unequal power relations are created and these can be exploited by both latter-day colonialists and the emergent black African élite class.

With a new awareness of the importance of multi-lingual in society, institutions of higher learning in South Africa are busy reviewing their language policies. There is now active encouragement to speak and to understand the language of another culture. To do that is one thing, but to write and read in that language at an academic level is quite another matter. However, the steps towards that objective may take time, so the sooner the process begins the better. But one thing is for certain, the process will not be effective if it is not driven by enthusiastic people of vision who are totally dedicated, well-informed and who are prepared to spend an inordinate amount of time, researching, translating and writing in the particular African Indigenous Language they, and their cultural bodies are seeking to promote. The following is a preliminary list of tasks that need to be addressed for all indigenous languages that aspire to the high status of being regarded as academic/scientific/research languages. Some cultural groups might not wish their language/s to develop in this way, but their language/s should still be respected, supported and developed so that the provisions of the Constitution can be complied with. Section 29(2) of the Constitution directs that:

Everyone has the right to receive education in the official language or languages of their choice in public educational institutions where that education is reasonably practicable.

Of course the final clause "...where that education is reasonably practicable" leaves the door wide open for individuals and institutions to by-pass the injunction by pointing out that it is not, at present, reasonably practicable because, despite steps that have been made and that are being made to tackle the issues the following still need to be addressed :

- 1) There is a lack of specialist dictionaries in many of these languages that list higher concepts together with technical, field-specific and scientific terms in the indigenous languages;
- 2) Publications in the particular indigenous language on a vast number of subjects are lacking together with works that could promote the use of the language including novels, anthologies of poetry, play scripts and so on. There is also a need for translation of seminal works in all academic subjects including: Agriculture, Mathematics, Science, Chemistry, Social Sciences, Information Technology, Economics, Psychology, Politics, History, all branches of Medicine, Theology, Architecture, Philosophy, Education, all branches of the Law and many others.
- 3) Staff development to include the acquisition of fluency in a spoken African Indigenous language and the capacity to read and write in that language at a high academic/scientific level.
- 4) The problem of publishing houses and Academic Journals publishing material in African Indigenous Languages when the level of sales to a sufficient number of readers or institutions is likely to remain a factor in determining the economic viability of the publishing entities. The same will be true when electronic publications replace hard copy publications. Subscriptions to electronic material will simply replace book and journal sales.
- 5) The most difficult problem is, I feel, what NgugiwaThiong'o referred to as 'the colonised mind'. Despite the fact that the South African student population in higher education is linguistically diverse, according to the study undertaken by the previous Vice-Chairperson of PANSLAB, Neville Alexander in his article entitled *The politics of language planning in post-apartheid South Africa*, he points out that:

“...the vast majority of black people simply do not believe that their languages can or should be used for higher-order functions even though they cherish them and are completely committed to maintaining them in the primary spheres of the family, the community and the church.”

This unfortunate attitude can be seen to be a direct result of the apartheid strategy of ensuring that black Africans remained “hewers of wood and drawers of water”. African languages were used as languages of instruction only at primary school level. As Prah (2007) points out

“...African schoolchildren and their parents had developed the impression that English was the language of advancement”

So that, in 1976 when Afrikaans was rejected as a language of instruction it was English that was demanded in its place not any indigenous language. The recognition after 1994 that there was a clear tendency emerging towards unilingualism in a multilingual society was one of the motivating factors for the setting up of PANSALB.

As matters stand, the epistemological issues associated with developing African indigenous languages are such that they seem not to be credited with having sufficient intellectual gravitas to begin to challenge the clear hegemony of English as an international language of Higher Education and academic publication in South Africa.

The more we examine the issue of the use of African Indigenous Languages in Higher Education, the clearer it becomes that a strong, efficient, well-led, dedicated and inspiring organisation is desperately needed to tease out the problem issues, address these nationally, discover solutions through wide consultation with numerous stakeholders, and to be a body that can provide insight and leadership to policy makers in the government structures at the highest levels. A re-structured and reconstituted PANSLAB, if indeed that is necessary, could be one such body. Considering the fact that the trajectory of the promotion of Afrikaans was facilitated by five or six cultural bodies including the *Genootschap van Rechte Afrikaners*, the *Afrikaanse Taalbond*, the *Taalgenootskap* and *Taalvereniging*, *De Zuid-Afrikaanse Academie voor Taal, Lettere en Kuns*, *De Suid-*

Afrikaanse Akademie vir Wetenskappe en Kuns and, of course, the *Afrikaner Broederbond* it may be that a consortium of cultural bodies should fall under the umbrella of PANSALB with at least one such body for every language group vested with the responsibility of improving the orthography of the particular language so that it is equipped to take its place amongst the world's languages of instruction. For every aspirant indigenous language, then, there needs to be at least one active cultural body lobbying vigorously and astutely for its survival, development and promotion. This is hardly a new concept. In 1955 a language board was set up for each of the languages but these were highly politicised and were generally regarded as divisive rather than supportive of indigenous African languages.

Ironically it is English that can give an example to the developers of African Indigenous Languages in the blatant borrowing of terms and variations of these, from other languages. The completely chaotic development of English orthography did not stand in the way of English becoming the *lingua franca* in many countries in the world and the language of commerce in a large part of the world, and so there is good reason to suppose that, despite all the difficulties, African Indigenous languages could do the same; if not on a global scale but at least nationally.

If the task and the range of problems seems to be too great to handle in dealing with nine African Indigenous languages in South Africa, maybe it is now time to reduce this number by re-visiting an idea that has been around for many years, which is to collapse these languages into just four; the Nguni languages, the Sotho languages, Tshivenda and Xitsonga which would make the task of preserving, developing and promoting of African Indigenous Languages that little bit more practicable. It was Dr. Jacob Nhlapo, the editor of *Bantu World* who for more than twenty years, starting in the 1940's, tried to argue the merits of merging Xhosa, Zulu, Tshangaan, Ndebele and others into one language. He also argued that the relationship between Southern Sotho, Sepedi, Northern Sotho and Setswana was so close that they too could merge into one language. This is the kind of initiative that should be researched, and written up by the resuscitated PANSLAB or any other body or institution set up for similar purposes.

The posing of the prospect of the use of African indigenous languages in Higher Education sits at the tip of an iceberg of related issues including:

- The state of general teacher and lecturer language training in South Africa;

- The lack of ability to teach reading skills (in any language) in schools;
- The need for a shift in attitude on the part of teachers, parents, and learners towards teaching in and learning of indigenous languages. But, as Professor Jonathan Jansen points out “...the problem is not the language of instruction – it is the quality of teaching, knowledge of the curriculum and stability of the school that determines educational chances in a black school.” (*Mail and Guardian* <http://mg.co.za>);
- The problem of School Governing Bodies taking unilateral decisions to impose English as the language of teaching and learning in schools which creates a negative impression of the use of vernacular languages as media of instruction which makes it unsurprising that vernacular language departments in some institutions of Higher Education have shut because of a lack of student registration;
- The lack of libraries with material in vernacular languages and other teaching resources, particularly in rural, but also in urban schools and at institutions of Higher Education;
- The lack of appreciation for the fact that it takes about three years to acquire an every-day working knowledge of a new language but five or more years of dedicated well-tutored study to achieve an understanding of and a capacity to read, speak and write in the language at an academic level; and
- The urgent need to promote what the Harare Declaration in 1997 referred to as ‘technological discourse’ in national languages (Mutasa 2002).

A thorny sociolinguistic issue also demands attention. As Prah (2007) points out:

Everywhere, African post-colonial regimes have on paper raised the status of the indigenous African languages, but nothing beyond this has invariably been achieved. They have from one country to the next, by evidence of the record, been particularly ineffectual in serving as a viable basis for the expansion of democratic and popular cultures or societal development... Most observers who

have looked at the issue of language policy in Africa are agreed about the fact that there is a big gap between intended policy (planned or espoused) and action or implementation. One important reason for the vacillation is that the élite interests have become very entrenched in the status quo and the use of colonial languages. Indeed, in a cultural sense, it is arguable that African élites owe their positions of privilege and influence to the use of colonial languages. They are the languages of power, as dictated by the colonial dispensation and inherited by the élites. Therefore, where many frequently see the logic in the argument for the unstinted use of African languages, the ruling groups and élites are unable to, as it were, cut off the branch on which they are sitting,

One is tempted to conclude that the ‘transformation’ that has been on various agendas in post-apartheid South Africa has amounted to an inexorable integration of new and developing African élites into the dress, the religion, the education policies, the medical traditions, the social life-style and the economic values of the culture of the white minority. PANSLAB and other affiliated bodies have a vast range of issues indeed to deal with.

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